

TWO MERTON SCHOOLS

by **Robert Grip & Gary Young, C.R.**

I. Robert Grip's *"Learning about Merton High"*

It is an irony that would have produced a good-natured belly laugh from Thomas Merton. The first school in North America named for him is run by a monk.

Michael Monk is the Principal of Bishop Francis Marrocco/ Thomas Merton Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, Ontario, part of the Metropolitan Separate School Board (MSSB), the largest school system in Canada, and one of five systems within the Archdiocese of Toronto. On Bloor Street West, Marrocco/ Merton is the largest secondary school of the thirty-seven in the system, occupying the three and one-half acre site of the former West Park Vocational School, which opened to students in 1968. The school's 1200 students and eighty-four teachers have at their disposal a chapel, an olympic-size swimming pool, a 700 seat auditorium and a football field atop the underground parking garage. Bordering an inner city neighborhood, Marrocco/ Merton serves an ethnic mixture of local students, many "New Canadians," including those of Portuguese, Central American, Polish, Lithuanian and Filipino descent.

The shared name is the result of a 1988 community decision merging two separate Catholic high schools. Bishop Francis Marrocco High School, originally located on the upper floor of an elementary school, was named after a local Italian bishop known for helping immigrants adjust to their new life in Canada. The inclusion of Thomas Merton in the name of the new school, according to Robert Nelder, former head of the Religion Department and now a Guidance Counselor at Marrocco/ Merton, followed a joint decision by parents, teachers and students who studied five possible candidates and chose the famous monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani. The school annually commemorates the anniversary of Merton's death and takes an active role in exploring social justice issues, thanks to a four member chaplaincy team, led by Sister Maureen Kelody, C.N.D.

In contrast to the rigid separation of church and state in Canada's neighbor to the south, Marrocco/ Merton is supported by public tax money, does not assess fees for books or school supplies, and has charged no tuition since 1984. The idea of the "separate" school system stems from Canada's French (Catholic) and English (Protestant) past and a political decision to try to accommodate the province's Catholic population. Now, those Catholics who choose to send their children to a tax-supported Catholic school may do so by directing their residential and commercial education taxes to the MSSB. The system also receives grants from the Ontario government. However, Monk admits schools in the Catholic system do not receive the same level of support as those which are fully "public." Half of Ontario's Catholic schools suffer from budget deficits. In addition, the Ontario government refuses to pay the start-up costs for expanding Catholic schools. Despite those obstacles, the MSSB still manages to educate 103,000 students in 229 schools on a budget of \$583.7 million dollars (Canadian).

Marrocco/ Merton is a comprehensive school, offering classes for all students from the trainable mentally retarded to the gifted, from those who intend to end their formal education with a high school diploma to those who are university bound. It also offers technical and industrial arts classes and special ESL (English as a Second Language) classes.

Principal Monk believes the decision to honor Merton goes beyond merely putting his name on the side of the building. Monk says, "Merton stands for all the things we want our school to stand for." Judging from Merton's enthusiastic correspondence with young people, the school is a joyful way to preserve with teens his spirit of energy, spiritual growth and creativity.

