

Shantal Marie Rosales lives in Westmoreland, Tenn., and made her first visit to Maple Mount on Nov. 11-13 to attend the “Prayer in Thomas Merton and the Coming Season of Advent” retreat at the Mount Saint Joseph Conference and Retreat Center.

“My interest in Merton’s life and writings prompted my attendance,” she said. “I thoroughly enjoyed Maple Mount in every way and my legs are still sore from the extensive walking I did all over the property and farm!”

While she was attending the retreat, led by Father James Conner, a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani who was a student under Merton, Shantal wrote about her experience and the impact her grandmother had on her. Below is that beautiful writing, shared with her permission.

Retreat of a Lifetime

This afternoon Father Connor read his detailed, insightful and honest reflections of the 18 years he spent with Thomas Merton at Gethsemani. He gave a vivid account of Merton as a man with great qualities and equally great flaws, which was a refreshing departure from the numerous “politically correct” versions of his story that play down or ignore the faults, weaknesses and inner turmoil that are an essential part of Merton’s remarkable life story.

One thing about Merton is made plainly clear by Father Connor, that his finest qualities remained intact despite the numerous internal and external challenges he faced. His best qualities created an amazing domino effect that touched the lives of countless people and left its mark on the world. He had a genuine love for all people, a sincere interest in their thoughts, feelings and opinions, an innate sense of curiosity, an open mind that easily processed new ideas and an extremely high level of tolerance in general. He could also be arrogant, rebellious, stubborn, short-tempered and notoriously disorganized. This is the complex recipe that makes a genius.

My grandmother knew Thomas Merton pretty well. She met him while attending Columbia University. She told me many stories about him but sadly I made the common mistake that many teens and young adults make by not paying close attention to the details. This is one of my greatest regrets because Father Connor’s description of Thomas Merton reveals itself as a hauntingly identical description of my grandmother, right down to the smallest personal details.

My mother abandoned me at six months of age and one of God’s greatest gifts to me was my grandmother, who cheerfully stepped in and became my mother and later in life, my dearest friend. It was not an easy job. As a teenager I developed a highly rebellious nature that was fueled by a quick temper and a sharp tongue. Without any solid reasons, I turned against many of the fundamental elements of my upbringing, including the Catholic Church. I must have hurt her many times with my angry, arrogant and disrespectful comments. But, she never tried to force me to see things differently, instead she patiently and lovingly guided me through example and also through the seemingly endless true life stories that she told me about herself and others, each one having a moral message that was too strong to ignore. I also now realize that even though I was tempted to go astray many, many times, I simply could not disappoint this incredible woman who deeply loved me at my very best and my very worst.

I am now 44 years old and I have been happily married to my soul mate for 23 amazing years. During this time I have sadly watched every single one of my high school and college friends get divorced, some of them two or three times. We have one son now coming on 19 who is the light of our lives and has honestly given us no real worry or trouble whatsoever. My grandmother is gone now, she died very suddenly of an aneurism in 1998. I was 30 years old and the shock and emptiness of losing her was one of the most difficult struggles of my entire life. We grew closer to each other with each passing year, we talked on the phone every single day. No joy or accomplishment was “real” until I could share it with her. Her wisdom was a bottomless well from which I received the most valuable, life-altering advice and direction. Her death left me with a profound and relentless feeling of loneliness that is to this day beyond words. I only visited her grave once and I left it fully convinced that she was not there in spirit.

I have thought of her constantly while attending this conference. She would have enjoyed every minute of it and she would have fallen in love with this peaceful and holy place, content to just sit quietly and take it all in just as I have so many times during these three days.

I was lazily browsing the gift shop on Saturday afternoon when I caught sight of a unique item that stopped me dead in my tracks. Partially hidden on a high shelf I could almost hear it whisper my name. In a state of wonder and disbelief, I reached up and grasped an oval-shaped, brass picture frame. I gently brushed away a light coating of dust and marveled at the intricate and delicate arrangement of pressed shamrocks and “Forget Me Nots” that lay gracefully intertwined beneath the glass. These were two of my grandmothers’ most favorite things and she was always experimenting with different methods of pressing these very items in hopes of finding the perfect way to preserve their color and delicate shape.

With a broad smile on my face and a bursting with joy, I paid for my precious find and walked out the door taking special delight in the comforting warmth of the sun on my shoulders and the velvet soft breeze gently brushing my hair away from my face. I relish moments like this and take time to savor the sweet, subtle message. The warm of the sun, the caress of the breeze and that dusty piece of hidden treasure that had been patiently waiting for me are all the proof I will ever need that Grandma walks beside me every single day!

Shantal Marie Rosales