

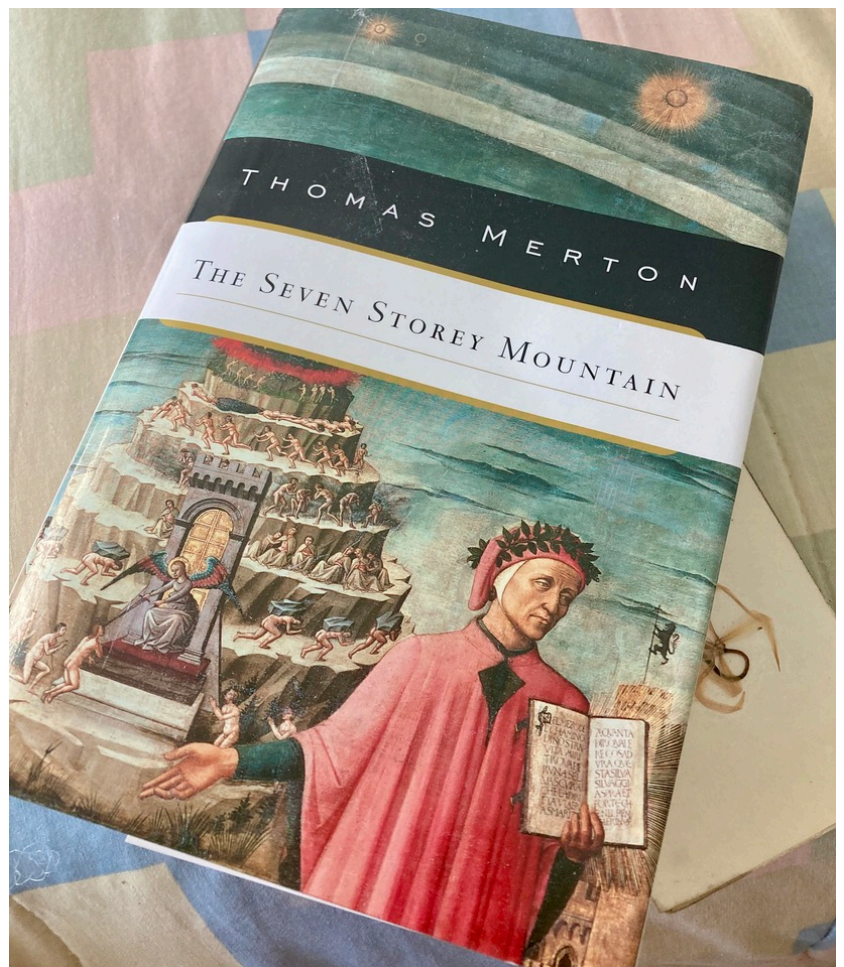
# Thomas Merton's French Churches ... on Stamps



Recently I had occasion to read "The Seven Storey Mountain," by Thomas Merton. The autobiographical work was a best-seller in its day, and remains popular today. First published in 1948, it's the story of the young Merton's odyssey from his birth and early years in France, the son of artists, through his pursuit of scholarship in academia at Cambridge, Columbia and St. Bonaventure; his conversion to Catholicism and enrollment as a Trappist monk in Kentucky. I understand there was a surge of young men into the contemplative orders after they read Merton's beguiling book.

What beguiled me about Merton, among other things, was his youthful appreciation of France, which resonates with my own youthful enthusiasm for the country and its landscape. He was born in a small village in the Pyrenee mountains, in the far south near the Spanish border.

In this series of short excerpts, which I pair with stamp illustrations, Merton praises ancient French religious architecture, which he learned to love from a picture book the family acquired when he was about 11. French engravers also scrutinized the remarkable buildings and depicted them on beautiful stamps.



My hope is that Merton's brief but pithy observations, next to the delicately engraved images on the stamps, provide a pleasing kind of resonance for the reader and viewer.

*Pop had sent us money, at Christmas, and we used some of it to buy a big expensive three volume set of books, full of pictures, called Le Pays de France. And I shall never forget the fascination with which I studied it, and filled my mind with those cathedrals and ancient abbeys and those castles and towns and monuments of the culture that had so captivated my heart.*

*I remember how I looked at the ruins of Jumieges and Cluny, and wondered how those immense basilicas had looked in the days of their glory. ...*







*... Then there was Chartres, with its two unequal spires ...*

*... the long vast nave of Bourges, ...*





*... the soaring choir of Beauvais; ...*



*... the strange fat romanese cathedral of Angouleme, ...*

*... the white  
byzantine domes  
of Perigueux. ...*



*... And I gazed  
upon the huddled  
buildings of the  
ancient Grande  
Chartreuse,  
crowded together  
in their solitary  
valley, with the  
high mountains  
loaded with firs,  
soaring up to their  
rocky summits on  
either side. ...*

**THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES**