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Known to God Alone: Reflections on the Trappists of Gethsemani and Father Louis

Emilie Grosvenor

**“Silence is in the heart, not in the absence of speaking.” ~ Father Seamus,
Guestmaster**

The greatest recognition a majority of Trappist monks of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani can receive is their gravemarker. The name on the small white cross above their final resting place is often not their birth name, but that given to them upon entrance into the monastery. Apart from this inscription and the date of their passing, God alone knows them. There are dozens of these headstones, dating from the mid-1800, when the abbey was founded. At the entrance of the abbey are the oldest graves, those of French villagers who settled in nearby Bardstown or the adjacent farmland, and aided the monks in constructing the monastery. In exchange, the monks educated their children, and buried their dead. Heartbreaking amounts of these headstones bear the names of children, sometimes several of them from a single family. The cemetery wraps around the front entrance, along the side of the guesthouse, and extends to the grassy area near the large white church. It is here the Trappists assemble nine times each day for The Office, also known as The Liturgy of the Hours. A monk is constantly confronted with his future place of burial, a reminder of his littleness and anonymity. Furthermore, the brothers are charged with not only the responsibility of a deceased monk's funeral mass, but with burial preparation as well. The same pine casket is used for each monk.¹ At burial, only their body is lowered into the ground. The vow of poverty, relinquishing individual possessions and sharing everything in community, is extended even unto death. Amongst the plain crosses, one is clearly visible. It is decorated with freshly picked wildflowers and colorful prayer beads. It is the same as the others, one amongst many, but clearly set apart. The inscription reads, “Father Louis,” though he is best known to his readers as Thomas Merton.

I arrived in Kentucky with the intention of researching how the obedience, routine and *askesis* of monastic life influenced Thomas Merton's thoughts on mysticism. I had read *Seven Storey Mountain* four years earlier and had dreamed of visiting Gethsemani ever since. I wanted to walk where Merton walked, to thank him on his ground for being one of the prominent vehicles through which Christ called me into deeper conversion. My undergraduate mentor and religious studies professor introduced me to a grant opportunity which could actualize my

¹Casey, Michael, and Clyde F. Crews, *Monks Road: Gethsemani into the Twenty-first Century*. 82.

dream. Despite being fourteen weeks pregnant, and therefore quite sick, a delay in receiving the funds, a small but significant fear of flying, and having never travelled by myself to a place where I was a stranger to others, and them to me, I could not pass up the chance to go.

Renting a car would have put me over budget. I was glad to find that *Uber* had expanded their service to rural Kentucky, and I had no problem finding a ride to my only stop apart from the monastery, The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Located at the top floor of their library, The Thomas Merton Center contains all things Merton including: first editions of his books, dozens of audio recordings of his lectures during his twelve years as novice master, posthumous statues and paintings of his likeness, his father's original landscape paintings of the French countryside, even his vestments. I could have spent several days in this one part of the library, but I had only two hours before Brother Bartholomew was scheduled to pick me up in the monks' communal car to drive me to The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani.

I had reserved a room to listen to tapes of his lectures, though that proved unnecessary. It was the end of June and the campus was all but barren of students. The director was kind enough to give me a tour, the highlight of which was seeing Merton's typewriter. Standing before that typewriter was an even greater emotional experience than sitting at his final resting place. I kept coming back to it, staring at the typewriter in an idolatrous awe that Merton himself would have surely found ridiculous. It took serious effort on my part to walk away from it. I spent the majority of those two hours in a room by myself with a tape player and giant 80's-style headphones over my ears listening to lectures from his years as novice master. Sadly, I barely made a dent in the center's audio collection, but heard enough to take several pages of notes on Merton's perspective of monks in the modern world, and his observation of "fake mysticism" as provided by LSD and induced trance-like experiences. His humor and great love for the world was as evident as his stern reproach of the "ready-made answers" of society. His students' laughter and questions were present throughout the tape. Little did I know that the greatest gift of this trip would be encountering the then- novices who could be heard in the background.

After thanking the director, and saying one last goodbye to the typewriter, I stepped outside to wait for Brother Bartholomew. An hour passed before I decided he was not coming. I would later find out that there was a miscommunication between me and the abbey's secretary. While I waited at Bellarmine University, Brother Bartholomew was patiently biding his time with another retreatant at the Louisville airport I called for an *Uber*, sharing my location and driver information on social media, realizing that I was about to get into a car with a strange man who would be driving me to The-Middle-of-

Nowhere, which I was pretty sure encompassed all my mother had warned me not to do since childhood.

We forget, in our noisy world, that silence can be jarring. It hit me as I got out of the car, whose driver was as anxious in dropping off a pregnant woman by herself in a remote region as I had been in hoping that I would have a sane, non-homicidal chaperone to see me through the 50 miles of countryside outside Louisville to Trappist, Kentucky. We had spent much of the hour and half drive exchanging pleasantries and anecdotes. He pointed to the Jim Beam Factory and vast green meadows which he claimed were, “Chalk full of wild turkey this time of year.” Eventually, we travelled beyond the rural part of Kentucky, which was familiar to him and he wondered aloud, “Where in the hell are you takin’ me?” I knew we were close when we began passing series of small hills with statues of saints praying at their summits.

I wish I could say, like Merton, that I arrived there in the dead of night, with the steeple as the first thing to greet me, but that was not the case I knew we had arrived because there was a large parking lot Beyond that were the high walls, which I took to be those of the cloister. Seeing that there was no one to greet me and no valet to take my bags, the *Uber* driver (a charming stereotype of southern hospitality) was uncomfortable leaving me behind I reassured him, and after he removed my rolling luggage from the trunk, I thanked him, waving goodbye as he started the car I walked purposefully, even though I knew not where I was going, so as to reassure him that I would be fine when he glanced in his rearview mirror He turned onto the road, and disappeared.

The noise of my luggage made me aware of the silence. I could not lift it, being fourteen weeks pregnant, and quickly took notice, that apart from the sounds of the bees pollinating the flowers in the front churchyard, all was still. I was a walking disruption as my bag thumped over the tiles of what seemed to me an interminably long entryway. On one side was the rot iron gate Merton had spoken of, which bore the words *God Alone*, and to my left was the guesthouse.² Laity are not permitted beyond this point, but I stuck my face between the gate and the wall as far as I could, catching a glimpse of a beautiful garden, a fountain, and the refectory beyond.

I went against doctor’s orders and lifted my bag back across the paved entry to the door of the guesthouse, which seemed bent on sabotaging any chance of making the quiet entrance befitting a silent retreat. To my left was a small doorbell with a label on it saying *nightcalls*. The Trappists take a vow of hospitality, and if anyone were to call on them at 2am, they would be sure to welcome them inside. I stood in a small lobby. Behind the simple front desk was perhaps the most ancient looking old man I have ever seen. He was reading a

²Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948, 2009), 351.

paperback, or sleeping. I could not tell which. I realized that I would have to speak to him, but then wondered if that would be disrespectful in a silent monastery. I decided to whisper. He did not hear me, so I ventured to whisper a bit louder. I heard a door swing open behind me. Another monk, who I would come to know as Fr. Seamus, strode inside wearing his white cassock and brown tunic.

“BROTHER FREDERIC!!! BROTHER FREDERIC!!!” The ancient monk looked up suddenly, seeing his fellow monk and I before him said, “I THINK THIS YOUNG WOMAN IS A GUEST. SHE’S LATE!”

I then proceeded to yell my name and greetings. Already, the monastery was surprising me with its contradictions and I began to see in a small way why Merton, a humorous and social person, found his home in the “silence” of Gethsemani.

I was to observe the monks who reside at Gethsemani as a living representation of the Trappist life Merton lived. They, and the land upon which they lived, interested me in so far as they told me of Thomas Merton. Meeting them opened my heart to what I already knew intellectually, but had not previously appreciated. Unlike their fellow brother, Father Louis, they will likely never travel to another county, let alone another continent. Their greatest work is their most menial task. When I found the courage to use my voice and ask the guestmaster, Father Seamus, for an interview in his office concerning the quotidian of Trappist monks, I was surprised to find that he had just as many questions for me as I did for him. “Ah, so you’re a *Mertonite*,” he observed. He explained to me that *Mertonite* is the term, that the residents of The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani use to describe retreatants whose visit is in fact a pilgrimage of devotion to Thomas Merton. Fr. Seamus must have noticed my discomfort with being branded as such, for he immediately followed with the reassurance that there are many Mertonite trappists at Gethsemani today. He then relayed a story to me describing the most eccentric Mertonite he had come in contact, a young man who had hitchhiked to the visitor’s center, and after conversing with Fr. Seamus, lifted his shirt to reveal a large tattoo across his back depicting Merton’s charcoal drawing of a Trappist monk.

I took the liberty of asking Fr. Seamus what the monks who knew Merton, if any of them still remained living, thought of Merton and his fandom. He responded with a hearty laugh, before assuring me that Merton’s writing played a role in most of their calls to contemplative life. He then added, “Of course Br. _____ will tell you he never wore working clothes.”

Though it was written informally I feel that what happened next in our conversation is best left described in my journal from that day.

July 1, 2015

Afternoon

Father Seamus just gave me the list of seventeen monks still living here who knew Merton personally. He told me, “No one has written them asking them to describe Merton in a sentence.” Then he proceeded to stare at me. Taking this as my cue I asked if he thought they would write back. “They might,” he replied smiling. His advice is to include an envelope, already stamped, and to ask the question in a form. He even demonstrated how to address each monk. I feel in my heart I have just become the recipient of a great gift...

Fr. Seamus was kind enough to share several conversations with me during my five-day retreat. Br. Bartholomew became a dear friend during the drive back to the Louisville airport. Neither of them knew Merton during his lifetime, but I argue that they know him quite well in the same manner that many of us feel we know a relative who passed before we were born or when we were small, because their personalities were so large that there is never a family gathering in which a story concerning something they said or did is not shared. Fr. Seamus expressed regret at the fact that retreatants who have visited The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, never reach out to her residents, and go on to publish a book about their three day retreat. The monks meanwhile have not been consulted, nor does the abbey receive any of the proceeds. Having told the monks of my intent to write about, not only their experiences with Merton, but their own perspective of monastic life, I am extremely grateful and humbled by their decision to share some of their thoughts with me.

I followed Fr. Seamus’ advice. In the months following my trip, I approached my mailbox with anticipation, and when I retrieved from it a letter from Gethsemani, I walked back to my apartment, waving the envelope to my family with an audible giddiness. Of the seventeen monks who knew Merton, about half responded. Below is a copy of the letter and the questionnaire I sent to each of them.

Br. _____

I was blessed to be able to visit your abbey in early July of this year. My trip served as both a spiritual retreat and an opportunity for research. Having recently graduated from the religious studies program at California State University, Dominguez Hills, I was awarded a grant to write an article about the relationship between monasticism and mysticism as described in the writings of Thomas Merton.

Though I was already Catholic, reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* several years ago was an important step in my being more deeply called into living my Catholic faith. Visiting your abbey was a dream come true for me, as well as a pilgrimage I plan to make again in the future. During my stay, Father Seamus was kind

enough to give me the names of those of you who knew Thomas Merton personally and suggested that I write to you, inviting you to share in a few words some of your impressions of Merton.

However, my time at Gethsemani also led to other insights which I did not expect. Mainly an appreciation for your generous hospitality and your quiet ways of serving the Lord. I came to see how your daily chores, much like the Little Flowers of St. Therese de Lisieux, were a humble manner of serving Christ. In our society, we can often strive to do great things while ignoring the simple tasks God calls us to do in service of others, and thus in service of Jesus Christ, through our individual vocations as daughters, sons, spouses, parents, and parishioners. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on Merton's writings and his way of life, I am also inviting you to share a few words about your experience of monastic life.

I have included a set of short answer questions in the pages attached to this letter. Should you feel comfortable answering them, you may send them back to me on the pre-stamped envelope included in this package. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. My family and I keep you always in our hearts and in our prayers.

Peace and Blessings in Christ,

Emilie Grosvenor

Questionnaire

Note: While you are invited to answer all the questions listed, feel free to answer as little or as many as you wish.

Part I. - Merton

1. How many years did you reside at Gethsemani while Thomas Merton was in residence (including his time at the hermitage)?
2. Did you ever share in performing certain routine tasks together? If so what were they?
3. Were you among the novices taught by Thomas Merton?
 - a. If so, please describe your impression of him as an instructor.
 - b. Was there a specific lecture or moment in the classroom of which you have a strong memory? If so, please describe it below.
4. Please describe what impact, if any, your time with Thomas Merton had upon your faith, vocation or perspective.
5. Please describe, to the best of your ability, the atmosphere of Gethsemani during Merton's time in residence, including how his presence contributed to that atmosphere.
6. Please share one or more of your strongest memories or impressions of Thomas Merton.

Part II- Life as a Monastic

1. How old were you when you entered the monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani?
2. Were there any parts of life as a Cistercian which were more difficult to adjust to than others? If so what were they?
3. How did you first learn of the existence of the Abbey of Gethsemani?
4. Did you visit the abbey as a member of the lay community prior to your decision to become a Cistercian monk?
5. What events/circumstances do you believe precipitated your calling to the religious life?
6. What is/was your daily chore at the monastery? How did you feel this brought you closer to Christ and your fellow brothers?
7. Please share any hobbies or interests which you explore and use as a manner to serve Christ (e.g., drawing, ceramics, reading, writing, astronomy, etc.).
8. What is your favorite time of day and why?
9. What is your favorite Psalm and why?
10. How have you changed since your time as a novice?

11. How has the Abbey of Gethsemani changed since your time as a novitiate?

Part III. Additional Comments:

The replies were varied. Two were typed. The remaining were handwritten. Generally speaking, those who held Merton in greater esteem tended to write more detailed answers, while the more ambivalent amongst them kept their replies short and polite, responding with only a yes or no to certain questions. Each of them were thoughtful in their answers, and expressed a gratitude at being asked about their own experience of life as a Trappist. Apart from their answers, I appreciated the smiley faces, stickers, prayer cards and Thomas Merton bookmarks they included along with their letters. One monk seemed particularly enthusiastic. He ended most of his sentences with an exclamation point. These small details within their correspondence allowed me to view the Trappists of Gethsemani as individuals, and humanized them in such a way that I no longer saw them as one anonymous monk among many.

I was touched (and still am) that they spent the time they had to read or study in order to write their responses. One of them began his letter with an apology, "Sorry for taking so long. I have been very busy..." Several of them wrote from the infirmary. Patrick Hart, Thomas Merton's personal secretary, who has since written the forward of Lawrence S. Cunningham's book, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, scrawled a short note at the bottom of the letter I had sent him, "Sorry, in the infirmary...unable to answer. Another of the brothers wrote on behalf of his fellow monk. "Br. ___ has alzheimer's disease and would want me to tell you that he is unable to answer your questions." While disheartening, these responses were all the more precious for several reasons: (1) They are a reminder that the endeavor to collect stories from those who knew Merton personally are limited by the life and good health of those who bear them. Thus, there is an urgency to hearing the voice of Gethsemani's older residents. (2) I would have understood had they not sent a reply. The fact that their empathy for one another runs so deep that they would write a response excusing a fellow monk due to illness is a testament to the familial relationships, based in the love of Christ, which form the connective tissue of the monastic community. Those, such as Br. Patrick Hart, who expressed their own inability to respond could have simply done just that. Taking the time and effort to write that one sentence response after a stroke demonstrated his thoughtfulness. In sum, I appreciate and treasure each of their replies, regardless of length or breadth. I pray that the research I present herein does the Trappists of Our Lady of Gethsemani justice in revealing their little way, and how it was impacted by their beloved Father Louis.

In his book, *My Life with the Saints*, Jesuit author James Martin notes that Thomas Merton is perhaps best defined by contradictions.³ As a Trappist monk, whose conscience and vocation as a writer would not let him hide from horrors of the world, he was at once removed from current events, as well as wholly invested in the outcomes of humanity's actions. In the final pages of his first spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes his former self as having followed him into the monastery like a shadow. Merton states of himself, "He generates books in the silence that ought to be sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation."⁴ The inner turmoil with which he wrestled due to the contradictions between his vocations of both writer and monk changed form over the 27 years he spent as a Trappist at Our Lady of Gethsemani, but served as a consistent dilemma throughout his years as a contemplative. His stamp on the monastic life at Gethsemani was such that the paradox that is Thomas Merton is still mirrored in the inhabitants of the monastery today. While some of the monks who lived and worked with Merton will express that they find his writing, especially his political essays, to be at odds with his monastic vocation, most acknowledge his great influence upon their call to the contemplative life. They also acknowledge the unique role his writing has played in sustaining American monasteries, as well as its service as a tool for God to call the laity and future religious to know their true self; their self before the presence of God.

Merton's writing would inspire the monastic vocations of dozens of young men who, combined with the disillusioned soldiers returning from World War II, formed a large host of incoming novices at Gethsemani.⁵ Merton would later lament at the fact that a large portion of these novices eventually left monastic life. He attributed this to the impulsive decisions made by young men with little life experience, who did not yet understand who they were called to be before God. Merton freely acknowledged that most are not called to the contemplative life as it is lived in a Trappist monastery.⁶ One of the monks of whom Fr. Seamus spoke, who proved to be committed to the monastic life and still resides at Gethsemani to this day, was barely seventeen at the time he entered the cloister. He sacrificed a full scholarship to college, gained by his achievements as a student and his status as his local high school's star basketball player. Reportedly quite popular and with a bright future ahead of him, he freely gave up these advantages to join the Cistercians in Kentucky. However, most of the men who joined at such a young age were also quick to leave the order.

³ James Martin, S.J. *My Life with the Saints*. Loyola Press, 2007. 48.

⁴ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 449.

⁵ Dianne Aprile. *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox* (150 Years in the Life of America's Oldest Trappist Monastery), Parkside Acres Books, 1998.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, "The Identity Crisis." 1971.

Merton no doubt felt responsible in some capacity for influencing many young men to embrace, at least for a short time, the monastic life. After his affair with M./Margie, only a few short years before his death, Merton's journals express not only an affirmation of his own monastic vocation, but also an acknowledgement of his inexperience in regards to love prior to entering the cloister. It is not a stretch to claim that M. was his first and only love. Coupled with his having had a mother who died when he was merely five years old, Merton reflects upon having never shared an intimate relationship with any woman on a spiritual and emotional level. His experience with M. as well as his realization that the one night stands and flings of his youth in Cambridge and New York did not constitute having experienced a true connection with the opposite sex, influenced his wish that men have greater life experience prior to choosing the Trappist life.⁷ He grieved over *Seven Storey Mountain's* potential to convince young men that they were called to the life of the ascetic, when in reality they were simply lost in the romance of his narrative.

Furthermore, the 1960's brought with them the changes of the Second Vatican Council and new leadership at Gethsemani under Abbot Dom James Fox. Our Lady of Gethsemani is a self-sustaining community, and during its years of rapid growth its need for an increase in monetary funds did as well. The prayer and mindfulness of manual labor, so greatly emphasized in Benedict's rule, seemed to Merton to be replaced by mindless industry. The monks worked in the fields, barns, and silos, harvesting crops, cheese, and beef.⁸

This was not the quiet life Merton had depicted in his writing, and the fact that many of these young men working the fields had arrived at Gethsemani to live the contemplative life, and have most of their time devoted to industry, was upsetting to him. He continually butted heads with Dom Fox, and according to one of the monks, was not shy voicing his opinion on the industrialization of the abbey when instructing his young novices. One of his former students communicated in his letter:

Merton could be very critical of community at times, very perceptive of inner contradictions like taking on a vow of poverty and then investing a lot of time and energy into becoming financially secure. I recall his speaking to the novices and junior professed of how we put an awful lot of time into our production and sales of cheese and fruitcake and ignore what's actually going on in terms of spiritual transformation, how our way of life is actually affection(ing) those who have newly joined the community. I had to talk to my junior master that evening after Compline

⁷ James R. Lauridson. *Merton and the Feminine: a Reflection*.3.

⁸ Correspondence.

so upset had I become and he managed to calm me down put Merton's words in a broader context.⁹

However, despite Merton and Fox's often opposing viewpoints, they each benefitted greatly from each other's input and example. In his book, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, author Michael Mott quotes Merton stating:

Dom James himself, with all his limitations and idiosyncrasies has done immense good to this community by stubbornly holding everything together. He, too, is an extraordinary man, many sided, baffling, often irritating, a man of enormous will, but who honestly and in his own way really seeks to be an instrument of God. And in the end that is what he has turned out to be. I am grateful to have been part of all this.¹⁰

Prior to Vatican II, the monks were either lay brothers (those who did manual labor) or choir monks, who lead the Gregorian chant of the office. Merton taught the choir novices, though also took turns leading seminars which were open to the entirety of the cloister. In addition, he assisted as confessor as well as in the spiritual direction of novices.¹¹ Thus, the seventeen monks who lived alongside Merton and continue to reside at Gethsemani to this day, each had experience with him as a teacher. Consequently, all of the monks with whom I corresponded, including those whose responses concerning Merton were cooler in tone, labelled him as an engaging and knowledgeable instructor. In this manner he formed the future character of Gethsemani, and the numerous daughter monasteries, such as New Clairveaux and Santa Rita, which would be established by brothers, who originally began their vocation at Our Lady of Gethsemani, in the coming years.¹²

Reflections on Time Spent with Fr. Louis:

It is easy to forget, listening to the recordings of Merton's lectures, that despite the many giggles, questions, jokes, and the enthusiastic speech of Merton himself, the monks lived in a spirit of silence which was far stricter than that which they observe today. Vocal communication was nonexistent outside of particular and rare occasions. Fr. Louis was a fellow monk, but conversations with him were all but nonexistent. The novices' awe and admiration of him set

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 434.

¹¹ Correspondence.

¹² Dianne Aprile, *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox* (150 Years in the Life of America's Oldest Trappist Monastery), Parkside Acres Books, 1998.

<http://trappists.org/monastic-life/>

him apart all the more. They knew him as part of their monastic family, as a writer, and teacher. However, in reality none of the monks spoke to him in the manner of a friend. Even Fr. ____, who routinely assisted at Father Louis' private mass in the hermitage, and spent a good portion of his time making copies of Merton's writing, could only cite one casual conversation with Merton, just prior to his embarking on the ecumenical trip to Thailand. He recalls:

I was a bookkeeper at the time and he came to (t)he office to get his travel money. Br. ____ was there with me and he said to Fr. Louis as he entered: "Are you going over there to stop the war?" (Viet-nam 1968!) He answered immediately: "No, I am not going to touch it!" That was the end of that subject! Then he turned to me and said: "I am sorry I will not be here for your Ordination!" I found that very thoughtful of him, but it told be(me) two things! One, that he must going to be gone for awhile, because the ordination was at least two years away...if ever! And that he approved of my ordination! That was a real affirmation. I thought of asking him for his Blessing. He may have b(p)ut out his hand. We shook hands...and he left. The next time I was close to him was December 17 (1968) as one of his eight Pallbearers. As we approached the entrance to the church for the funeral mass I found myself between laughter and tears. He was late for his own funeral and was in a CASKET!

Thomas Merton's ecumenism arose largely due to his mystical experience at Fourth and Walnut from which he concluded:

...We are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and to make a profession out of this consciousness. But does that entitle us to consider ourselves different, or even better, than others? The whole idea is preposterous.¹³

From this point forward, Merton no longer sought the cloister as a manner to shut out the world. Rather, solitude enabled him to see God in the world and to "find men in God." Thomas Merton observed that while he may not have been the immediate cause of Hitler, the atom bomb, the war in Vietnam and numerous other societal evils, he shared in the need to take responsibility for the suffering in the world. The only manner to do so was to acknowledge the unity he first felt at

¹³ Cunningham, *Spiritual Master*, p.144.

4th and Walnut, and which was so prevalent in the Eastern religions he studied. He explains:

True solitude is the home of the person, false solitude the refuge of the individualist. The person is constituted by a uniquely subsisting capacity to love-- by a radical ability to care for all beings made by God and loved by Him. Such a capacity is destroyed by the loss of perspective. Without a certain element of solitude there can be no compassion because when man is lost in the wheels of a social machine he is no longer aware of human needs as a matter of personal responsibility.¹⁴

Thus, another of the numerous contradictions which define Thomas Merton is revealed. Merton became more active in his concern for the state of the outside world, even though he isolated himself still further from society in the hermitage.

"A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." (NASB, Mark 4:6)

Fr. ___ observed that during his twelve years as master of novices Merton typically used "we" when he spoke to the students. Once he had completely retreated to the hermitage, the few words he spoke included "me up there" and "you down here." By 1967, Merton had retreated wholly into his hermitage, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Dom Fox selected some of the novices to make the hike through the hills to the small house in order to assist Merton with mass, make copies of his writing, and organize his journals. The vast majority of his time, however, was spent in complete solitude.¹⁵

His last years in the hermitage, as well as his political writing, seemed to have sparked the majority of the community's ambivalence toward Merton. While the lay Cistercians spent much of their days working in the fields, tending to livestock, or packaging cheese and fudge, one of Merton's brothers, who shall remain anonymous, confided in Father Seamus decades later. "He never wore working clothes," he said, when asked to relay a memory of his fellow monk. Another of the brothers, who was kind enough to be interviewed via mail, voiced his opinion that Fr. Louis had fled to the hermitage due to his being a choir monk, and having to hear the off key voices of the older Trappists eight times each day.

Since sign language remained the primary form of communication between the monks at Gethsemani, there was much room left for misunderstanding. Why would a cloistered priest seek to make a name for himself

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New York: New Directions, 2007), 53.

¹⁵ Correspondence.

in the secular world? Why would he choose to comment on war? Such topics were to be left to politicians. Trappists live a life known by God alone. Their vocation is prayer and contemplation, not social commentary. One cannot blame them for this confusion regarding Merton's way of life, for he set himself apart from that of his own brotherhood and community. One even reads that the laity, with whom Merton corresponded outside the monastery, were confused by the solitary life of a man so concerned with social justice.¹⁶

Thomas Merton's paradoxical way of life, that of an outspoken activist living as a silent contemplative, and that of a man living in community while being set apart, is perhaps best justified by a passage in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

“But if you try to escape from this world merely by leaving the city and hiding yourself in solitude, you will only take the city with you into solitude; and yet you can be entirely out of the world while remaining in the midst of it, if you let God set you free from your own selfishness and if you live for love alone.”¹⁷

Therefore, from his mystical experience at Fourth and Walnut on, Merton no longer struggled in the same manner with the apparent disconnect between his vocation as both a Trappist and a writer. He was a hermit *for* the world, rather than against it. He could not remain a contributor of the mindless noise of the world at large, and live the contemplative life which revealed to him that his love for God was measured in his love for all of humankind. The monastic life, therefore, is not an attempt to shut out the whole of society as the sinful “other,” but to embrace it by testifying to the inherent dignity of earthly life in its simplicity. Human lives are not important due to their career accomplishments, education, sex, race, or material wealth. Each human life is invaluable as a unique reflection of Christ; we are *imago dei*. There is nothing we can do or acquire which negates or amplifies our worth as children of God. Our souls, our essence, stripped of all our superfluous categories (liberal, conservative, black, white etc.) is fully known to God alone. The Cistercians of the Strict Observance live according to this principle.

In one of Merton's recorded lectures, later given the title, *The Christian in the World*, he states, “The value we look for in the world is what Christ values and loves and what he died for and what he died in order to, not only save, but lift up.”¹⁸ Therefore, openness to the love of Christ demands “openness to the

¹⁶ Merton, Thomas, William H. Shannon, and Christine M. Bochen, *T. Merton: A Life in Letters* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2008), 8.

¹⁷ Merton, *New Seeds*, 78-79.

¹⁸ 164:4, *The Christian in the World*. The Thomas Merton Center. Bellarmine University.

world.” Merton argued that finding value in the secular: sports, technology, science etc., enables lay monks and priests to better serve those outside the church, pointing out that Vatican II had drawn a line in the sand. Our serving of others is no longer dependent on whether or not they share the same beliefs, “we serve them anyway.”¹⁹

When speaking on the mystical life, Merton notes that the first sin was an act inspired by Adam’s desire to know himself as “doing good.” Adam failed to see he was already doing good by living a simple life of obedience to God. According to Merton, human life should not be “a consistent project of seeing yourself do good.” The anonymity of the Trappists is a testament to this spiritual reality. Furthermore, original sin makes it such that even monks are susceptible and fall prey to sin, though it is more likely to take the form of spiritual pride. Nonetheless, piety and holiness can be sought after for one’s own ego in the same manner as fame or fortune, rather than to be of service for God. Trickier still is pride’s deft ability to disguise itself as an authentic desire to serve Christ. By lecturing on these spiritual truths, Merton was quick to dissolve any notions of moralistic superiority felt by novices over those outside the cloister.²⁰

As a choir monk, ordained priest, and master of novices, Merton was not only “outspoken,” but his voice carried considerable weight. He remained obedient to his abbot, even during his brief censorship in 1966 by the abbot general. However, the letters from his surviving contemporaries reveal that he was not afraid to butt heads with the majority. Two of the Trappists mention Merton’s open determination to defend the chapter of faults. Each Friday, a time was set aside in which the Trappists at Gethsemani were able to voice suggestions, complaints, and concerns over community life. The younger monks were especially resentful of this weekly custom, citing that it was used to voice bold and petty accusations directed at individuals, creating a divisive atmosphere, rather than a stronger community aimed at the pursuit of perfection. Merton disagreed for reasons not provided by the respondents. In the end, the novices boycotted the chapter of faults in protest, influencing Dom Fox’s decision to end the practice completely.

Some of Thomas Merton’s fellow monks continue to be confused by him, and unsure of what to believe when confronted with both his popularity and the criticism which he continues to draw today. One monk expressed his own befuddlement with Fr. Louis as follows:

Also he like some others in the community was more OUT SPOKEN with his ideas. I feel he was “ahead” of the times with some of his ideas etc.-

¹⁹ 164:4, *The Christian in the World*. The Thomas Merton Center. Bellarmine University.

²⁰ 175:1, *The Mystic Life*. The Thomas Merton Center. Bellarmine University.

which is not bad? I believe he got too much INVOLVED WITH SOME POLITICAL THINGS. I COULD BE WRONG.²¹

Despite differing perspectives, his fellow Trappists were also quick to point out his strengths, mainly his intellectualism and talent as a public speaker. Their responses also carry a deep respect for his ability to quiet himself with the sign of the cross immediately following an impassioned lecture or homily. He was at once “open to questions” and “not one for chitter chatter” outside the classroom. Merton is also remembered as a sort of nutty professor who could quote Teilhard de Chardin and knew the history of the order well, all the while “he couldn’t even tie his shoes!”

Interestingly, none of the monks mentioned Thomas Merton’s affair with Margie in their replies. I had not heard of Merton’s liaison prior to a conversation with Fr. Seamus during my retreat. I am assuming that they are aware of it having occurred and are simply too gracious to cite one of the more morally controversial aspects of Merton’s life. Perhaps they are indifferent to it, and would rather focus on his contributions to the order.²²

The Lasting Presence of Father Louis:

Vatican II brought with it an effort to return to the roots of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. Rather than focusing on penance, the Trappists strove to return to their vocation as contemplatives. Thomas Merton’s knowledge and interest in the history of his order, his ecumenical efforts, and choice to love the world on its own terms aided The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani to align itself with the contemporary world without compromising the founding principles of the Trappists. Rather, Merton aided in recovering and expanding upon its tradition of contemplation.²³ One of the respondents notes that while he did not share much of the same concerns as Father Louis as a young monk, he finds himself wrestling with the manner in which the Trappist community at Gethsemani live out their contemplative life. However, he and his fellow monks each acknowledge that the abbey is far more peaceful than it was during Merton’s lifetime.

Of the two hundred and fifty brothers residing at The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1955, about forty-five remain.²⁴ Of these, seventeen knew Merton personally.. A large portion of the monks who knew Merton personally and joined the monastic community in the decades since Merton’s death are growing older. Needless to say, this might lead some to believe that Trappist life

²¹ Correspondence.

²² Ibid.

²³ Thomas Merton, “Monk in the Diaspora,” *The Commonwealth* 79, no.25: 741-745, 1964.

²⁴ Correspondence.

in the United States is dying, but Fr. Seamus and Br. Bartholomew are quick to refute this grim outlook. Both point out that they did not enter the Abbey before reaching an age suitable for retirement. Thus, those joining Trappist monasteries in the United States are generally older, though some younger novitiates are present as well.

According to both Fr. Seamus and Br. Bartholomew, one of the main reasons for this change is family size. In Merton's day, it was still expected that a Catholic family would be a large one. It was a natural assumption on the part of many Catholic families that one of their children would enter religious life. Smaller family sizes, ease of transportation, and multiple ways of communication have made families less accustomed to the idea that their child should move away and never come home. When asked what aspect of Trappist life they found most difficult to adapt to, one replied honestly "Straw mattresses, they had no give,". The other responses involved missing family.²⁵

Herein lies one of the great and tragic differences between Fr. Louis and his brothers. While many of them left large, loving families, and vibrant communities behind, Merton had already lost all of his loved ones, save his brother who was killed two months after Merton entered Gethsemani. Some might argue that it was easier for him to adjust to monastic life because, unlike his brothers, he had been forced to give up the normal idea of a family when he was still very young. Br. Bartholomew mentioned this as he drove me back to the Louisville airport after my five day retreat. He could never have entered so young, he stated. Br. Bartholomew had been in the military, travelled all around Europe, and had fallen in love. He was a seasoned man when he joined the monastery, a person with the kind of life experience Merton hoped one would have prior to entering the cloister. Unlike many of the novices of the 1950's, he visited The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani several times before making the decision to stay indefinitely. "I was driving away from the abbey," he said. "I looked up at the moon and I just knew."

The respondents acknowledge that Merton helped to bring about the monastery as it is today. Not only are brothers encouraged to join at a later age, but the grounds are quieter. The surrounding land is not busy with lay brothers on tractors. The monks are no longer butchers, or even cheesemakers since several months after my visit. While they still produce fudge and fruitcake, they focus on selling products made by individual monks, who find within their monastic vocation, another vocation. Similarly to Merton, for some this is writing, photography, and painting. For others, it is bookbinding, ceramics, beekeeping, and even astronomy. This leaves greater time for *lectio divina*, meditative walks

²⁵ Ibid.

through the nearby woods, and a form of manual labor where contemplation, as well as service to Christ, is central.²⁶

Thomas Merton's years at The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, and the writing he left behind, left an indelible impression on his brothers. The lessons he taught, and the stories surrounding his time at Gethsemani have been passed down to novitiates in the decades since his passing in the same manner of old family stories. When viewed in the context of a family, the ambivalence directed at Merton is revealed to be based in love. The Trappists today continue to serve as a reminder of living a life to that of Christ. Though they may die in obscurity, their example has arguably done more for the world than some who live lives of great pomp and circumstance. Thomas Merton's life and writing serves to point to the importance of a simple and quiet life of community, which demonstrates to an individualistic and violent world how life can be lived in the knowledge of our presence before Christ. Despite his fame, whether known as Thomas Merton or Father Louis, he remains a mystery to his readers and fellow monastics, a person "known to God alone".²⁷

²⁶ Correspondence.

²⁷ Ibid.

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