

LOOKING BACK TO MERTON:

Memories and Impressions /

An Interview

by **Matthew Kelty**, O.C.S.O.

Edited by **Dewey Weiss Kramer**

This interview has been edited from a tape made for the "Thomas Merton Oral History." It was conducted by Victor A. Kramer on 26 October 1982 at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Matthew (Charles) Kelty, born in South Boston in 1915, has been a monk of Gethsemani since 1960. He joined the Cistercians at forty-five after having been a member of the Society of the Divine Word for over fifteen years, serving as priest in the S.V.D. mission in New Guinea (1948-1951), then as editor of the S.V.D. magazine. He was novice under Merton for two and a half years. After his solemn profession in 1969, Kelty became Superior of a small experimental foundation at Oxford, North Carolina, then spent nine years as a hermit (still a member of Gethsemani) in Papua New Guinea, the same mission where he had served twenty-five years earlier. He returned to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1982 where he continues to live the monastic life. A gifted homilist, in demand as a spiritual director and retreat master, Kelty has published several books, among them the autobiographical meditation on his New Guinea hermitage, *Flute Solo*, and *Sermons in a Monastery*.

"His last appearance among us was in that monstrous casket in our sanctuary while we did our last service to him. He was Jonah in the belly of the whale. He was the man totally committed to the mercy of God, about to be cast on the eternal shores. Mercy was his other name."

Kramer: We are talking about biographical problems and the recent Furlong biography.¹

Kelty: Now, just what were you saying -- about Monica Furlong? I read rapidly a copy that was here -- the manuscript. It was being printed when I was home the last time, home from New Guinea where I lived the solitary life from 1973 to 1982 and had come home for six months during that period. There were several things I would have questioned. But I knew nothing of it while it was being written. But in reference to what you were just saying, there was a point where Furlong referred to the monastery as being very bright and light. (**Kramer:** Yes, yes.) And it wasn't. It was very dark and gloomy, the old monastery. (**Kramer:** Yes, I've seen photographs of it.) That shows you how tricky it is because she placed Merton in terms of the present. It was nothing like this. (**Kramer:** Very good point.) The church was dark and gloomy, not depressing, but dark, the whole house was dark, being even dirty compared to now. The church wasn't painted. It hadn't seen paint for God knows how long. That was deliberate because the monks knew someday they were going to redo it anyhow, and it would have wasted money to make an effort in that direction. Anyway, I came in 1960, it was November, dark and gloomy, and I saw Fr. Andrew who was the Guestmaster and I was there three or four days and then I wanted to enter. The first one to receive me was Fr. John Eudes Bamberger who was the psychiatrist. And he didn't give you much attention. He just asked a few, almost blase, questions, nothing very striking. I didn't think they were very telling. He just said they get a lot of priests coming here who were just coming to get away from their orders or societies. . . . And then Merton came along and just asked a few simple questions. It was not very astonishing.

Kramer: And in 1960 Merton would have been the Novice Master?

Kelty: Yes. And that's all. And both of them were about as indifferent as if they couldn't care less. That was deliberate; I realized that after a while. They probably, even today, do that. They don't entice you, and beg you, or cajole you or make any effort at all to coax you to enter or something like that.

1. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

Kramer: So you wondered, do I really want to do this?

Kelty: Yes, it's up to you. They just, both of them, sat. Actually, it's up to you. If you want to try it. . . that's about as much interest as they showed. The Abbot, Dom James Fox, was a little more positive. And that was the first meeting. And then when I came, I came in January or February 1960, then Merton was Novice Master.

Kramer: So at that point you would have had some contact with him?

Kelty: From then on you were under him because we lived separately then, and we had a conference from him everyday, and he ran our little community. (**Kramer:** Of about how many novices?) About a dozen or sixteen, twelve to sixteen. . . very mixed, young high school kids, graduates, and some from college, couple of businessmen, couple of priests, It was a very wide variety. Paul Quenon was one the novices; Timothy Kelly [now Abbot of Gethsemani] was one of the novices then. How would I describe Merton in those days? I always thought he was very British. I don't know if people would agree with that. I grew up in the Boston area, and there was a strong British influence in Boston. I went to public schools and the teachers were all maiden ladies, "secular nuns," "protestant nuns." He had a lot of that. At least I thought he did. His humor, I thought, was British. He could be very cutting. . . maybe even sarcastic. I don't want to put this out as being critical, but the British (Anglo-Saxons) are pretty good at the "put-down," but with "class." He could seem very British. His humor was on the dry side.

Kramer: At that point, were the novices much more separated from the rest of the monks, more than today?

Kelty: Yes. We lived in the rear. . . it's gone now. But there was a back wing, and we had our own bootroom where we would change our clothes. And we had our own study hall, and our own conference room. And the dormitory. . . we had a separate chapel. We were more segregated in those days. (**Kramer:** So your actual contact with the professed monks?) Was little. We worked with them and we went to choir, of course. We blended with them, but we were more separated than they are today. There was a certain point in it. And so it did tend to make a group, a community, out of the Novitiate. Now there aren't as many and it would be more difficult. Beside the Abbot, Merton would be the one we had most contact with, like

assigning your work, for example in the morning after Prime. And he was very shrewd at that. (**Kramer:** And this was done everyday? So you never knew what you would be doing?) After Prime. Never knew. And he could be really demanding. Many in the community thought he was kind of a pushover as Novice Master, but he wasn't. He didn't mind imposing discipline. (**Kramer:** And what kind of work did you do? Outdoor work?) Indoor, outdoor. You know you'd get a beautiful day like this, say in February, and Kentucky in February can be kind of grim, but you get occasionally a beautiful sunshiny, lovely day, and you'd just love to go outside and do something. He'd assign me to type stencils for him. That was his work style. He used to write out, type out his articles, and then revise them, I think in red, and then revise them again in black, and then we would type it out on a stencil and mimeograph it, and then he would send it out to a lot of his friends. He would get their reactions, and then he would go into the feedback. Having some kind of assessment of the article, he would do it again and then maybe send it out to a magazine. It would appear in a journal and there would be more feedback and ultimately [it would] find its way into a book. I'm not a typist. There were only one or two typists in the group. It was tedious work. And then you'd find things you couldn't read, where he'd make these corrections in his cramped hand, and I simply couldn't read it, and he would get very annoyed. You weren't supposed to bother him. He was very strict on this. Once the man was at his work, you left him alone. This was a lesson to us. (**Kramer:** So, he'd put everybody to work, and he'd go off and do his thing?) Yes, we were supposed to respect people when they were working. Don't bother people; imposing on others, you know, taking advantage of them on the point of their work. You were expected to be charitable. You'd have to go to his door. He would be annoyed.

Kramer: Were the other novices aware of the fact that he was a writer, that he wrote a lot of things?

Kelty: Oh, yes. But we knew very little. The Abbot never talked about it, and he never talked about it. He was seeing people all the time, but we knew very little. No, it was very low key. They made nothing of him in the Abbey.

Kramer: So, in terms of the attitudes of some of the other monks toward Merton, you didn't get any feeling that here was a man who had written a

lot of books?

Kelty: Oh, no! Famous man, or something? Oh, Lord, no. And I thought a lot of the reason was he didn't think of himself that way. He didn't think of himself as famous, or interesting, or a character, or a well-known writer. He simply didn't take himself that seriously; and when you don't, nobody else will. They will react to you the way you react to yourself. And they took him very casually. They treated him just like any other monk. And we would hear very little about his impact on the literary world in any case. The books, when they did appear, were up in the library on the table and nothing specially would be made of them. I don't remember any of his books being read in refectory but they did read one or two, I think, before my time. There was no big announcement made. We had no idea, in fact, that he was well-known. (**Kramer:** More than, say, Fr. Raymond?) Fr. Raymond was a little different because he started as different. He was perhaps more a "writer" than Merton; you know, this is not said critically. It's just that their styles were quite different. But we had no idea that Merton's impact was as great as it was. It was a bombshell to most of us to find out how great a man he was.

Kramer: In some ways, it's been only in the years since his death that he's really become so well known. So, in a sense, in 1960 he would have been recognized and his books would have been distributed over the country, but he wouldn't have been known that well among Cistercians.

Kelty: Occasionally he would share guests with us; you know, get them to talk to the Novices. The Abbot would let him. . . (**Kramer:** For instance?) The Berrigans did, once or twice. But he did that with the community, too. Then we had Evans. He was a Dominican. (**Kramer:** What was his first name?) Illtud. I think it's a British name. He was editor of "Blackfriars." He talked to us one day. I remember him particularly. He's very British. He's learned. . . a Dominican, you know, a very learned man, the kind of man that Merton loved, and he had toured the States and he came especially to see some of the abbeys. He visited Collegetteville and then there was a friary in St. Louis, built in very modern style; then there was another one out in Rhode Island some place. These were a little bit advanced in their style. He was praising them and I could remember, we novices didn't go along with him. We told him we didn't like these new monasteries, these great German masses of concrete. We thought it was hideous. And we said we thought that the

National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, which was just being finished in Washington, was much more typical of the United States. (**Kramer:** What did he say about the remodeling of this monastery, though?) I don't think it was along yet. I don't think we had started it. I don't remember. We hadn't finished the church yet. He didn't comment on Gethsemani, but he was proud of the fact the monastic orders had the most advanced architecture. We said we didn't agree with that. I mean we weren't saying the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was all that great, but it was typical of the American Catholic viewpoint, and the American Bishops, that it would be much more representative of the Catholic Church than St. John's in Collegeville would be. St. John's would be for an elite, a very small group. But this is what I was getting to, that Merton would take it very much amiss if you criticized his guests or disagreed with them or spoke out, didn't treat them with great civility. We weren't uncivil to Evans. But I didn't realize that Merton would get very annoyed. Finally Dom James told me, "Don't do that, don't pick on his guests." Well, we had a very quiet life. We saw nobody, and we were restricted here in this confine, then much more than now, and we were all new at it, we had just come. You move into an environment where all outside stimulus is cut off, there's no input. It's to awaken the inner life. So there's nothing coming in from outside. But all of his friends were intellectually stimulating, original thinkers, and many of them were professional. They were speakers, lecturers, and they deliberately set out to antagonize you, to stimulate you by making extraordinary statements. These people would come in to us novices and in no more than ten minutes, we'd be jumping out of the chairs. He'd get very annoyed.

Kramer: Do you remember other persons who came as guests?

Kelty: Oh, it would take a while. It was twenty years ago. If I talked, I could get it.

Kramer: We can pursue that another time. Let's change the subject and ask you to say something about Merton's physical appearance, as you recall it. I read the essay you wrote which was in Br. Patrick Hart's book, and you did a beautiful job there of saying something about Merton's manner.² But I just wondered what comes to mind?

2. "The Man" in *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983, pp. 19-35.

Kelty: Yes. . . not big and heavy. . . with the Charlie Chaplin feet? . . . how his feet were spread? And he thought of himself, I'm sure he did, as physically capable, but I thought he was dangerous with an axe. He thought of himself as not exactly athletic, for he talked about his failure as a rower with the boats. (**Kramer:** I know, oarsman) That was mentioned, but he wasn't all that coordinated. He wasn't handy. Let's put it that way. He wasn't handy with stuff, tools and things.

Kramer: But he must have realized that and also have had a sense of humor.

Kelty: Well, I think he did. I remember one day we were all coming in from work or something. It was the afternoon, around three or something, and there was an enormous black cloud of smoke up there on the hill. It would have been right in the dry time, in the fall sometime. Fires can be very dangerous here. And so he rounded us all up and we all went just as we were, robes and all, we went galavanting up the hill, and he took charge. And he wouldn't let us run; he made us walk fast. And we all had brooms; there was a fire broom each of us took along. And the whole woods was a roaring fire because one of the neighbors was burning something in the back of his yard, and it had gotten out of hand. And of course his hermitage was right in the middle of all that. But I never forgot it because he was showing more than just ordinary concern, telling us: "All right, men, now, go here, now we'll do this," shouting orders. We got it out, though. It was so unlike him. It was so out of context, as the military leader leading this expedition to put out this fire.

Kramer: Do you think he was conscious of how he appeared?

Kelty: Not impressive, a poor dresser. Didn't know how to wear clothes. Even in the habit, he didn't look very good. He was just not gifted that way. It was the same in New Guinea. The people on the coast are aware of clothes and what you can do with them. People in the highlands are not. You know, you either have this gift or you haven't. Even people who don't have much in terms of a body, if they have a feeling for clothes they can always look good, you know, with a little bit of class. But he had nothing of that. Funny. Of course, he was indifferent to it, too. That didn't help it any. No. . . a very modest, humble person, unassuming, unpushy, the kind people, I'm sure, could talk to easily. They wouldn't be afraid of him.

Kramer: You mentioned some of the duties you had when you were a novice. Later, did you have other duties which brought you into contact with Merton?

Kelty: Yes, because of what they call vocations. I would interview the men who were interested. (**Kramer:** So you were the Vocation Director?) Well, you call it that. What it meant was that you got the mail that came in, and you sorted out the absolutely hopeless and didn't encourage them to waste their money. We would engage in a little preliminary correspondence and send them some stuff, some pamphlet or booklets and then eventually they'd come for a weekend retreat when they could. And then I would talk, just see what they sounded like and then Fr. Eudes would see them, the psychiatrist. If they were interested in entering Merton would be the third one, and then it wasn't a final judgment. It was just kind of an assessment whether there was any hope in pursuing this any further. It used to be quite awkward at times because they would get here Friday night, and wouldn't know whether they were going to have these interviews or not; and then sometime Saturday morning or Saturday afternoon, Merton would have to see them in order to get it done in time for the Abbot to see them on Sunday morning. So, if Fr. Louis was busy or had company or was working on something, it would be a little awkward at times to squeeze that in.

Kramer: During that period when he was writing and distributing a lot of material in mimeograph form to get reactions, do you think he sometimes felt frustrated because he often couldn't get things published quickly or because he wasn't sure he could get permission from the censors?

Kelty: Well, I never got the impression that he felt crushed. He would talk about it occasionally, but I never thought of it as anything more than anyone else in the church would be subject to. That was the feeling I had.

Kramer: So you'd say his attitudes toward his life at Gethsemani during that whole period were clearly very, very positive?

Kelty: Oh, yes, yes.

Kramer: See, that's the thing. If you read Monica Furlong's book, she stresses this poor Fr. Louis who felt frustrated. (**Kelty:** It was overdone.) I think so too. (**Kelty:** It may be all correct.) But I think it's out of context. My

feeling is that she was looking for a problem chapter by chapter, and so she would find a problem upon which to build the chapter. But she's ignoring the larger rhythm.

Kelty: I really wouldn't say that what she said was not true, but it's not the whole truth. And I'm not saying either that this is an easy thing to do, to assess a character like Merton, a person like that. No, no. He would frequently bitch about the Abbot and we always understood this to mean that, you know, he criticized the Abbot. He'd find fault with him, the Abbot did this or that. (**Kramer:** You're talking about the Abbot at that time?) Dom James, yes. And we novices, we understood this perfectly. The idea was that the Abbot is a human being. He is the head of this monastery. You take vows to God Almighty through the hands of this Abbot. If you cannot live with his imperfections and human frailty, well, don't get involved then. If your faith isn't deep enough to go beyond this, you're simply out of your element. In other words, he wasn't out to put the Abbot up as some glorified figure, the Christ figure, whom you would find it easy to obey. You took your vows to God through this man, and this man was a human being, and he wouldn't pull any punches. He would tell us what this old man's job was, what this man was up to. So it was done frankly but without this sneering backbiting sort of thing. Very objective.

Kramer: There has been some writing about Merton's wanting to change Orders, to become a hermit and so on, and you get a kind of one-sided view of that sometimes, too.

Kelty: He told me himself that he was an artist, a poet, he was a romantic, he was a dreamer, he had a new idea every week, and he would get all worked up over these ideas, and then he would go running off to the Abbot with them, and the Abbot would sit and listen to him patiently and, of course, eventually tell him the whole thing was just a dream. Then he'd bitch a bit and then go back where he was and start over again. And he told me himself that Dom James was the kind of Abbot that he needed. If he had had a soft-hearted, easy, benevolent Abbot, he would have ended up a disaster. His gifts were so strong and so wild that he needed this control if they were going to amount to anything. And he told me that himself.

Kramer: So you might say that, although it was difficult for a monk to be a monk and a writer, it wasn't any more difficult for him to be a writer here than it would have been somewhere else.

Kelty: It's him. It was the gift that made it difficult for him. Any artist has this problem.

Kramer: And would you say Merton would think, "O.K. I'm an artist, but first I'm a monk?"

Kelty: He had it straight. The monks used to think he was kind of a wild one, you know, that he got away with a great deal. And he would give you this impression, you know, because he was not out to create a following. He hated that. He did not want a cult; he was vehement on this. He'd get wild if he thought people were cultivating him, you know, or were making a fetish out of him. But Dom James himself told me that he had no more obedient monk than Merton. He would bitch and make a lot of noise about something, but when it came to a showdown, he'd obey. And the Abbot knew this. This is why the Abbot could give him a great deal of rope, because he could trust him. But in the end, if he said "No" it was finished. He'd give him a real good talking to and the matter was settled. And those were the principles Fr. Louis taught us. Being a good, obedient monk didn't mean that you lived forever in a kind of equanimity with your Abbot on every single issue. There were many areas where you could be in disagreement, and even in contention if you thought it was serious enough; but in the end the decision was the Abbot's, and that's the way the life is set up. And he lived up to it.

Kramer: Do you remember if he ever indicated any special concerns about the monastery? What kinds of things would he get worked up over?

Kelty: Before I forget, he did feel very badly about the Peace book. . . that he wrote. . . it was something about peace, and the Abbot General turned it down.³ The Abbot General was a patriot and De Gaulle had decorated him. He was a super French patriot, you know, and I know that hurt Merton but then it was not so long after that Pope John came out with his *Pacem in Terris* and he was delighted. Merton said, "He said everything I wanted to say and said it better." But, the biggest thing. . . (**Kramer:** I was inquiring about the kinds of things he would be concerned about at Gethsemani.) Earlier in his life, that would have been the *environment*. I think in the

3. Probably *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (1962), never published as a book, but various articles appeared separately. See listings in Marquita E. Breit / Robert E. Daggy, *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1986).

Abbey that was probably the thing that he made the biggest stink about, and with certain departments, you know, that would be the Cellarer, Brother Clement, who was in charge of the farm and who was a modern farmer, and who did everything just like right out of a book. I never saw a farm like the one we had. I came from a different order and at our seminary we had a farm. We were in some ways more of a monastery than this place was. We grew our wheat and made our own flour and baked our own bread. The equipment was old hand-me-downs and poor stuff and you had to fix it up, you know. I mean it was antiquated. And this place was modern, up-to-date, and that meant going along with all that involved; pesticides, for instance, to make the crops grow because our land is not that good. And then they watered all these fields with these irrigation pipes, you know, and lakes they made. (**Kramer:** They needed the ponds so they could irrigate?) Sure, because it gets dry here. It doesn't rain maybe for a month or so. And then it all had to be sprayed with pesticides. And Merton would go wild over this, because it would kill everything, bugs and birds, bees and butterflies, in order to make this alfalfa. You know our alfalfa would be up to your waist and the neighbors' would be like clover around your ankles. (**Kramer:** They didn't stop using the pesticides, I don't suppose.) No! No! Then they . . . down in the bottoms . . . you don't know it, but out back there, there's the so-called "bottoms" . . . there was a creek that wandered through the fields. (**Kramer:** Behind the buildings?) Yes, along in there, and it was more fertile ground because it's lowland, and there was a creek wandering through it but the creek wandering through it made it very difficult to cultivate it, and so they moved the creek, put it over on the further side. Well that went on, I think, for months, day and night, or at least they worked in the moonlight, you know. They moved that creek over to the one side so that they could, you know, do the corn or whatever it was in one clean sweep. He bitched about that without end, because he couldn't sleep at night. He'd write nasty notes. (**Kramer:** So he wasn't concerned about the environment; he was concerned about how he couldn't sleep!) Well, he didn't like the idea of tearing up this creek anyhow. Later on the water returned. I don't know how it is today. I think the water . . . (**Kramer:** Went back?) Yes! . . . but bulldozers, pawing through, tearing up woods and spreading chemicals. This sort of thing annoyed him no end.

Kramer: How about the environment within the monastery?

Kelty: Noise, excitement . . . big to-do over anything. Life used to be much

more exciting than it is now. There was much more pandemonium. The Office was longer and complicated, feast days were apt to be very elaborate with very long Offices. Whenever they would do anything, they'd tend to make it big. (**Kramer:** He didn't like that?) Down on it. He was very low key. I remember the class a year ahead of me, before I came. They took one little room off of the office in the Novitiate, before Christmas, and tore everything out and then built a crib, a big Christmas scene inside. He was very annoyed. Because they wasted valuable time. Just because of Christmas, because the room was for Christmas, you don't have to make work out of it. Oh, he'd get very, very nasty. (**Kramer:** Who would the crib have been for?) For the novices. Oh, he didn't mind a little decoration, but all that running out to the woods and bringing in all kinds of green, spending all day working on it. And then they used to have a Corpus Christi procession in the cloister. You've seen pictures of it in Europe? This got more and more elaborate every year that I was here because you'd have to go out and gather all these flowers, and because there weren't enough flowers, they'd go out and gather greens, and grind them up in one of the farm machines, so you could handle them. You'd get different colored kinds of grass and gravel. (**Kramer:** And where was all this done?) The whole cloister floor was covered with this carpet of flowers and greens in designs.

Kramer: Do you think that Merton's years as a hermit were satisfactory?

Kelty: Yes. But after he was living up there a while, it got to be known where he was, and priests from the area used to come. They knew that you could park on the highway up there and cut across the fields, and then climb over the fence to the woods. And it got to be so bad that, in the end, in the afternoons, you'd find him out in the woods because people would come to him. But he told me, too, that priests, like in Louisville, which is what we were talking about, "If they need me, I would gladly spend myself for them. I would give up my solitude." What he resented was people coming to him just like they were tourists or something. If people had problems and worries or wanted somebody to talk to, he would be very glad to see them. He never would turn them away.

Kramer: Now, you said he told you this. Did you have much personal association with him, after you ceased to be a Novice?

Kelty: Well, I'd see him every time there would be somebody entering or

who wanted an interview. (**Kramer:** So you would see him on a more or less regular basis?) Often. And as you know, there would always be small talk, something in the air at the moment. It wouldn't be just business.

Kramer: Would you say that your own personal association with him was valuable?

Kelty: Oh, yes. He was an interesting person. He was difficult, not the easiest person to work with, but I enjoyed working with him. I never thought of it in terms of whether it was valuable or not. He was an interesting man. (**Kramer:** Very well disciplined in some ways?) Oh, yes, extremely. But he didn't give you this impression. Hard work was his basic discipline and he was more mortified than many thought. For instance, I can remember problems sometimes with the food he was given. I won't criticize certain people. The cooks sometimes get, you know, kind of tired. You know Merton didn't pay attention to his health. He was supposed to get certain foods and was not to get others.

Kramer: Sometimes it has been said that his health deteriorated because the food wasn't good, but I think part of it was that he just didn't think. He didn't think, am I eating a balanced diet?

Kelty: The cooks' attitudes, too... they just didn't like fussing over it with the people. He didn't like fussing over it either. I know he told me this several times, that he just went down to dinner and he couldn't eat anything because what they gave him he wasn't supposed to get, and he knew if he did eat it, he would get sick. And he would never complain. I know this, because the monk he complained to me about for doing such a shitty job was the monk who told me that Merton never complained. So I got it from both sides. And it doesn't mean this particular man was evil! Well, you just get tired of cooking for a lot of different people.

Kramer: Would you say today that if a monk needed some special attention, right now, in this monastery, he'd probably stand a better chance?

Kelty: Yes. Today we don't have the cult of severity, or the rigor. See, the cult of the day was, if it's tough, it's good. If it's hard, it's better. You know, this was in the air. It was dying in Merton's time, but it was still very strong, and this was the environment in which he was living. So in that context, it is

very difficult to develop a certain kind of tenderness toward people who needed a little bit of special consideration, especially if the person doesn't demand it, or insist on it. Do you follow me?

Kramer: Yes, yes, I do. Do you think persons were attracted to the religious life because of Merton? I mean because of his writings?

Kelty: I would think so. (**Kramer:** When the men came here and spoke with you, did they mention that?) Sometimes, yes. They knew his books often. Dom James used to say he sure brings them, but that doesn't keep them. (**Kramer:** Would you agree with that?) Yes. 'Cause they get like anybody else, a romanticized version of the life. He didn't romanticize it, but they did.

Kramer: I have a monk friend at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit near Conyers. He says, you know, one out of twenty-five will stay a while.

Kelty: Yes, it looks different from the gallery, you know. It doesn't mean they're supermen, but it does take a peculiar combination of gifts to be able to make a life of frugal experience.

Kramer: Some people have said that Thomas Merton would write about one thing and then he would change his mind and he would take another opinion, or that he was easily swayed in his opinions. You mentioned that he would have a new idea every week and so on.

Kelty: Not so much the way he did it. I think he was seeing it from so many aspects, from so many sides. I don't know much about intellectuals. I sometimes get the impression that intellectuals love stimulating dialogue, and he could do this. He could be very exciting in his talks, lectures and so on, and say really outrageous things and then come back tomorrow and, without batting an eye, contradict everything he said yesterday. (**Kramer:** And enjoy it!) Without, you know, thinking that there's any reason to apologize, because he's seeing it today from this side, and yesterday he was seeing it from that side. And it was up to you to figure it out.

Kramer: Did you go to any of these Sunday afternoon conferences?

Kelty: Very few, because I just had enough of him. In this context, in this

life too much excitement is not good for you, too much emotion, too much, you know. And he used to get me excited, even annoyed, get me all worked up. Reading him is different, but hearing him. . . I should have gone. It was sinful not to, but they'll all appear in print eventually, his literary criticism. (**Kramer:** Yes, he spoke on several poets and Faulkner.) Faulkner. I've read a comment by people, I think John Eudes said it, that this was where he was superb, as a literary critic, apart from his spiritual area, which was probably the best. But as a literary critic, he was very gifted, and that's what he was doing on Sunday afternoons. When I think of it. . . I didn't even bother going.

Kramer: You know there were tapes made.

Kelty: Yes, they're all down. You heard the story of how that started? (**Kramer:** I've heard someone explain a little bit of it.) 'Cause that was an accident. The brothers used to go down and cut up the vegetables for dinner, early in the morning, four o'clock or something. . . and they resented it as time went on, and when the new look began to come into the life, they wanted more time for reading. A lot of this was make-do work, wasn't really necessary. . . sometimes it was, but sometimes it wasn't. And so they began to fall off; they figured let the cooks do it themselves. And then we had an eager beaver, a young father, appointed to be Master of the Brothers, and he was wanting to get all the Brothers down there in the morning, because those who went resented the fact that others didn't come, you know, the usual community thing. And in order to entice the Brothers to come to work, he would tape Merton's conferences to the Novices today at eleven o'clock and would play it the next day at four o'clock in the morning, because in those days, there was no contact between the different departments. Merton might just as well have been anywhere as far as they were concerned, because they never heard him talk. At most maybe once a year, in a Chapter talk, and you couldn't go to confession to him. You weren't allowed to speak to him, seeing him occasionally, that's all. And they had no awareness of his spiritual teaching because it wasn't yet available. And so one day we went to a conference at 11:15, I think it was, and there was a microphone hanging in front of him. He said, "Today we're on the air." And I said, "Who's listening to you?" "Well," he said, "the Brothers will." I said, "How are the Brothers listening to you, because there's nobody in the house." He said, "The Brothers down in the workroom." I said, "They're not down in the workroom now." He

said, "It's on tape. It's going to be put on tape." Tape was fairly new then; tape recorders weren't everywhere. Well, I thought, for Heaven's sake! And we were surprised that he went along with it, because he didn't have much sympathy for electronic business. So then they started and all the Brothers flocked to the workroom. They went, because it was the first time they had heard him. Well, that started them to work. It was a trick to get them there. And then from then on, they recorded all of his conferences, and then they were better in the original because. . . well the originals were better than the printed form, because his talks were always preceded by his little. . . you know, small talk around the Abbey, little jokes, and then questions from the audience and that sort of thing. And then they went on further, and began to record any address that he made, and by the time he died, they had a whole cabinet full. (**Kramer:** Yes, they do have a lot of them. You're right. They will eventually be made available.) It was Gerard Majella, that's the Father's name, Bryan. He's gone now. He left. He was the Father Master for the Brothers. It was his idea.

Kramer: I wanted to ask you a question since you lived in Asia and because you may have thought about some of the Eastern connections. (**Kelty:** South Pacific. I lived in New Guinea.) You'd have a better feel for Eastern views than most Americans. Have you read Merton's writings about the East? (**Kelty:** Not many.) I just wondered if you had some sympathetic feelings about them, the way he became so interested in Eastern philosophy and religion and so on toward the end of his life, then the trip, of course.

Kelty: Yes, the last card he wrote me. He sent a card from Singapore when he was on his way to Bangkok, because I had been in Singapore and he knew that. And I had talked to him about the Cargo Cults in the Pacific. And that would be typical of the way he did things. We would be in what he called a rap session, direction, you know, every two weeks or so, you had a half an hour. (**Kramer:** But he asked you specifically about the Cargo Cults?) It must have come up in conversation, and I talked about it to him, and he was interested, and then what would he do. . . (**Kramer:** He hadn't been reading about them?) No. He knew a little bit about it, and what he would do, he would write for books, I mean to the University Library, and they would send them back. He would just ask for books on the Cargo Cults, and they would send them back. You know, boxes of books, and then he would read that all through. Then he would do several papers on it. That's the way

he worked; he would delve deep into a subject. (**Kramer:** But what do you remember? What did you tell him about Cargo Cults?) Well, it was simply talking about it in reference to the fact that it was the reaction of a primitive people to maintain the role of the world of spirit in society. Western man thinks the Pacific people are barren of religion and they cannot understand this. We do not integrate faith or beliefs and action in the secular world and the spiritual world. We don't integrate this, and they do. (**Kramer:** So they figure it has to be integrated?) Has to be. When we deny it, they say we're either lying, or we're deceiving them, or hiding it from them. And so actually the cult is not a thing to get money, which is the way most Europeans think of the Cargo Cults. They think it's rubbing your hand in spiritual techniques in order to get wealth. That's a very crude interpretation. Merton denies this too. What they're trying to say is that there is a spiritual world, a dominion, a dimension to every secular action, and it's not evident in the Westerner. (**Kramer:** That's a very good way to explain it.) Why is it? And when you ask about it, we deny there is any and then they say, you're hiding it. And this then is where crooked characters are out there, too. Because we're "hiding it," they think we have special techniques for producing things, and this is how it can get perverted, and then it becomes a cult for money.

Kramer: That's very interesting, though, that you knew about the Cargo Cults. (**Kelty:** It's still there.) And you talked with Merton, and then he started reading and making notes, and then he ended up writing a whole section in the book *The Geography of Lograire*, which is really very much about Cargo cults, and about the fact that Western ideas have had a bad influence upon these native cults.

Kelty: Indeed! You see, this would be the point, I think, of his contact with the East, because the East would be traditional and has a much better integrated spiritual world along with their material world. Their material world may not be, or at least traditionally hasn't been, as advanced as ours has been, but they have had this spiritual dominion, you know, the Contemplative East, and we lack this dreadfully; and it's very difficult to have anything like a contemplative life or live in a monastery, when the people who are in it come from this kind of a background. And this Western mentality continues to be the problem in New Guinea. They would make elegant monks, contemplative monks. In fact, they're contemplative already, in terms of their ability to reflect and to ponder, even though it's

low level, not sophisticated. . . (**Kramer:** But they're ready for it, they're ready for it, just as the people in Africa are ready for it.) They have the gift. They're normal. They're healthy human beings, that's what it amounts to. But all Western materialism is gross in its secularity, and even the spiritual people who become priests, the brothers and sisters and so on, are tainted with it, and it's very hard to see very much spirituality even in them; in other words, it's not integrated. You follow me? (**Kramer:** Right, right.) The difference between the plantation manager, the government men, and the priest, they see this. They're quite aware there's a real difference, but it's as much their insight as their gift. Because they look the same, dress the same, they all have Hondas or they have Toyotas, they eat the same; there was precious little difference. The Father may be a bit more moral, and he's a celibate and they appreciated this; but then they do know he prays and they do know he has his sacraments and so on, and so, even though on the evidence there isn't a great deal to distinguish them, the local is very much aware of the fact that this man's a priest, but it's sharp insight on their part.

Kramer: How many Christians are there in the area of New Guinea where you lived?

Kelty: They'd be predominantly Christian, predominantly Catholic in that area. Most of New Guinea has been colored with Christianity, and they take it seriously. They consider themselves a Christian country. Areas would be Lutheran and other areas would be so-called United Church, that would be the British Baptists or whatever they were, and then other whole areas would be Catholic. But no religion they would see is as important in the elemental aspect of life as they would have it. Even if they are not individually pious, and they might not go to Mass or something, neglect many things, religion is important to them.

Kramer: So this word "integration" is the key and this would be what Merton would be interested in, the fact that something is wrong, fundamentally wrong, with Western society.

Kelty: This is *the* problem there now because they're headed toward a secular society. The new University has nothing to identify it as Christian. It's government sponsored. They're building a big government center near Port Moresby. There's no cross there, there's no Madonna, there's no

Christ, there's nothing, no chapel, nothing to indicate a spiritual orientation. This is not in conformity with primitive thinking, and they will move into a secular society because they want it to be Western. They want to have our ways. They do! They wear the kind of clothes we do. They like Americans, they love jeans and boots, the whole show. But if they do, they will blow it in one generation, because they came yesterday from a rich, integrated culture, and they're going to be moving into a barren desert with a lot of toys. I mean they'll have clothes if the economy holds up. They'll have a lot of material things and they will discover too late that these things do not provide what they're looking for. I told this to a young Father, an Irish priest in the Cathedral in Madang. I said, "You know, Father, it ain't going to be very long, a generation maybe, and you're going to have young men and women who are successful. They've got a nice education, they've got nice government jobs, they have a cute little house, they've got one or two kids, they've got a motorcycle or a car, they eat better than the typical locals. In terms of the average New Guinean, they're sophisticates." But I said, "They're going to come to you and tell you that inside they're empty. 'Empty drums' is their expression. 'Life has no meaning.'" And he told me, he said, "Father, that ain't coming. It has come. I have young people coming to me telling me, 'I got everything and my life is empty, and it leads to drink and worse.'" Because, you see, they come from just yesterday. We are schooled, we have a tradition of Christianity going back a thousand years, and we're living on the remnants of it, and furthermore, we've been schooled in will power and ego expression and aggression and Western modes of thinking over a long, long period. We have been doing this for a couple of hundred years; this secular society has been a slow process, and we're tough, and even we, as Jung said, we're sick people, and the sickness is no faith now.

Kramer: I wanted to ask just a couple of other questions which lead back to Merton and monasticism. You know he had a lot of ideas, expressed mostly in essays written toward the end of his life, about monastic renewal and renewal in the Church. Do you think he was instrumental in bringing about some change within the monasteries, or would you think that most of the changes within monasteries which have taken place would have been effected if Thomas Merton had stayed in New York City and had never come to Kentucky?

Kelty: I think he had a really powerful role within the Order. (**Kramer:**

Within the Cistercian Order?) Yes. I think that would be admitted, because of his research and his studies.

Kramer: And so the things that he published would have been read carefully and would have had an effect?

Kelty: Oh, they did! They had an impact, yes. As a spiritual writer in the monastic area, he was widely accepted in the Order, even universally. And his strictly spiritual writing, there was no question that they loved him and followed him. There was no doubt that he was a real leader and a real influence within the Order. If he hadn't been there, the impact would probably have come from others, but it would have been a great loss, a great loss.

Kramer: Do particular writings come to mind?

Kelty: Well, all of his so-called monastic writings. I'd have to get a list.

Kramer: His books about monasticism and books having to do with matters of spirituality, and so on?

Kelty: And history, monastic history. The kind of stuff he was giving the Novices. He'd get into the social areas, war and peace, and the monks were a little bit skittish there. Today they're not. He was never a popular figure when it came to war and nonviolence, this kind of thing. There his influence was not what it could have been. Today, perhaps, it comes into its own, because now we're faced with things which are not better. (**Kramer:** They're worse.) Much worse, much worse. But this particular house was superbly blessed by God. Because we had Dom James who was a superb Abbot. He was an authoritarian character, an old-fashioned kind of an Abbot, but a holy man, and a shrewd operator. He knew men when he had them. And he was blessed with good men. He had this brother, Clement Dorsey, who completely revitalized the whole economics of the place. Then he had John Eudes who was a doctor, and he sent him off to study psychiatry and he did much to improve the psychiatric tone of this place, because there were a lot of nutty things going on here. Even in terms of things like diet. Also the "climate" was really quite weird. Then we had Chrysogonus Waddell, a musician, superb. And then we had Merton for the spirituality. And that combination, I mean, if you couldn't build a good

monastery with them!

Kramer: Dom James Fox knew this. He knew what he was doing, right?

Kelty: And he was completely different from many in these modern Orders who are stingy with dealing out power.

Kramer: Someone should have told, probably someone did tell, Monica Furlong about this and she missed it when she wrote her book about Merton since you just get the one thing about Dom James.

Kelty: It's a pity, because he wasn't that kind. It's not fair. He was authoritarian, there's no question of it, that's the way he did things, but so was the whole monastic set-up run that way. But when he found a good man, he would give power and that meant the money, too. I mean I'd come from an active Order. The active Orders are not nearly as democratic as the old ones, and you didn't get nearly the power, and power means also the money, because these people, these brothers, they built this farm, and they didn't have to run to him every few minutes to get permission to spend ten dollars. They were given authority and it was sink or swim. If you failed, it's your neck, you know. If you succeed, it's to your credit. And they would die for him. (**Kramer:** That makes them feel like they're doing it, you know, and they're doing it as a community, and that's the beauty of it.) And that builds a really strong community.

Kramer: I've got one last question, and that is, if you were to put in a few words what you think the most important thing to be remembered about Thomas Merton is, what would you say?

Kelty: The most important thing about him? I would always think of him not as being brilliant and an intellectual and all that, I think of him as being poor, and simple, and little, and fragile and dearly loved. Do you follow me? (**Kramer:** Yes.) I'm not an intellectual, so I don't understand all that. People think of him as brilliant and all this, but he thought of himself as a poor sinner whom God infinitely loved. He reflected this in his whole manner and that's the way he affected people. He did not impress you. He was not an impressive person. He was not an impressive figure, even his face was plain. This isn't to criticize other people, some people exhibit power and strength, but he didn't. And his lesson was how good God is, how sweet

God is and how loving God is, even for the littlest and poorest and the most fragile of us. Do you follow me?

Kramer: Right, I do, and that's very important because, see, if we can provide this information for people some twenty, thirty years from now, then it would be a matter of fitting it back into the context of how he lived day by day in the atmosphere of this monastery. It wasn't a matter of somebody who produced a bibliography which was so long, or somebody who corresponded with 1700 people.

Kelty: Some of his earlier poetry reflects these things, especially the one on the death of his brother, and some of them are very touching in their simplicity. . . in their utter modesty.

Kramer: That's very good. Thank you. Now would you want to give a final reflection on Fr. Louis?

Kelty: His last appearance among us was in that monstrous casket in our sanctuary while we did our last service to him. He was Jonah in the belly of the whale. He was the man totally committed to the mercy of God, about to be cast on the eternal shores. Mercy was his other name.