

## From Faith to Joy: Studying the Church and Thomas Merton: An Interview with William H. Shannon\*

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*Conducted by Christine M. Bochen and Victor A. Kramer  
Edited and Transcribed by Glenn Crider*

**Kramer:** We feel that a good place to start the interview would be to consider what you wrote about St Anselm in relation to Merton. This is from your chapter 'The Spirituality of St. Anselm', and in this part of the book you examine a basic message in *The Proslogion*: 'Would this understanding of faith – as an experience to be enjoyed – be helpful to women and men in today's world, beset as they are by questions and problems about faith?'<sup>1</sup>

**Shannon:** I honestly don't know. The reader can answer for herself or himself. I would simply say that a healthy understanding of faith and of the joy that can accompany it may very well help a person to transcend questions and doubts, or even to live with them and discover that they're not destructive of faith, indeed, they may even be the condition of its growth. Faith brings joy because it puts us in touch with God who is the source of joy. Thomas Merton has written, 'Faith, then, is not just the grim determination to cling to a certain form of words, no matter what may happen...above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light'.<sup>2</sup>

**Kramer:** When I chose that passage I was thinking about you, Bill, and

\* This interview was conducted in Rochester, New York, on 15 August 2002.

1. William H. Shannon, *Anselm: The Joy of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. 92.

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 130.

your own vocation which, looking at you from afar, I feel has been one of joy and affirmation. And I feel that sense of affirmation in much that I've seen you do and write, and edit, but I find that it's especially there in your own writing, and not only in your work about Merton. So, what we want to do is to talk about both your life and your work as a writer.

**Shannon:** I'm very impressed by that text from St. Anselm. (Laughter.)

**Bochen:** Many readers of *The Merton Annual* know your work on Thomas Merton as well as your own writings on spirituality and non-violence, on the catechism of the Catholic Church, and on St. Anselm. Your books have been widely read in North America, in England, and beyond. But you are not only a writer; you are also a Catholic priest, a professor, and a spiritual director. It seems that all these dimensions of your life have been integrally related to your work as a writer. Tell us about yourself and about how you became a writer. Perhaps you might begin with what we might call the 'early Shannon' before moving on to the 'later Shannon'.

**Shannon:** I remember a quotation from Merton that I used at a talk that I gave when I was given the President's Award from St Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. I think it was in the year 2000. Here is the quotation: 'Of all ages in which to be a priest, I cannot think of a better one than this'. I identify with that quotation. I was ordained in 1943. I'll be celebrating my sixtieth anniversary in 2003, and I just feel it's been a very joyful and exciting time to be a priest.

And as a priest I've undergone tremendous changes in my thinking, in my teaching. I began as someone, who had been nurtured in neo-scholasticism, and was made to feel that all I had to do was to learn my textbooks and I would be a good priest who would have the answers to all people's questions. And for a while, that's the way I thought about being a priest. That's the way I thought when I was first assigned by Bishop James Edward Kearney to be a teacher at Nazareth College. So I gave students the neo-scholasticism that I had been taught. It was pretty grim stuff: an approach to religious issues that presumed we had all the answers. We were certain that any questions that we could not answer were not really worth asking.

And then something very important happened in the life of the Catholic Church in America and in my life. I saw advertised some place a biblical institute that was organized by Monsignor Dan Cantwell, a Chicago priest. In the early 60's, in his role as director of continuing education, he adopted a booklet on Scripture to be used during Lent in the parishes of

the Chicago Archdiocese. A number of priests told him: 'We can't lead these discussions; we don't know anything about Scripture'. So Monsignor Cantwell set up institutes on Scripture, held at the Maryknoll Seminary in Glen Ellen, north of Chicago. As I felt very much like those Chicago priests, sharing their sense of ignorance of Scripture, when I saw the advertisement for the Biblical Institute, I decided to go. This would have been some time in the early '60s, maybe even earlier than that. Dan managed to get the best biblical scholars from all over the world to come to Glen Ellen for two weeks each summer. The first time I went, I didn't know what they were talking about. I remember one professor talking about the 'Deuteronomist historian'. What in the world did he mean by that? And I left there very puzzled, but with the conviction that there is something here that I'm not getting and that I must keep at.

So I came back the next year. I went back there probably six, seven, eight years. The first year I went by myself. I gradually picked up a number of priests from Rochester who joined me, and by the fifth or sixth year we had a dozen priests from our diocese. And at one point the whole business – the historical-critical approach to Scripture – began to jell with me; I began to realize what was happening in Scripture study. I came to realize that Scripture was not something that you use, as we had been doing in our theology courses, to prove things that we already believed, but rather that Scripture was something that you listened to. You listened to understand what God was saying to us and asking of us through the sacred text.

**Kramer:** Right, Merton says, 'The Bible reads us'.

**Shannon:** Absolutely. Anyway, that really opened my mind to a whole new understanding of Scripture, and it emboldened me to begin giving courses on Scripture. On one instance, I agreed to give lectures one night a week for a whole semester at a parish hall, on the whole of the New Testament. I still have the outlines of the lectures: I covered *all* the books of the New Testament. I am still amazed at the boldness (probably arrogance would be a better word) that I had in embarking on such a project.

Anyway, participating in summer institutes and studying the Scripture was what really prepared me for the monumental changes in the Church that came with the Second Vatican Council. Many Council documents were largely crafted by biblical scholars.

This entry into a new way of understanding Scripture prepared me to read those documents. It was exciting to be teaching at the very time the

Council was in session. As the documents kept coming, I gave the lectures on them in class. I also remember that Father Charles Curran and I took turns each month giving lectures to the Sisters of St Joseph at Nazareth Academy. We would talk on a different document of the Council. I still have those talks somewhere in my files.

**Bochen:** How did studying these documents affect your teaching?

**Shannon:** The Council had a profound effect on me. All of a sudden I was beginning to realize that the rigidity of the theology that I had learned just didn't make much sense, especially for college students. There was a huge change in my life: I began to see that even the teachings that were coming officially from the Church had to be looked at and examined and that this was one of the tasks of a theologian.

So at one point a group of us began reading Protestant theologians. This was an unheard of thing for priests to be doing. We had a group of maybe eight or ten priests who would meet in my office at Nazareth College and we read Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, Harvey Cox and Bishop John A.T. Robinson. I remember Bishop Robinson came to Rochester one time, and Henry Atwell, a very enterprising priest, had an interview with him. When it was Father Atwell's turn to lead the discussion on Bishop Robinson, he brought in the tape he had made with Bishop Robinson.

It was in this group that we began discussing the whole question of birth control, which was a big issue for people at the time. The Birth Control Commission, set up by Pope John XXIII and expanded by Paul VI, was meeting in Rome. The word began leaking out that the people, especially lay people on the Commission, were saying that the Church's teaching could and should be changed. Their report was given in 1966. In 1968 Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, in which he upheld the ban on contraceptives. We already had reached a different position in our discussion group, and I was teaching the right of married couples to make their own decision of conscience on the matter of birth control. One day I got a call from the Bishop of Rochester, Bishop Kearney. Actually it was 18 August 1967. I know it was 18 August because it was the first day of the week of prayer for Christian unity and I was supposed to go into town to a Presbyterian church. Well, I never got there because Bishop Kearny called me and said, 'Can you come down to the office at 11.00?' He said, 'It's about an education matter'. Father Curran had just recently been told he could not teach any longer at our local seminary (he went on to Catholic University). So I thought that,

since I was teaching in my classes what Curran was forbidden to teach, I was about to lose my job at Nazareth College!

**Kramer:** That's frightening.

**Shannon:** And so I got down to the Chancery office and several other priests were there.

The bishop ushered us into a meeting room and then with a big grin on his face told us: 'Gentlemen, I have called you here to tell you that Pope Paul VI has made you Monsignors of the Church'. This was a moment of great relief for me. Not because I was being made a monsignor but because I wasn't losing my job.

Later, in August of 1968 I was one of the theologians who went down to Washington and the Mayflower Hotel for a press conference on the encyclical. Charles Curran was the spokesperson. In his statement he declared that Catholic theologians present with him (and there were over 100) were saying that *Humanae Vitae* was not infallible teaching and, therefore, that Catholic people could act according to their conscience regarding birth control.

**Kramer:** Was all this related to how you began to be a writer?

**Shannon:** It was indeed. After that meeting in Washington I got the idea of writing an article about some of the statements that were being made by individual bishops, by conferences of bishops, by theologians and by lay people. I thought I'd write an article and send it to some journal. Well, I began accumulating all this stuff and then looked into the background of the encyclical, going back to *Casti Connubii*, the encyclical of Pius XI in 1930. In this encyclical, he came out very strongly against birth control, quite obviously responding to the Anglican Church that had given guarded approval to contraception that same year.

So I traced that whole history of how that encyclical came into being, and then the reactions to it after its publication. Especially important were the statements of bishops' Conferences — some of them were saying that the encyclical had to be obeyed; others were saying you could make up your mind about this but you had to do it with great care. Still others were saying this is not infallible teaching. Therefore, as it has always been taught in the Church, you have a right to disagree with this, and after giving serious consideration to it, to make your own decision.

So, a book began to develop. I soon found that I had a chapter on the background of it, a chapter on the bishop's conferences, a chapter on theologians, and a chapter on lay people who had written about the

encyclical. Also I had a section on the encyclical itself. And I had, interestingly, gone to Washington and there was a psychiatrist who taught on the staff of Catholic University who had been a member of the Birth Control Commission. He was so angry with Pope Paul's failure to accept the decision of the members of the Commission, which was 54 to 5 in favor of changing the Church's teaching on birth control, that he gave me all the documents that had been discussed at the Commission meetings. Of course, he was supposed to keep them confidential.

**Kramer:** This encyclical marked one of the pivotal points in Church history.

**Shannon:** It certainly did. The documents of the Commission I found very helpful. Also part of my book was an analysis of the encyclical itself. I showed how very different *Humanae Vitae* was from Pius XI's views. *Casti Connubii* had been very severe in its condemnation. Pope Paul was much more gentle, and in fact you could read the encyclical up to a certain point without knowing which way he was going to go, until all of a sudden he returns to the 'biologism' of *Casti Connubii*, insisting that every act of intercourse must be open to procreation.

That was the genesis of my first book. But I guess the only part of the book that was original was my final chapter in which I tried to make a case for dissent in the church. The title I selected for the book, *The Lively Debate*, is taken from a statement made by Paul VI to the German Bishops in which he said that he hoped that 'the lively debate aroused by our encyclical will lead us to a deeper understanding of God's will'. Interestingly, he did not say the encyclical leads to that understanding, but the debate about it.<sup>3</sup>

**Bochen:** That's a critically important distinction. How did you go about finding a publisher?

**Shannon:** I thought of Sheed & Ward as *the* [italics added] prestigious Catholic publishing house at that time. So I got in touch with the editor, Philip Scharper. He was interested but he told me, 'I have to be quite sure that a book will sell before I can actually accept it for publication'. Well, eventually they did accept the manuscript and published it. Soon afterward, Sheed & Ward crashed. Thus there was not much publicity about the book, and not much advertising. So it did not sell very well.

3. William H. Shannon, *The Lively Debate: Response to Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970).

That's the way that book came into existence. However, except for the last chapter on 'Dissent' I really didn't feel that this book truly proved that I was a writer because I was just reporting what other people had written.

**Kramer:** How then did you become interested in Merton?

**Shannon:** It was about this time, probably a few years afterwards, that I was teaching a summer course titled 'Modern Catholic Thinking and Theology', and there were two sisters in the class who were interested in Thomas Merton. I happened to make a chance remark in this class that some day I'd like to teach a course on Thomas Merton. Actually what I said is that sometime I'd like to teach a course on Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin but the two sisters who were very interested in Merton came to me and said, 'When are you going to teach that course on Merton?'

**Kramer:** So this is like the mid-'70s?

**Shannon:** Yes, maybe the early '70s. Well, about the mid-'70s. I think it would have been about '75 or '76. They were persistent. So I told them to get a dozen interested people and we would have a course. They recruited a sufficient number and we had the class. The year, I think, was 1976. So I taught the course on Merton, and then a number of rather providential events directed me further toward Merton.

That same year I was going on vacation with a priest friend of mine. We were going to the Grand Canyon and he had a wedding to perform in Louisville, so we were going to start our vacation there. I wasn't interested in going to this wedding so I got somebody from the wedding party to drive me down to Gethsemani. And that's where I first met Brother Patrick Hart. We had a very cordial meeting and he took me up to the Hermitage. This was an exciting experience. Then, the following year the College Theology Society met in Indianapolis, which isn't very far from Louisville.

**Bochen:** So that was providential.

**Shannon:** That was Easter week. The meeting was held Monday and Tuesday, so I rented a car and drove to Louisville. That's when I first met Bob Daggy at the Merton Center and began reading some of Merton's material in the Bellarmine College archives. I think that that might have been when I first got to read some of 'The Inner Experience' manuscript.

And I was fascinated with this book and the fact that Merton's will said it was not to be published as a book. Why not, I wondered? What was the problem with it? So I began reading it and thinking of the possibility of doing something with it, but I found out that The Legacy Trust was adamantly opposed to publishing it. (I'll say more about this later.)

I kept going down to the Merton Center, regularly, during the school year and in the summer. At least a couple of times a year I would go there and stay a week or so. I stayed in Lenihan Hall, the residence for the priests on the faculty of Bellarmine College.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** The hospitality was wonderful. I got to know these priests and kept coming back and coming back. I also began looking at the letters of Merton and began reading those, and I don't remember when it was that I began thinking, 'It's time to do something about editing these letters', and so one time when I was at the Merton Center, since I had read a substantial number of the letters, I made a list of categories into which they could be organized. I got in touch with Bob Giroux and told him that I had some ideas about publishing Merton's letters.

This is how it happened. I had gone down to Columbia University in New York to give a lecture at their Newman Center during Lent, and this would have been, I forget the day, but it was 1981, the year that Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr died. She had been a frequent correspondent and an avid collector of Merton material.

**Kramer:** Yes, she was his typist and friend for 20-plus years.

**Shannon:** Yes and she collected his stuff wherever she could find it. All in all it was a splendid collection. Then she had willed her collection to Paul Dinter.

**Kramer:** Correct.

**Shannon:** He was the Newman chaplain.

**Kramer:** Because Paul Dinter had been nice to her in 1978 when he organized a tenth-year celebration about Merton.

**Shannon:** Dinter had been very nice to her, yes. So, anyway, I was there to give this lecture on Merton to their Newman Club and Paul arrived from Racine, Wisconsin, with all this stuff of hers. Thérèse had died



some months earlier. The books he brought were in boxes that in no way represented the meticulous cataloging of Merton materials that she had done. All these books had been placed in an unused living room in the Notre Dame rectory where Paul resided. The whole collection was in disarray. There were limited editions of Merton's books lying around on the floor. I said, 'Paul, you do not know what you have'. There was no way of correlating this pile of books with Thérèse's catalogue. I said, 'Paul, I'd be glad to catalogue this material for you, if you will get a graduate student to work with me. I'll come down after school is over'. So, we agreed and I returned to New York in the middle of May when classes were over.

**Kramer:** Did this then connect with your interest in the letters?

**Shannon:** Very much so. While I was there I called Bob Giroux and I said, 'I have some ideas about the editing of the Merton letters'. He said, 'That's interesting. We're having a meeting of the Trust on Wednesday. I'll bring up your ideas to them at that time'. Well, I have to say this kind of surprised me but I wasn't too sure that I would necessarily be the best editor. I called Anne McCormick also that very day and said, 'Anne, I would like to go to lunch with you. I want to talk to you about this meeting of the Trust'. And so we talked. We went out to lunch and I told her about it. At 4.00 in the afternoon — the day of the meeting — I got a call from Anne. She said, 'The Trust would like you to come down to New York on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July'. And I said, 'Well, Anne, you know, if they just want to know my ideas about how the letters should be published I can send that to them in writing. I do not need to take a trip to New York for that'. But I added, 'If they are willing to think of offering me the editorship then I'll be glad to come down'. She said, 'I think that's what they have in mind'. So I came and we met at the Chelsea Restaurant on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, near the offices of New Directions, on the appointed day.

Bob Giroux and Anne McCormick were there, as was Jay Laughlin. We had this nice dinner and I was appointed as the general editor of the Merton letters. As soon as I could arrange it, I made plans to go to Louisville to begin work in earnest on the letters, going to Louisville by way of Ann Arbor because I had friends there. On the way down, I passed through to Bowling Green where Michael Mott, the authorized Merton biographer, was living. I called him and we agreed that I would visit him on my way back from Louisville.

**Kramer:** Exactly.

**Shannon:** After my trip to Louisville, I went to stay with Michael. Michael was very honest with me. After some smalltalk, he said that he might as well be frank with me. When he heard that I was appointed editor, he called Anne McCormick who suggested that Michael and I might talk it over together. I said, 'There are a lot of letters and there's plenty of room for all of us. I do want others to be involved in editing these letters'. I told Michael that I had set up a category of letters to writers and so I just assumed this would be an area that would be congenial for him to do. He was most agreeable and we called Anne McCormick and told her what we had agreed upon.

I also asked Dr Robert Daggy if he would do the letters to friends and family, and Brother Patrick Hart the monastic letters. I myself was going to do the first volume, selecting for it letters on religious experience and social concerns.

**Kramer:** Right.

**Shannon:** First, we needed to collect many of the letters because Merton had only begun systematically keeping copies of his letters in 1963. Before that, there were clear gaps in some of the correspondence that suggested missing letters. Soon, I was writing to Merton correspondents all over the world. It was an exciting year because I was getting correspondence from many different places in the world. For example, I remember that one day a big package arrived from Taiwan. It was full of the remarkable exchange of letters between Merton and John Wu.

**Kramer:** John Wu, Sr?

**Shannon:** Yes. I also heard from Hildegard Goss-Mayr. I had written to her and said I would like to come to Vienna and talk about her correspondence with Merton. She wrote back and said, 'Well, I'm going to Nyack, New York, the headquarters of the Fellowship of Reconciliation'. She said, 'You can visit me there'.

**Bochen:** (Laughter.) Bad luck!

**Shannon:** Right. That was not a very good substitute for Vienna, but anyway, I did meet her there. I was tremendously impressed by Hildegard. I agree with Merton who wrote in one of his letters: 'My choice for sanctity, for holiness and canonization is Hildegard Goss-Mayr'. I agree with him on that.

Anyway, this is the way the letters went. Michael decided that he did not have the time to work with Merton's letters to writers. Eventually, Christine Bochen carried out this project. In the meantime, we were negotiating with Farrar, Straus & Giroux. We received permission for one book at a time. That is why the volumes of letters were not listed, from the first, as running in a series: 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. We were never sure whether or not the next volume would be accepted. Bob Giroux is the one who managed to muster them through. I do not know that would have happened without Bob's support. So that's how I got involved with the letters.<sup>4</sup>

**Kramer:** Right.

**Bochen:** However, editing Merton's letters was not your first major Merton project.

**Shannon:** That's correct. Just before I retired from teaching at Nazareth College, I began working on *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* in which I decided to bring together a selection of works of his about contemplation and about the making of 'The Inner Experience' — his unpublished work. In this book I decided to summarize Merton's major works about contemplation. The centerpiece of that work was a selection from his unpublished work, 'The Inner Experience'. The title, *Dark Path*, was Merton's original title for 'The Inner Experience'.<sup>5</sup>

**Kramer:** Right. *Dark Path* was published in 1981.

**Shannon:** 1981.

**Kramer:** So you were working on the letters at the same time. And the editing of the letters kept you busy throughout the '80s and into the middle '90s.

**Shannon:** Yes, and then somewhere along the line, I wrote my biog-

4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985); *idem*, *The Road to Joy* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989); *idem*, *The School of Charity* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990); *idem*, *The Courage for Truth* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993); *idem*, *Witness to Freedom* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

5. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981).

raphy of Merton, *Silent Lamp*. I'm not sure of the date. Let's see, would that be '92?<sup>6</sup>

**Bochen:** Yes, 1992. But your work as a writer was not limited to your work on Merton. In the late '80s, you were finding your own voice as a writer.

**Shannon:** Yes, I was realizing that while I was interested in writing about Merton, I was also feeling the need to strike out on my own.

**Kramer:** That's clear.

**Shannon:** I wanted to write something of my own on prayer and contemplation. And I wrote this book which I originally called *The Veils and the Face* using the text of Merton in which he had borrowed from a Muslim statement, 'a thousand veils prevent us from seeing the face of God'. I sent the manuscript to one publisher who eventually turned it down.

Some time in July 1987 I called Michael Leach at Crossroad. I had had a brief contact with him when Jim Forest had asked me to contact Michael about publishing a book of Hildegard Goss-Mayr's. Michael had said to me then, 'If you ever have a manuscript anytime, get in touch with me'. So I called him and said, 'I'd like to send this manuscript to you'. He said, 'I probably won't get to look at it until September, but send it on'. And so I sent it. I probably sent it early in the week, and he probably would have gotten it by Wednesday or Thursday. The following Monday I got a call from him. He said, 'I took this home with me over the weekend', and he said, 'I want to publish it'.

**Bochen:** Ah! (Exclamation of surprise.)

**Shannon:** So that's how *Seeking the Face of God* found a publisher.<sup>7</sup>

**Kramer:** Well, you see, he wanted to publish it because it's an honest book. It says in the Introduction that it's going to be unobtrusively autobiographical, and then it says up front '...it would be silly for a person who had spent a dozen years studying Merton to write a book about contemplation, and say that Merton had nothing to do with it.

6. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

7. William H. Shannon, *Seeking the Face of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

Obviously, much of what I will say will be colored—consciously or not—of what I have read about contemplation in the works of Thomas Merton'. And so that's the beauty of the book: it builds on Merton, but it's very much your own book.

**Shannon:** Thank you.

**Kramer:** *Silence on Fire* came in '91.

**Shannon:** Yes, *Silence on Fire* was an effort to follow up on *Seeking the Face of God*.

**Kramer:** Right.

**Shannon:** Actually I think the thing that initially moved me to write another book was that I felt I had talked about moving from meditation to contemplation as if this were an easy next step. I began to realize that you don't really move from one to the other like that. There is another step. I wrote *Silence on Fire* to make this clear. I called this step 'awareness'. It is awareness that opens us to God's gift of contemplation.

**Kramer:** You spoke of the prayer of awareness, right?

**Shannon:** Yes, and that became the subtitle of the book. Interestingly, Crossroad wanted to call the book *Awareness of God*. When they told me that they wanted to use that title, I didn't like it. At the time I was at a meeting in Webster, a suburb of Rochester. I took two pieces of paper. On one I had written *Silence on Fire*, and on another, *The Awareness of God*. And at the end of the meeting, I just held up the two titles and said, 'I must choose a title for a book that I have just completed. Which of these would you choose?' They all chose *Silence on Fire*.<sup>8</sup>

**Bochen:** And so the book was named. What was your next book?

**Shannon:** At the time I finished *Silence on Fire*, Crossroad was putting out the Spiritual Legacy Series in which my book on Anselm was released.

**Kramer:** Yes.

8. William H. Shannon, *Silence on Fire: Prayer of Awareness* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

**Shannon:** As I recall, either I proposed to Mike Leach, or he proposed to me, that I write the book on Merton for that Spiritual Legacy Series. I said okay. So much of Merton is inside of me that I really want to say something.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** So I began writing what became *Silent Lamp*. I consider it the best book that I've ever written, and I just feel that this book came out of my long involvement in Merton's writings. I am happy with some of the insights I tried to share, for example: two ways of understanding the mysterious event of the 'vision' he had of his father in Rome: one in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the other in an unpublished novel of his called *The Straits of Dover*. I remember reflecting on this 'vision'. Was it his effort to forgive his father for not being a good father? Was it a kind of apotheosis of his father? Whom did he see? Did he see God? Did he see his father, or what? I felt that that sort of thing was intriguing. Yet it is not even mentioned in his unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Straits of Dover*, which describes his visit to Rome.

I started writing and soon I called Michael: 'Mike, these Spiritual Legacy Series books – there are a fixed number of pages, 192 pages, I think. I can't fit into that'. He said, 'Go ahead and write it, and if it fits the series we'll put it in. If it doesn't we'll publish it anyway'. So, I had permission to go ahead and do what I wanted, really. So, that's what I did. And as I said, it was really most intimately what I felt about Merton and what was inside of me that just had to come out. It just seemed to write itself very easily. As I was writing it, I began to think that Merton's story really should fit into the wider cultural story. That's when I put in those chapters on chronology which even I find very helpful in being able to quickly put Merton's life in its wider context. Having these chronology chapters enabled me to focus on key themes that I did not attempt to develop in the chronologies. The other chapters expanded the brief biographical details in the chronology and enabled me to use those chapters to explore more important issues in Merton's life.

**Bochen:** There are other biographies of Merton. What do you think distinguishes yours?

**Shannon:** As I wrote in the Introduction to *Silent Lamp*, 'It might be called a *reflective biography*, as it attempts to look at the inner journey that

alone gives meaning to the exterior one'. I wanted 'to put the picture in the frame'.<sup>9</sup>

**Kramer:** How did you choose the title for this book?

**Shannon:** John Wu, Sr, had told Merton that his name in Chinese was *Mei Teng* which means 'Silent Lamp'.

**Kramer:** How did your next writing project begin?

**Shannon:** At about this time, I was asked to write a column for *Praying* magazine which was published by *The National Catholic Reporter* [NCR] of Kansas City. They had started on a new program of appointing a spiritual director for the year. I was their first one and was asked to write an article a month. Central to these articles was the theme of God's [omnipresence] and our need to be aware of God's proximity. I don't know exactly how it happened—but eventually out of these articles came the writing of *Seeds of Peace* in which I tried to continue what I had begun in *Seeking the Face of God*. In the last chapter of that book, I had introduced the idea of steps of a 'ladder' for non-violence, based on Gandhi's thoughts about non-violence.

**Kramer:** In *Seeking the Face of God*?

**Shannon:** Yes, that's right. In *Seeking the Face of God*. Now I turned my attention to writing about contemplation and its relationship to non-violence. That's why I called it *Seeds of Peace*.<sup>10</sup> I used some of the articles I had written for the NCR magazine, discussing the beginning of contemplation and then linking it with non-violence. Then I wrote several chapters on the meaning of non-violence, noting the fact that I thought that the Non-violent Movement was just beginning to grow in the Church in Merton's time. There weren't many priests or monks directly involved in the Non-violent Movement then, but their number is growing. I felt that it was somewhat like the Liturgical Movement—a movement *in* [italics added] the Church that at Vatican II became a movement *of* [italics added] the Church. So I was expressing the hope that the same thing would happen with the Non-violent Movement: that from being a

9. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 7.

10. William H. Shannon, *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and Non-Violence* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

movement of the few, it would become a part of Catholic thinking about conflict resolution.

Pax Christi, for instance, did not exist in the USA until 1972. The reason: according to their rules of Pax Christi International, a national Pax Christi group must have a bishop as president. There were no interested Catholic bishops until Tom Gumbelton was ordained bishop in 1968. He became the first president of Pax Christi, USA in 1972 and since then Pax Christi certainly has been growing.

**Bochen:** How has the Non-violent Movement developed after 9/11?

**Shannon:** I think that the Non-violent Movement is growing. More and more people are beginning to see the necessity of non-violence. The way things are happening in our country now, I don't know, but the voice of non-violence is often muffled by the government. I mean it's ridiculous. I realize that it is important for us to act against terrorism but we need to do this as part of an international community.

**Kramer:** To move to another book of yours, would you say that you decided to write that book for the St Anthony Messenger Press, *'Something of a Rebel'*, as a kind of follow-up to some of these ideas you're just talking about now?

**Shannon:** When the new catechism came out, I was asked by St Anthony Messenger to write on that subject. I had published an article in *America*, and Jeremy Harrington, the president of St Anthony Messenger, wrote and asked if I would be willing to do a series of 'Updates' on the catechism. I agreed to do so. I did 12 'Updates'. When I finished with that, they said, 'We'd like you to put this into a book'. This created something of a problem for me, because it was one thing to do a monthly four-page article, and quite another to write a book about the catechism, especially because I had reservations about the catechism. And so I said, 'Well, let me think about this'. I was asking myself how I could present this and still preserve my own integrity.

**Kramer:** (Laughter.) I like that. That's very good.

**Shannon:** And so what I did was to ask in the introductory chapter, 'Will this catechism some day be changed?' That allowed me to make an important point. There was a catechism for the Council of Trent. Now you read that catechism and read this catechism, and you see that they are very, very different. Many changes have been made. So I could make



the point that 50 years down the line, there will undoubtedly be another catechism. And there will be changes, and here, I think, are some of the changes that will be made. This was my way of saying what I disagreed with in the catechism – by saying that these would be the things that would certainly be in a new catechism 50 years later.<sup>11</sup>

So that is how I got in contact with St Anthony Messenger Press. I got to know these people, and they are wonderful people. Lisa Biedenbach is the editor of their books. I worked with her on the catechism book. When that project was completed, Lisa asked me if I would write a book introducing people to Merton. And that's how '*Something of a Rebel*' came into existence.<sup>12</sup> That's why I wrote it as I did, namely, recounting his life story, reflecting on his contemporary relevance, developing some themes from his writings and suggesting where someone new to Merton might begin and what books she or he might read.

**Kramer:** Now, I have a question about *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*.<sup>13</sup> When did you first have that idea about doing an encyclopedia?

**Shannon:** (Laughing.) Well, that happened in a rather interesting way. Mike Leach, now at Orbis Books, Maryknoll, and I have formed a kind of telephone friendship and so every once in a while we talk. And so it would be about three years ago, maybe a little longer than three years or maybe in the spring of 1999, that I was talking to Mike on the phone and he said, 'What are you going to write for me?' And I just spontaneously said, 'a Thomas Merton encyclopedia!' 'Wow!' he said, 'I better talk this over with my editors'. So he calls me back in a couple of days and said, 'They're really excited about it. So go ahead and do what you can'. I don't remember having brought up anything about an encyclopedia before I had this conversation with Mike Leach. I don't know whether I really was half joking, or really intending to do one. But, when Orbis accepted my proposal, I thought, 'I will need some helpers on this project'.

**Kramer:** But how in the world did you talk Patrick O'Connell and Christine Bochen into agreeing to do this?

11. William H. Shannon, *Exploring the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1995).

12. William H. Shannon, '*Something of a Rebel*': *Thomas Merton, his Life and Works. An Introduction* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997).

13. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell (eds.), *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

**Shannon:** (Laughter.) Oh, they were very willing to do it. So we began and we had several 'authors' meetings' where we divided up topics. Christine and Pat were doing this while they were teaching. I had more free time so I did a lot of the editorial work and contacted publishers for permissions and so on. Christine, you might want to say something about the encyclopedia at this point.

**Bochen:** It was an exciting project and an enormous one. Even though the three of us were well acquainted with Merton's work, when we began to list his writings, we were astounded by Merton's prodigious output. Just when we thought we had compiled a complete list of all the books that Merton wrote, someone—usually Pat—would discover another little book. In addition to entries on each of Merton's books, we wrote short notes on the people and places in Merton's life and entries of varying lengths on themes in his writings. When we were finished, we had written more than 350 entries and produced more than 550 double column pages of text.

**Kramer:** And now we have *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*.

**Bochen:** We certainly do—thanks to Bill. One thing I have noticed is that when Bill Shannon has an idea, there is nothing small about it! And the second thing I have learned is that Bill's ideas usually involve work, not only for him but for others as well. The International Thomas Merton Society is a good example. Bill, I can remember when you said, 'We should have a Merton Society'. And now there are more than 1200 members with chapters all over the world. We really do have an International Thomas Merton Society.

**Shannon:** Yes. I could add a bit to the story of how the Society came about. In 1978, there was a Merton Conference at Columbia University, which was organized by Paul Dinter for the tenth anniversary [of Merton's death]. There was also a conference in Vancouver, BC.

**Kramer:** Right, in the same year, 1978.

**Shannon:** Were you there for the Vancouver conference?

**Kramer:** No, no, I didn't go to Vancouver.

**Shannon:** Well, there were a number of people there whom I met for the first time. Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's literary agent, was one of them. So was Bob Daggy.

**Kramer:** Yes, Donald Grayston was the one who organized this meeting.

**Shannon:** Yes, Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins. Michael Higgins had said, 'You know, I'd be interested in putting you on this program'. So I gave a paper on 'Merton and the Self'. The papers were recorded. It was at that meeting that we first talked about the idea of an International Merton Society, and we informally commissioned Don and Michael to get it started because they were the ones who had organized this Canadian meeting.

But nothing came of that. By 1987, I had become good friends with Bob Daggy. So I wrote to him and said, 'Bob, we've got to do something about the twentieth anniversary of Merton's death. The time has come to form an International Thomas Merton Society'. Then I said, 'Let's get some people together and organize this'. So that's when letters went out. Fourteen people came to this meeting, including the three of us.

**Kramer:** That meeting was held in 1987.

**Shannon:** Yes, 1987.

**Bochen:** The twentieth anniversary of Merton's death was only a year away.

**Kramer:** Although we talked about having a meeting of the new society as soon as possible, we decided that we could not do it by '88, and so we planned the First General Meeting in '89.

**Shannon:** Yes and we made '88 a 'Celebrate Merton' year.

**Bochen:** Now 25 years after the meeting in Canada, the International Thomas Merton Society will be having its Eighth General Meeting in Vancouver in June 2003.

**Kramer:** We have kind of come full circle; there are a couple of things that I still would like to talk about. Would you like to make a comment about the revision of the book that has the 'Dark Path' title?

**Shannon:** Oh, yes.

**Kramer:** And how it came to be *Paradise Journey*, which is a much less, let

us say, forbidding title than *Dark Path*.<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that in the background of all that we're talking about we do always have a kind of irony. That is, indirectly we've been talking about Merton, and I think the early Merton was kind of dark and forbidding. I also think that part of what we're realizing is that we need to go on this journey into this path of darkness, a contemplative darkness, which then opens up still many other possibilities.

**Shannon:** That's a good point.

**Kramer:** I think that's what happened to Merton. Once he knew what it was like to be at one with his creator, he no longer worried about the future. You don't worry so much more about what does somebody think, or even what does the Abbot think, or what may happen if someone thinks something about me. You just go ahead and do it with a sense of peace and joy. And I have the very strange feeling that something along these lines happened to Bill Shannon, too.

**Shannon:** I was ready to talk about the joy of faith and attempted to do so in *Anselm*, the subject of which was the joy of faith.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** Actually I wrote the book as a kind of diversion. I wanted to prove that I could write about something or someone besides Thomas Merton.

**Kramer:** Right, right.

**Shannon:** I realized I have always been attracted to Anselm. And so, again, I called Mike Leach, and I said, 'You know, you've got Aquinas in your Spiritual Legacy Series, and Augustine. The big name theologically between them is Anselm. So you need a book on him'.

I really think that Mike Leach has played an important role in my life by simply letting me go ahead with the projects that came to my mind.

**Kramer:** (Chuckles.) Well, you've been lucky to know editors and to have a friendship, also, with Bob Giroux.

14. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2000).

**Shannon:** Yes, yes.

**Kramer:** That's true, that's fortunate. You know the rumors are that Bob Giroux is writing still more essays about people that he's edited. It's really wonderful if you think about all the different people he has encouraged. It's an honor to have been one of those persons.

**Shannon:** Yes, that's right. I will never forget the day early in my writing career when I got a telephone call about *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*. I had been in touch with Naomi Burton Stone, and we had become friends. I asked her where I should send the manuscript I had. She said, 'Go with the best. Send it to Farrar, Straus & Giroux'. I did. I don't know how long it took but one day I remember getting that telephone call from Bob Giroux saying, 'We want to publish your book'. I was reminded of the telegram that he had sent to Merton around Christmas 1947, telling Merton that *The Seven Storey Mountain* had been accepted for publication, wishing him a Happy New Year.

**Kramer:** I understand that you have been in touch with the Merton Trust about 'The Inner Experience'. Can you explain this contact and what happened?

**Shannon:** In 1983, Brother Patrick Hart had received permission from the Merton Legacy Trust to publish 'The Inner Experience' serially in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, and then to make these available to readers as offprints. A new editor decided to make these offprints available in two booklets, with four offprints in each.<sup>15</sup> I had concerns about this way of making parts of 'The Inner Experience' available. Merton deserved better: an introduction, footnotes, etc.

**Kramer:** If you just stumbled on these articles or offprints you wouldn't know what they were.

**Shannon:** Right! This is when I began suggesting that it should be published as a book with a proper introduction and notations. It was only fair to Merton and his readers that it be published properly. So, I got in touch with the Trust and with John Ford who said that this could not be done.

15. Thomas Merton, 'The Inner Experience', sections 1-8 (*Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 18 (1983); ed. Patrick Hart.

**Kramer:** John Ford is the attorney of the Trust.

**Shannon:** Yes, but this is not the end of the story. In 1968 when Merton was getting ready to go to Asia, he visited Dan Walsh. 'I brought you an anniversary present for your ordination [which had taken place the year before]', he said. 'It's something I wrote some time ago, and recently I made a few corrections and I'd like you to see if you think it's publishable'. Merton added: 'When I get back we'll talk about it'. Well, of course he never returned, and so Walsh forgot about it primarily because of Merton's death, and so on.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** Then one day the manuscript appeared on Walsh's desk again. Walsh had given it to the Carmelite Sisters, whose house was opposite Bellarmine College, and the Sisters had returned it to him. Walsh read it twice and he wrote to Father Flavian Burns and told him how Merton had visited him, how he had said that he had made a few corrections recently and how he had asked Walsh if he thought the manuscript was publishable. Walsh said, 'I really think it is publishable', and Father Flavian agreed. But they referred the matter to the lawyer who told them that vocal statements do not override the written word.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** So that was the end of it at that time. But I re-opened the question because I thought that it was unfair to readers and to Merton himself to have this material available in the way it was – in booklets. When Bob Giroux called the Library of Congress, he discovered that these two booklets were actually listed as publications. So in a literal sense, the will already had been broken.

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** Once the Trust realized this, there was no reason to block my suggestion to publish 'The Inner Experience'. And that's how I came to edit these manuscripts.

**Bochen:** Manuscripts?

**Shannon:** Yes, manuscripts. I had already made copies of the drafts that were down at Bellarmine. There are four drafts of it. The first draft had

all sorts of addenda at the end. The second one was more viable, but there were some parts that were not in the third and fourth drafts. The third and fourth drafts were identical, except for a difference in pagination that was corrected in the fourth draft. Before Merton went to Asia, he decided to make some corrections – he made them on the third draft – and the corrections amounted to about 450 words. Not a great deal of additional material!

**Kramer:** Yes.

**Shannon:** I have a long introduction in which I clarify my reasons for dating ‘The Inner Experience’ in 1959. I scoured the letters and the journals to find the references to ‘The Inner Experience’.<sup>16</sup>

**Kramer:** So it took many, many years to sort the pieces out.

Well, I think maybe we should draw this interview to a conclusion. But before we do so, I would like to ask if you would want to make any comments about Merton and what you see as his relationship to the present moment. Some of us are kind of discouraged at times when we think about the possibilities that Vatican II opened up along with the possibilities that Merton envisioned. And it looks like we’re still waiting for action that was dreamt already in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

**Shannon:** Yes, I think that Merton himself had misgivings about whether or not Vatican II would be carried through, precisely because of the Roman Curia. Their efforts, once the bishops were gone, were to regroup and recover the position of authority and leadership that they felt was rightfully theirs. And, you know, Merton has a lot of critical statements, especially about the Curia.

I think a lot of Merton’s hopes have been realized but what has happened is that they have been realized in people who have seen, in Merton, an approach to spirituality that they’ve found very congenial. And that congeniality they do not find very often in organized religion. So, therefore, more often people are going off alone or into small groups very much involved in spirituality but probably turned off by organized religion. Unless organized religion is really doing something that is important to them – many seekers are not interested – I think one of the dangers that Merton probably would have recognized is that there is so much emphasis now, as far as religion is concerned, on person-to-person

16. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (ed. William H. Shannon; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

relationships. I mean so much of the music that has been written in the last three decades reveals this.

**Kramer:** Yes. (Laughing.)

**Shannon:** There is little or no sense of the transcendent. And that's why I was very happy that at the Feast Day celebration today, we ended the service with 'Holy God, we praise your name'. I mean that's a good, strong hymn, and there's no doubt that you're talking about God.

**Kramer:** What one wants is continuity. I'm reminded of the Feast of the Assumption and Mary's acceptance of her role as well as the continuity of a new Mother House being built here for the Sisters of Nazareth. And the old one is given up to the college and then a new one built. It's beautiful. Do you want to add anything, Christine?

**Bochen:** Well, Bill, I was just thinking that when you edited the fifth volume of the letters, *Witness to Freedom*, you used as your subtitle *Letters in a Time of Crisis*. I was thinking as you were speaking today about the situation that we are in, both in the Church and in the world, and noting that the crises are more severe, more intense, and more threatening than they were in the '60s. Thinking both from Merton's perspective and from your own, what is the content of letters of crisis that we should be writing today? To whom should we address these letters? What's the message that is so imperative for our time?

**Shannon:** Well, I think that certainly one of the things that is needed is for the authority of the Church to begin listening to the laity, and really listening, and really hearing what they're saying, and then to act upon it. The bishops must realize that they can no longer see the Church simply in terms of their own limited insights. But the Holy Spirit is definitely active among the whole people of God. It is the denial of the action of the Spirit to feel that there is only one group in the Church that has the ability to hear the Spirit and to proclaim what the Spirit says to the whole Church.

I did an 'Update' for St Anthony Messenger Press in which I contrasted the ecclesiology of Matthew and the ecclesiology of John. In the Fourth Gospel there seems to be no organized authority. The emphasis in the Fourth Gospel is on disciples led by the Spirit. It is an egalitarian Church. Though a pastoral authority is given to Peter, he first has to pass the test of the Johannine Church: he has to profess – three times – his



love for Jesus. The Church is a community of disciples united by their love for Jesus and for one another.

The Church of Matthew's Gospel gives a greater role to authority. It is the only Gospel that uses the word 'Church'. Peter is presented as possessing an authority vested in him by Christ. (See Matthew 16.) Peter is given the keys to the kingdom, and so on. Nothing of that is in the Fourth Gospel, except in chapter 21 which was probably added to the Gospel of John to get the approval of the Great Church for accepting this Gospel at a later date. But in the Gospel of John, Peter, as I have said, was given a pastoral authority. He is to shepherd Jesus' flock. But before he gets this role of shepherd among the disciples of Jesus, he had to pass the test of the Johannine Church, namely the test of professing his love for Jesus.

**Kramer:** Right.

**Shannon:** And I think that's what the Church has to become: not just the Church of Matthew, not just the Church of John, but it must combine the genius of both Gospels: 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'.

I also think that we have to realize that we're in a skeptical age. Young people today don't have the same attitude towards Church that we had.

**Kramer:** That's right.

**Shannon:** We would say, 'Well, I have to go to Mass no matter what. Unless I have a 110 degree fever, I'll go to Mass'. Well, young people don't feel that way today.

**Kramer:** Right.

**Shannon:** I think we're in a delicate time wherein there is a danger of relativism. There is a danger of losing any kind of sense of sin, and yet, at the same time, there is, at least on the part of many young people, a sense of sin at more than the individual level.

**Kramer:** At the collective level...

**Shannon:** Yes. Yes! And that's why General Absolution, or the service of General Absolution, has become so popular, and Rome is refusing to accept that. If Rome would only realize that you have to listen to what is the experience of people and not to some abstract notions that they have, that it is better to have people confess their sins individually. But, of

course, that's another element of control. If you can control the conscience of people, individually, you've got a lot of power over them whereas you can't do that in a service with General Absolution.

**Bochen:** In speaking of authority, we have come full circle, haven't we?

**Kramer:** Right.

**Bochen:** As you began to tell your story, and were reflecting on the writing of *Humanae Vitae* and the lively debate that is generated, you were talking about issues of authority and conscience and dissent, and now we have come around to that again.

**Shannon:** Right, right.

**Bochen:** ...in your story and in your encounter with Merton and in the legacy of your books.

**Shannon:** To understand the rights of conscience, we rely on something so dear to Merton's heart, the prodigal mercy of God.

**Kramer:** I actually saw a sentence in the Anselm book, 'mercy and justice go together'. And that's Merton. Merton's favorite word is 'mercy'. It all fits.