"Living and Learning with Merton for Decades": An Interview with Victor A. Kramer, Editor

Conducted and edited by Glenn Crider

I

Crider: How did you become interested in Thomas Merton?

Kramer: That is a very slowly developing story, a story which has been in process for the better part of fifty years. It finally took flight in 1972. I can remember reading Merton that summer, in Austria. We were in Graz and my first book, on James Agee, was finished. At that time I had a contract to do a book about Merton which led to many other things later. In a sense, I've now been living with Merton for three or four decades.

Crider: Can you remember when you first actually read Thomas Merton?

Kramer: Yes. I was an undergraduate at St. Edward's in Austin, Texas and in the spring of 1958 I bought a Dell 25-cent paperback of *Seeds of Contemplation* in the St. Ed's book store. To me, at the time, Merton's book seemed good pious advice. I didn't read *Seeds* carefully. I put it on the shelf with Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. Both writers seemed to possess a 1950s Catholic stamp of approval, and I must admit they did not make much of an impression on that young innocent reader. He was too busy with too many other things—courses, books, girls, dreams. I certainly did not then go out and read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I avoided that book until 1972.

Crider: So if that first book remained on the shelf, how long did it take before you took it down?

Kramer: Oh, maybe a decade in terms of careful reading. Actually in 1966 I was given a copy of *Raids on the Unspeakable* by one of my teaching assistants at Marquette, Kaye Duncan. That was a beautifully printed book. I enjoyed Merton's abstract drawings. And by the early 1970s, as I have suggested, I was doing some serious thinking about Merton. He had begun to seem like a critic of American culture to me. I now have learned that as so he is also a critic of all Western civilization.

Crider: What does that mean?

Kramer: I had written a lot about James Agee and was teaching American literature. I was in a position where I was then looking for a twentieth-century author, comparable perhaps to Agee, but little recognized, yet someone who was important as a non-fiction writer and observer of culture. Someone I might "use" as a research topic.

Crider: What do you mean by "observer of culture"?

Kramer: I mean that in European and American literature we have a variety of writers who combine analysis of culture along with a spiritual strain. By 1972 I had taught several non-fiction courses. Early writers like Jonathan Edwards, transcendental writers including Emerson and Thoreau, and writers of the twentieth century such as Henry Adams, William Carlos Williams, Ralph Ellison, interested me because they were asking questions about the self and the wider culture. Today Wendell Berry is part of this group.

Crider: But your first Merton "project" was a Twayne's United States Authors Series book.

Kramer: Yes.

Crider: Well, that is a standard format, right?

Kramer: Actually, there is a great deal of latitude in the requirements for that series. I was free to structure the book as I wished. I chose to emphasize the fact that Merton was a writer who was also a monk, and a monk who profited greatly from his writing. If I ever revise the expanded second version of that study, the book entitled *Thomas Merton, Monk and Artist*, I could use Merton's Journals and correspondence now available, to make my points in much more detail.

Crider: What is your point?

Kramer: That Thomas Merton was very much an adopted American writer, but as a Christian monk formed in the Benedictine and Cistercian tradition the spiritual aspects always were dominant in his view.

Crider: Could you define "spiritual aspects"?

Kramer: I mean Merton's seeking of God and the mystery of that quest. What has become increasingly significant to me is that in life—all lives—there are only a relatively small and limited number of pivotal and life-changing events. For Merton his conver-

sion and baptism changed everything. That simple decision is an example we can all learn from.

Crider: Changed everything?

Kramer: Yes. What I have come to understand now is that what I earlier wrote about Merton (1972-1982) was to focus upon his accomplishments as a writer, monk, novice master, etc. What I have become increasingly aware of is that all these things—important as they may be—are "after the fact." There is, to use a Gerard Manley Hopkins phrase, "a hidden deep-down" thing which was for him always much more important which then caused an overflow into his well-known accomplishments as a spiritual, and then as a celebrity, writer.

Crider: So would you say there is a vital aspect of Merton which must remain hidden?

Kramer: Yes, but you can triangulate on this by looking at his poems and books and collecting stories about the monk-writer.

Crider: Could you tell a story which you think reveals an essential fact about Merton?

Kramer: Yes. I remember something John Foley (who was a Holy Cross priest in Atlanta in the early 1970s) told me. Merton, that lover of words and monk, was confident about himself, and while he had many doubts about his vocation, he was also confident he was in the right place. This is an early 1960s or late 1950s story: John Foley remembered once running into Thomas Merton (Father Louis) as he was on his way out the monastery garden going to Louisville on some errand. Merton was wearing a black business suit, probably taken off a rack in a common room. It did not seem to fit him very well. He winked at Foley, and said "I look just like a bishop, don't I." Of course the point is he did not, yet could at the same time joke about it.

Crider: I have another way of asking my basic question. Why did you want to write a book about Merton?

Kramer: I did so because I knew he was a significant American writer of prose, not just a "Catholic" writer. All the while I was in graduate school and then in my earliest years teaching I kept returning to American non-fiction prose. I loved teaching a Non-Fiction Prose course at Marquette (1966-1969). Also thirty years later when I could chose a Lecture Course for the University of Heidelberg when I returned to Germany as a Senior Fulbright lec-

turer, I did another survey course on Non-Fiction. Our earliest writers—Puritans like Cotton Mather, thinkers like Jonathan Edwards, ponderers like Emerson and Thoreau. Then writers like Henry Adams, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Wendell Berry, all of whom have all contributed to the flow of our deepening spiritual awareness by questioning what it means to live. Merton is surely part of this pattern and to me his continuing value is that his questioning is itself a model from which we learn.

I sensed Merton was part of this undertow and so when I did that Twayne United States Authors Series book about him I sought to study his work like I had James Agee's writing and through my study of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, because, of course, I knew there had to be much more there.

Crider: Why, after that first book, did you decide to continue writing about Thomas Merton?

Kramer: One thing led to another. Part of it clearly was the pleasure of meeting many monks at Gethsemani; then Conyers; and at other monasteries; a string of articles; then the clear realization that Merton was important to me as a person. Going to the Abbey of Gethsemani, which I visited first in 1973, helped as did the many subsequent visits. Getting to know some of the monks was a real grace.

II

Crider: Is it correct that you did some oral history work about Merton?

Kramer: Yes. Beginning in 1980 some nineteen monks, or friends, of Merton were included. Many of these "archival" interviews have been published in journals, or revised for *The Merton Annual*. My wife, Dr. Dewey Weiss Kramer, and I also did a second oral history of the monk-founders of Gethsemani's first daughter-house, Conyers in 1982-83.

Crider: When did the idea for *The Merton Annual* develop?

Kramer: It grew out of work for A.M.S. Press (New York) while I was editing the Georgia State University "Literary Studies Series" (1987-1997). As that series was planned, I also discussed the possibility of a yearly publication for Merton-related studies which would publish lengthy pieces.

Crider: How did establishing of *The Merton Annual* evolve?

Kramer: It began with the encouragement of Gabe Hornstein, publisher of A.M.S. He agreed to do the first five volumes. Our second series (Vols. 6-10) was published by Liturgical Press. It was at that time that George Kilcourse and Michael Downey came on as editors. At that time we thought that *The Merton Annual* could sprout interests and connections beyond just Merton studies with inclusion of related parallel studies. The Abbey Center at Gethsemani, a discussion group designed to bring monastics and like-minded people together, sponsored conferences during those years (1992-1994) and our Vol. 6 reflects this influence. Yet the fact is the *Annual* has remained pretty well focused on just Merton's work and on his influence, with only a few forays into other territories. That says a lot about Merton's appeal.

Crider: Will you comment about the various "batches" of *Merton Annuals* and how they might be distinguished from one another?

Kramer: The first group of hardbacks (Volumes 1-5) contains many fairly long monographs. From the start we always included an interview of someone who knew, or was influenced by, Merton and we also used an "unpublished" or "obscurely published" Merton piece.

Volumes 6-10 rotated editors for successive volumes. That had some good and bad features. With volumes 11-16, we had only two editors. Sometimes it encouraged an editor to think of a book as "his" volume. Since Fons Vitae assumed publishing, beginning with volume 17, we have witnessed a much healthier pattern develop. I have edited each volume, but also many other persons have done the Bibliographic essays, have been responsible for the sub-sections of papers which grew out of the I.T.M.S. meetings, conducted interviews, etc.

Crider: What can you say about the future of *The Merton Annual*?

Kramer: I believe that the relationship with the International Thomas Merton Society which has agreed to sponsor this publication during the next five years bodes well for the future. We have selected, expanded and revised some I.T.M.S. papers in the *Annual* from volume 3 forward, but year after year the tie between the *Annual* and I.T.M.S. has grown.

III

Crider: What does Merton mean to you now that you have lived with him for five or so decades?

Kramer: I think an autobiographical volume might well be written on that subject. I would have to think about Merton as classic; Merton's work as writer; the true facts of his vocation; my own slow learning about the traditions of monasticism; also, then integration of all this with my own life and the beauty of many friendships with people I have come to know through Merton circles; and now, doing retreats on Merton as well as academic work. It is fun today (in 2007) to look forward to teaching still another graduate course on "Merton as Spiritual Master" in 2009.

Crider: Has Merton affected your "scholarly" interests and your own writing?

Kramer: I can say that I have been very "lucky" when I have chosen to concentrate upon various subjects in American studies. To me, however, it is all of a piece: My thinking and reading about literary theory, ethnic literature, contemporary poetry and fiction has all been in terms of honoring says, James Agee, "the dignity of actuality."

Merton always did this too. And with increasing focus my present work with Walker Percy builds, I hope, the same way.

Crider: Do you see Merton as a valuable asset for today's spiritual seeker?

Kramer: He is a very valuable figure which most Catholics and many of the Hierarchy do not appreciate. Quite a bit like Henri Nouwen, but monastic; a far more complicated figure than Fulton J. Sheen, and a far more complex figure than the meditative poet Mary Oliver. For Merton, as I have said, the poetry, the meditations, the journals are overflow, not anywhere near the essence of his life or contribution. Nevertheless, through these items we glimpse what he glimpsed of the wonder of God.

Crider: What is the best thing you can suggest about studying Merton?

Kramer: I believe Merton's primary gift to today's readers and to our culture is that he saw the value of monasticism and embraced it. He wants his reader to seek the essential. "Not resting until we rest in God," he assures us of the importance of prayer in the same

way as does St. Augustine. Fully committed to serving and seeking God, once he discerned this was the way to be a saint—he was like St. Ignatius. My Merton is, I guess, like a modern melding of these different saints' earnestness and talents. Once converted, he is focused, honest, and true. I think it is from that focus—honesty and intensity—that we learn.

Crider: I think what distinguishes Merton in an important way is his commitment to the monastic life. Commitment is complex in nature, and our cunning tendency to avoid commitment often eludes us. Merton's life and work shows us both the joy and difficulty he experienced as he continued to commit to his vocation. Underneath Merton's commitment, I see an on-going, intentional turning, or evolving. This is a challenging position to assume much less remain in. You just commented that once Merton converted, he was focused, honest and true. What specifically do you think enabled Merton to commit in the way that he did?

Kramer: He learned that life, love and learning within a Benedictine framework is a process. Once one knows this, then the commitment as a Christian is never static. As process, the dynamic of becoming a saint keeps changing. Think of a giant kaleidoscope with all kinds of fundamental, yet always different patterns, to be enjoyed and affirmed.

Crider: And what do you think hinders others from committing in a way that Merton did? Put another way, what do you think keeps people from living an authentic life that is open to ongoing and revolutionary change and transformation?

Kramer: At the base is our Western sense of individualism. Deeply seated is our culture's ill-founded rationalization that we should, or worse can, control our lives. Merton learned to celebrate the mystery of living in community, and as the sense of mystery deepened, his understanding of Church and community opened up. His life endorsed the wonder of an ever-changing world to be celebrated. For many today, who seem to be driven by their own narrow desires, or who apparently are afraid to admit to much mystery, life remains a narrow matter of limited and fixed choices which seem to allow such persons to build a private portfolio without regard to others. In so much of what Merton observed and celebrated it becomes most fundamentally a matter of sharing in the goodness of creation and praising God's gifts.