An Interview with Fr. Raymond Pedrizetti, O.S.B. February 12, 2005

*Conducted and edited by Victor A. Kramer**

I

Kramer: What I would like to do first is to ask you to provide information about your choice to become a religious, your childhood, and your family. What size family did you come from and what do you remember about your early Catholicism?

Pedrizetti: I had two brothers and one sister. It was a more or less pious Catholic family. My father is Italian. My mother is Irish. That combination raised some eyebrows, but it worked out well.

Kramer: Where were you born?

Pedrizetti: I was born in Duluth, Minnesota in 1930.

Kramer: What do you remember about your early years and when you first started school?

Pedrizetti: I went to school in a Catholic parish run by Benedictine nuns at St. Scholastica in Duluth. What I remember mostly is running around doing things and enjoying sports, and having a congenial neighborhood to live in. There were a number of good-size families and kids my age to play with. It was during the Depres-

*These interviews (this one and the preceeding, both conducted at the Abbey of St. John's, Collegeville, February, 2005) reveal much about the nature of religious vocation during the era of Merton's life. Along with providing new information about Merton, it is hoped that their inclusion in *The Merton Annual* will also provide insight into the nature of religious vocation in the twentieth-century and may encourage scholars to interview other persons who were Merton's contemporaries, not so much to uncover material just about Thomas Merton, but rather to document the wider life of the Church during the periods both before and after Vatican II.

While Merton is perhaps the best known religious of his era, it is also quite valuable to be reminded of the many hundreds, indeed thousands, of vocations which contributed to the development of the Church during this time of change. (V.A.K.)

sion, so we created our own fun and played games and did not feel deprived too much because we did not have anything to compare it with, of course.

Kramer: What did your father do?

Pedrizetti: My dad worked for the City Water and Gas Department. He repaired water and gas facilities and so on and later became a supervisor. He started out as a meter reader. Before I was born, I think he was a sales person in a department store.

Kramer: When you think back on the religious atmosphere in your school and home, is there anything that stands out?

Pedrizetti: Well, what stands out in retrospect is that we took religion for granted. We were taught by nuns and were expected in school to show up for weekday Mass frequently. And that was a given part of the schedule. Some activities revolved around the Church. The Assistant Pastor would play sports with us, for example. Things like that were taken for granted.

Kramer: When did you consciously begin to think about the possibility of perhaps a religious vocation?

Pedrizetti: In the middle of my year in the seventh grade, a good friend of mine was killed in a car accident. I remember being shocked—I was a pallbearer—by seeing a dead body for the first time, and all that goes with that. I am sure that was the incident that tripped my thinking about the possibility of a religious life. And by the time I reached the middle of the 8th grade, I had asked about going to St. John's Preparatory School with the possibility of becoming a priest. Through the Assistant Pastor at my parish who had studied theology here and knew the place, I began my first year of high school at St. John's.

Kramer: What year was that?

Pedrizetti: 1944.

Kramer: What building was the Prep School in?

Pedrizetti: This was during World War II. There were only five college graduates in my first year of prep school. The Prep School was the predominant institution at the time. Everything took place more or less in the quadrangle buildings.

Kramer: So you were here for those four years. Then did you continue at St. John's?

Pedrizetti: I continued for two years at college. My classmates then entered the Novitiate here. I entered the Novitiate at Spencer, Massachusetts.

II

Kramer: So you entered a Cistercian monastery? That was fairly unusual wasn't it?

Pedrizetti: I was a Trappist novice for a year and a half after my sophomore year of college.

Kramer: What was Spencer like at that point?

Pedrizetti: It was a very interesting situation. I received my acceptance papers the day the monastery that was originally in Rhode Island burnt down. So I wrote back and asked if I should still come at the end of the school year. This occurred in the spring sometime. They said to come. They were relocated in an old C.C.C. camp in Chepachet, Rhode Island. The Novitiate program was set up there at that C.C.C. camp. Among the rest of the community, some were at the camp and some were at the new location at Spencer.

Kramer: How many people were there as novices at the camp?

Pedrizetti: There were two novitiates and about twenty or thirty people. We commuted back and forth between Spencer and Chepachet which was about an hour's trip. We worked to help build and modify the buildings at Spencer in preparation for the whole community to move there.

Kramer: So there were already buildings there?

Pedrizetti: There were buildings there. It was originally a large dairy farm. There were several buildings already there. One was reformed into a chapel.

Kramer: So what stands out in your memory from those years?

Pedrizetti: It was a very intense time. I had become interested in the Trappists rather than the Benedictines during my first two years at college at St. John's. I sought advice and decided to give it a try and went there after my sophomore year. This was the first time I had been without an academic program to follow. So I read up and prayed about the development of the spiritual life.

Thomas Merton['s books] began to appear during this time.

Kramer: Merton had already become known, and you had read him?

Pedrizetti: I read the usual works—*The Seven Storey Mountain.*

Kramer: Then in 1949, did you read *Seeds of Contemplation*?

Pedrizetti: I read it somewhere along the way. I cannot remember exactly when.

Kramer: So he was someone whom you were aware of?

Pedrizetti: Very much so. In fact, we had a visitation by Dom James Fox during the time I was there in the novitiate. He made some remarks about Merton. I do not remember exactly what he said, but the point is that he was already well known.

Kramer: Right, he was ordained in 1949. And already by 1951 he was assuming the role of Master of Scholastics which was very fast work.

Pedrizetti: Yes. That was the year I was in the novitiate. 1950, or 51.

Kramer: So you stayed a year and a half. You must have felt there were many good things there. But you decided to come back here. How did you decide that?

Pedrizetti: In the middle of that year my health began to give away a little. I sought some advice and, for various reasons, it was decided that it would be better for me to leave. I wanted to stay around and keep at it for a while longer. But the writing was on the wall so I said, "Ok, I'll go."

Kramer: And you were only twenty or twenty-one? So then what did you do?

Pedrizetti: Yes. I came back here and finished college. I managed to do that in a full senior year, then a summer program. I took a few courses at what was eventually UMD in Duluth, University of Minnesota in Duluth. Then I took my senior year of college here. Then I thought about entering here and decided to go ahead and do that.

Kramer: So when you entered St. John's, you in effect had to start the novitiate over?

Pedrizetti: Yes. I spent two and one half years in the novitiate.

Kramer: Was there someone at that time who served as novice master?

Pedrizetti: We entered by classes rather than just any old time. I entered with twelve others on July 11, 1953. The Novice Master was Fr. Cosmas Dahlheimer. The associate Novice Master who sorted out our jobs and things like that was a young cleric who has been a classmate of mine in school. But by then those who I had studied with in prep school were a year ahead of me.

Kramer: So you did a year of novitiate and you continued....

Pedrizetti: I continued on and took four years of theology and was ordained in 1958.

Kramer: And had you started teaching by then?

Pedrizetti: I started teaching right after ordination.

Kramer: During your years of religious formation you had regular conferences with your novice master? How was that done at that point?

Pedrizetti: There were regular conferences in the program. We were isolated from the rest of the community. It was a rather strict sort of existence.

Kramer: Did you go to choir with the community?

Pedrizetti: Yes, we went to choir with the community. We did not eat with them because we were the permanent waiters! So we usually ate before or right after. That was standard procedure.

Kramer: Did you have a spiritual director in addition to a novice master?

Pedrizetti: Not in the novitiate. We had a confessor. There were half a dozen or more that were recommended—priests in the monastery. We could choose anybody, but it was recommended to choose one of those priests.

Kramer: So, during that time when you were preparing for ordination, what seemed to be most valuable for you in developing your vocation and moving toward ordination?

Pedrizetti: Well, I discovered philosophy when I was in the Trappist [monastery] which was rather odd. But before that time, I was mostly interested in sports and making money and doing things. The intellectual life did not mean much to me at all until I was in the Trappist novitiate. So when I came back it was great fun to study philosophy which was what I was doing to finish college.

Kramer: Were you reading Aquinas? What were you reading?

Pedrizetti: I was reading ancient Greek philosophy as well as medieval philosophy. In those days Aquinas was pretty well the theological standard. So my interests in philosophy dove-tailed with much of my theological work.

Kramer: Do you remember a particular moment in your religious life when you were absolutely sure that you would stay and that you were certain that this was it; and that you did not have any doubts about continuing?

Pedrizetti: I cannot recall a particular moment, but there was an atmosphere that grew and suggested I fit well with this life and with possibilities of teaching and with the Benedictine Rule and its application here. So it gradually grew on me. I suppose there was one day when I said, "Well, it is perfectly obvious that I belong here."

Kramer: How is the Benedictine Rule important for you?

Pedrizetti: It gives me a framework within which to make decisions. The major vows of poverty, chastity and obedience provide a particular framework in which you make decisions by and how you are going to live your life. And it gives meaning on a daily basis, the daily horarium.

Kramer: Are there particular persons who seemed to be of special value to you during your period of formation?

Pedrizetti: My confessor—I held onto him right until I was ordained and shortly after actually. I always received good advice from him. There were a few of my teachers in philosophy and history who were members of the monastic community who were people I looked up to and could call upon to ask questions.

Kramer: Whom in philosophy do you remember?

Pedrizetti: Well, I remember Fr. Ernest Keltzer very much and Eleutherius Winance who was actually a Benedictine from another community. But he was one of those charismatic kinds of people for many of us and I got a lot of ideas from him.

Kramer: Would you want to say something about your work as a religious? You are the Prior now. And what other kinds of religious jobs have you had over the years?

Pedrizetti: When I was ordained my major job was teaching. I started out teaching Classics actually. Much of my graduate school

training was in Classics. I started teaching Latin and Greek. But then the Vatican Council came along and Latin and Greek were no longer all that important for seminary training. So it was suggested to me to switch into philosophy, which I did. And I spent about thirty years teaching philosophy and enjoyed it quite a bit. I had an opportunity to read and think about a lot of things and discuss a lot of ideas that I was learning about and familiar with.

Kramer: Did you write in this area?

Pedrizetti: The only thing I wrote at that time was book reviews. But I did a lot of collecting of ideas. I have files full of stuff but have not published much.

Kramer: I saw an article in *Sponsa Regis* with Pedrizetti's name on it. But your name in religion was Anselm.

Pedrizetti: Yes, Anselm.

Kramer: So I saw something in *Sponsa Regis* by Anselm Pedrizetti, but I cannot remember the title.

Pedrizetti: Well, I wrote several articles for that.

Kramer: What kind of articles were those?

Pedrizetti: Oh, pious articles about religious life.

Kramer: Pious articles...what to do to be holy! So if you think about where you were in the 1950s and 1960s and where we are now, would you like to comment about any changes in the religious life? I mean this house itself is so different from when you first came.

Pedrizetti: When I first came it was a pre-Vatican Council regime. Since that time, just in terms of the architecture and the Church building itself, it sort of symbolizes the vast changes that took place. What is now the Great Hall was the former Church. It was the very traditional style with choir stalls on either side of the sanctuary. In the new Church the layout of the Church itself is an indication of the vast changes that have taken place.

Kramer: To leap all the way into the present moment, you still have people who come and are novices. The religious life still exists. Are people motivated to be religious for the same kind of reasons? In other words, it was pretty clear that if you became a monk in the 1950s or 1960s, you would probably end up teaching. Now it would not be so definite.

Pedrizetti: In my time, if you were going to teach, it probably meant that you were going to become a priest. That is not the case anymore. The academic life and the priesthood are not as important in the minds of younger people as they were. That is part of what was taken for granted in my time. If you were smart enough to get through college you were smart enough to be a priest. So if you had the talent the assumption was that is where you would go. But now we have people with Ph.D.'s who have no interest in becoming priests and never did. So this emphasizes that the religious life itself is of more importance than the pastoral work as priests and even teaching in some instances.

Kramer: But there was a time where people were not examined so carefully for the priesthood. They were not tested or encouraged to think long and hard. And in some ways I think it might have been easier to get into monasteries. Thomas Merton wrote an article about the neurotic personality in the monastery. I guess he wrote the article because he had been serving as Master of Scholastics and then as Novice Master, and he had been dealing with some pretty "special cases." My guess is that you would not have as many problematic men in a novitiate or monastery now because you are much more careful about who you admit.

Pedrizetti: I should have mentioned that one of my major jobs that absorbed a lot of time and did not give me a chance to get much writing done was living in the dormitory and working with students. Then I became Cleric Master right through the Vatican Council period.

Kramer: What does the Cleric Master do?

Pedrizetti: In those days a cleric was between the novitiate and ordination. At the beginning of the Vatican Council, there were about 70 or 75 clerics who came here. We had a theology program that attracted many from other places. Three or four years later at the end of Vatican Council that group had been reduced to 25. So there was vast turmoil and change just during the time of my first job as an administrator. Since that time the priesthood and academic life are less important than they were.

III

Kramer: Years earlier St. John's set up a Summer Workshop on Psychology and the Monastic Life. When did that begin?

Pedrizetti: It was during the time I was studying theology. It would have been in the mid- to late 1950s.

Kramer: And it ran for almost 20 years?

Pedrizetti: Something like that. I was on the support staff for the mental health workshops. And the whole point of them was to have a dialogue running between psychology and theology or spirituality.

Kramer: So how many men would come to these workshops?

Pedrizetti: Well they restricted the numbers. Maybe 40. Each week they had a team of people—two psychiatrists who gave talks and four who led discussion groups of maybe ten or twelve each.

Kramer: Would the topic change from year to year?

Pedrizetti: Yes. Merton came to one of those of mental health weeks and ran into Gregory Zilboorg and had an interesting battle, part of which I witnessed.

Kramer: So you were there and you watched Gregory Zilboorg "perform." He was rather well known at that point.

Pedrizetti: He was very famous within the psychoanalytic movement because he had been a student of Freud.

Kramer: Can you describe him? Do you remember him?

Pedrizetti: He was the stereotypical image that you have of an intellectual: sort of rotund wearing a tweed coat and smoking a pipe. I do not know if he actually smoked a pipe but he should have if he did not.

Kramer: Did he come more than one summer?

Pedrizetti: Oh yes. He came often.

Kramer: But he was not Catholic? Was he Jewish?

Pedrizetti: He was Jewish, I think, but converted to Catholicism.

Kramer: So he came several summers. Then one summer Merton came with his Abbot?

Pedrizetti: I am a bit confused about that. There were possibly two occasions when Merton was here. One was for a workshop on psychology and theology. Later on, there were workshops on spirituality set up for those "in charge" in monasteries and religious life.

Kramer: That would have been when he was Novice Master, I suppose—after 1955. So what did you see happen between Merton and Zilboorg?

Pedrizetti: Mostly that they disagreed. They tried to be polite. But the battle was over a manuscript that Merton wrote about psychology and theology. And Zilboorg said it was nonsense, at least the psychology part of it. And basically Zilboorg's message was "Stay in your own field. Don't mess around with mine."

Kramer: That manuscript, "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life," was published in *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 4 (pp. 3-19).

Pedrizetti: Right.

Kramer: So they were polite, but they disagreed.

Pedrizetti: Yes.

Kramer: Did you watch anything else about Merton?

Pedrizetti: On another occasion I sat in on a conversation between Merton and a classmate of mine whom Merton knew or was in academic or intellectual contact with.

Kramer: Who was that?

Pedrizetti: James Kritzeck. He went on to become an expert on Near Eastern languages. He was from St. Cloud. I sat in on their conversation. And it was a relaxed, interesting conversation where Merton was just chatting with this other fellow. I had arranged the meeting so they let me sit in and watch. They talked for at least an hour. My impression of Merton in that instance was amiable. He just seemed like an ordinary guy. He was this great important person who traveled around the world and was known everywhere. He was sitting in this office and just being an ordinary American person.

Kramer: I think often that is what people report: that he could focus in on a conversation and be totally with that conversation and not in any way pretentious or self-conscious. Have you ever visited Cistercian monasteries since you left Spencer?

Pedrizetti: One year I went to a conference on Merton and Maritain. It was in Louisville. I went to Gethsemani also to look around. But that was after Merton had died.

Kramer: Yes. I think that conference was in 1980, or so. I think I went to the same conference.

Pedrizetti: One of the participants was a priest who I mentioned had taught me philosophy. He was from another Abbey. He was from Claremont, California. He is still alive. And Raimundo Pannikar was there.

Kramer: Bob Lax was there, but did not talk much.

Pedrizetti: But my visit was just one of those tours of the Abbey. I saw Merton's grave and so on.

Kramer: Gethsemani had been renovated. So you saw the Church with its nice white walls and beautiful yellow and black glass. They really cleaned that building out. It had filled up over the years. There are photographs of it. At Merton's ordination it is all Baroque imitation!

So you had some contact with Merton. Did you read much of Merton?

Pedrizetti: Oh yes. I read the usual stuff.

Kramer: Have you looked at any of the Journals?

Pedrizetti: I only picked up a few last summer. There is a nun in Duluth, Minnesota who has an extensive Merton collection. I went to visit her once and realized that was my old parish where I grew up. And the actual room where she has all those materials is the very room where I spent the 7th and 8th grade.

Kramer: That is something! I am aware of her because she has gone to the International Thomas Merton Society meetings. So she has a good collection. The Journals are interesting because he was keeping a journal before he entered Gethsemani.

Pedrizetti: Oh, his personal journals.

Kramer: Yes. They are now edited and published and there are seven volumes. Of course, *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) comes from his journals and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) is re-worked material from the journals. But they were finally published in seven volumes, which can give you a good sense of the development of his life. Although there are moments where he does not keep a journal—1942 to 1946, there is not much. He loved to write.

I wanted to talk with you because I feel the changes in the religious life during this period—and Merton experienced many of these changes also—but he did not live past 1968—make a lot of people nervous. Merton makes a lot of people nervous too because the assumption is that he was not a good monk or Catholic

or Christian. I think that is probably not true, but if you stand back from people like yourself or like Thomas Merton who lived through this period of fantastic change in the Church and you see where we are now, some would be pessimistic I think. Some are really afraid that the old Church is gone. I do not feel that way. I feel that we are in a moment of opportunity. I wonder what you feel when you think about these completely different ways of structuring Church and spirituality and education and so on. Do you feel optimistic?

Pedrizetti: Well, I do not feel optimistic. But I do not feel pessimistic either. I think that we have a long way to go with the upheaval that has taken place on the level of spirituality with the ecumenical movement and the theological nuances that are complex and interesting but also difficult for it to impact our culture.

I think the basic strains of monasticism indicated by the vows are still valued by everybody. The ways they are practically worked out are much different. People entering religious life these days are much more highly educated and much more mature at least in the sense of having a variety of experience before they enter. So they have a lot of questions. At times one gets the feeling that we are just floating with a lot of ideas but no solid structure to put them into.

Kramer: I sometimes think it is similar in a parish structure where earlier the assumption was old Fr. So-and-so or Monsignor So-and-so would answer all the questions. Now in a large parish with two or three thousand families, the pastor is surrounded by people with all their questions, ideas and projects. And this would be almost too much to manage.

Pedrizetti: Yes, that would be impossible to manage. As a result, large parishes have begun to use others besides the pastor to handle those sorts of concerns.

Kramer: Have you been involved in activities here at St. John's that fall under the general rubric of liturgical renewal?

Pedrizetti: That has been a part of my life. I have an interesting perspective because I taught Latin and Greek for about five years before going into philosophy. So I know enough about Latin so that I can understand the liturgy in Latin and enjoy it. I think the Gregorian chant and things like that are treasures that we should not just dump entirely. But at the same time there is a lot of new stuff that is very interesting.

Kramer: When you came and first walked into the choir, everything was in Latin. And, now, the only time you would hear Latin would be on a Feast Day where you have a special reason for singing a hymn.

Pedrizetti: I am on the liturgy committee in the monastery. It is a committee mostly of people who are trained in liturgy and teach it in the graduate school. But we discuss things like where to put the Presider's chair in the sanctuary during weekday Mass. It does not excite your interest too much.

Kramer: The liturgy here is very clean. It is very carefully structured, and it gives you a feeling of wholeness. So often when you wander into a Mass in a parish, you may or may not be surprised at this accretion and that accretion, and this or that prayer and so on. What is so nice about coming to the Office or Sunday Mass here is that it is very carefully thought through.

Pedrizetti: Fortunately we have had for a long time at least two or three people who are trained in liturgy. So we can first avoid a lot of egregious errors and mistakes in how we perform the liturgy, and, secondly, we offer a lot to the people who are interested in creating and constructing a form of communal prayer that is meaningful for us today.

In the early days when it was all in Latin, a monk was sort of in a world apart because prayer was in Latin rather than English. And people did not participate like they do now. They just observed. This, to me, is an indication of the difficulty with monasticism. In St. Benedict's time, monasticism was a kind of protest against the reigning culture. But now the effort is to make monasticism a part of culture and at the same time retain something that is distinctive about it so it is recognizable for what it is.

Kramer: That is a big challenge. But it is very valuable. I think St. John's has a wonderful history doing exactly that.

Are there other things you would like to say?

Pedrizetti: You asked the question about the future. Am I optimistic, and I said not really. But I think that monasticism and religious life in some form will continue. I do not know a lot about Eastern thought, but one of my favorite authors is Fr. Martin Cyril D'Arcy. He was the person I read who helped me to undergo the transitions that I had to experience in coming back from the Trappists and getting into community life here. He has a book on

the spirituality of the East and West. He points out that we in the West should be more concerned, as Merton was, about the experience of spirituality that seems to be almost pervasive in the East.

Kramer: Yes. And it is a personal experience that people live. This is what people are beginning to learn in the West: you can have both formal liturgy and a personal spirituality.

Pedrizetti: That is what I was looking for in the Trappists. And I retained my interest in that sort of thing. But on the social level there does not seem to be much interest in the West about this way of life. It strikes me that the future of monasticism will be connected to the development of this kind of spirit.

Kramer: I think there is something lacking in American culture which also has to do with the need for the contemplative. But Americans are so busy, successful and content that they do not even know that they have any need for the contemplative. In the East, it is more a part of how everyone lives, or at least it was until the Chinese and Japanese wanted automobiles just like the rest of us.