

# MERTON'S QUIET INFLUENCE: A TESTIMONY OF CONTINUING CONVERSION

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BROTHER FREDERIC COLLINS, O.C.S.O.

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Edited by Dewey Weiss Kramer

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**Kramer:** What was your background before coming to the monastery?

**Collins:** I was born into a Catholic family and attended Catholic elementary and high school. Shortly after I graduated from high school in 1941 World War II started. I joined the Navy and spent four years on duty in the Pacific. Thanks to the generous benefits for veterans I went to Kansas University for four years and during that time I was active in the Marine Reserve. My eight years of exposure to the military left me somewhat sympathetic to the military viewpoint. At one stage of my Navy experience I gave some thought to making it a career. My studies in Business Management at the University gave me a good introduction to the viewpoint of the owners and managers of our system of making money. This was further reinforced during the next four years when I worked for the Prudential Insurance Company and the Ford Motor Company.

With this kind of background I fitted right in to the prevailing economic situation at Gethsemani. Abbot James Fox was a

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1. This interview has been edited from a tape first made for the Thomas Merton Oral History. The interview was conducted at the Abbey of Gethsemani on July 23, 1980 and revised in 1991-1992.

very good businessman and when I arrived in 1954 he was in the process of making the monastery self-sufficient in terms of the monks supporting themselves by their own work.

**Kramer:** Could we begin with your association with Thomas Merton?

**Collins:** I came here in 1954 so I've been at Gethsemani twenty-six years. I knew Thomas Merton from [19]54 until he died in [19]68, but I did go to Chile, our Foundation La Dehesa, in 1966. I was there for a couple of years, and then we had the election in early [19]68 for Father Flavian, and I came back from Chile. In a certain sense, I had more personal contact with Father Louis at that time because he was very interested in Chile and South America and was having various groups and talks at his Hermitage at that time. So there I was, back up with the Superior from Chile, Fr. George Peterson, and in a way we were sort of distinguished guests from South America. Merton invited us over to the Hermitage to share with small groups of his friends since he was distinctly planning on coming to Chile on one of his trips to see what was going on down there himself; we were arranging that.

In those early years, the twelve years that I spent here with him while we still had the sign language, it was much more a "separation-thing" in the monastery. I didn't have that much personal contact with Merton since I entered as a Lay Brother, and even when he became the Novice Master, he was the Novice Master of the choir religious only. So I was in a different novitiate. After I had been here a couple of years, since I had a business background, I was made the manager of the cheese and fruitcake business. At that time here Father Louis was "in his thing" and he was kind of "anti-capitalistic." He was kind of anti-business and felt the cheese and fruitcake thing was influencing his monastery more and more. He would make remarks like "We're not picking the corn by hand," and "we're making money just like the capitalists."

**Kramer:** Too much success?

**Collins:** That's right. Too much like a big business; too much emphasis on efficiency. So there is a sense in which I was even on the opposite side of the monastery in those early years. Father Louis was responsible for the work of the novices so when we were busy he had to come over to the building that I was in charge of and worked with me. So there was something going on there. And he was very good about giving me little needles, you know, "And what are you doing making

all this money in here and working inside?" So I myself went through kind of a conversion during those years. I was convinced about the "business thing," and the Abbot, who represented the will of God.... The Abbot said to me, "Well you go and run the cheese and fruitcake business and do the best you can. We need all the money we can get to operate the monastery and to make these foundations and to do a whole lot of things."

So it was very clear to me at the beginning that it was the will of God. But I kept listening to Father Louis and reading some of his books and he kept needling me, and I gradually came around. By the time I went to Chile I was plenty glad to get out of the cheese and fruitcake business. I had been in it for ten years, so it was time to move on. And when I had the opportunity to go to a poor country and to what I thought was a poor simple monastery in Chile, I took it.

**Kramer:** What did you do in Chile?

**Collins:** I was actually sent down there to be what we call the Cellarer, the monk that's in charge of the material side of the monastery. Dom James Fox was the Abbot then and in a way he was glad to get rid of me. Even though I had done a good job for him, I was beginning to ask the same kind of questions that Father Louis was about various things. And so he said, "I need to have somebody down there in Chile, 6000 miles away, to run that place and you, since you're getting more and more interested in poverty and simplicity, how would you like to go to Chile?" And I said, "Fine. I'd like to go." So I went; and actually we all had the option to come back. Since I was already in my middle forties when I went to Chile and I had very little linguistic ability, I had to get by on English. And after three years I still had not learned to speak Spanish well enough to be fluent. And there I was, the person in charge of the material things in the monastery, and couldn't speak fluent Spanish. So I did decide to come back.

**Kramer:** When you came back and you were invited to meet some of the friends of Merton's at his Hermitage meetings, what kind of things interested Merton? What did Father Louis ask you about Chile?

**Collins:** Merton was certainly interested to see if there was kind of a revolution taking place in South America. Were things changing? Were the governments, was the United States, was anybody helping ordinary people to receive a fairer share of the wealth in Chile? The

whole question of social justice was something that Father Louis had been interested in for a long time. So that would be the kind of questions he would ask. And even the role of the Church down there, we all knew it was supposed to be Catholic but the Protestants were coming in more and more in South America. He was very ecumenically minded; in fact some of those meetings I went to up in his Hermitage were more like ecumenical gatherings: many other non-Catholic people were there. And Father Louis was always very sensitive to their feelings, while down in South America the Church was so strong that it kind of dominated the Protestants, and didn't give them a chance to express their version of Christianity.

**Kramer:** Could you describe the monastery during the years when you first entered? What kinds of things stand out in your mind which would make it different than the way it is now?

**Collins:** Actually that is a very complicated question. Certainly in those early years the place was sort of mysterious. In one way I didn't know anything about it, there were 250 monks here then, and we didn't talk. And the monks wore their habits a lot more and they had their hoods up a lot more, and we didn't know anything about each other. It was a very strange world. For me, at least for several years, it did really remain quite mysterious. What really is this place all about, I asked myself? And I didn't learn that quickly. After thirty years and with all the changes it is quite different. There is a sense in which it is still mysterious. But then the mysteriousness was based more on external things, the habit and, oh, even just the place which was kind of dark. I'd even use the word *spooky* to describe the monastery. Some things about it just weren't "normal." I came from a middle-class background, and you know I expected everything to be clean and neat. And so there was a certain kind of a griminess about the place. Father Louis used to complain. He was very much an artist and said, "It's too bad this place has to be so ugly."

**Kramer:** And now you're talking about the actual living quarters?

**Collins:** Well the Church was ugly; at least I thought so. And I think Father Louis agreed. Plaster and a lot of statues all over the place. Just to give you a sense of one kind of feeling, I'll mention my trip to California. In the last eight years I've been Treasurer here so I go to the meeting of Treasurers of the Trappist and Trappistines every year, and this year we went to California to our monastery in Vina,

Our Lady of New Clairvaux. Then later on I went up to the Redwoods monastery which maybe I'll mention later on in connection with Father Louis. And then I went up to our monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe; they're more conservative there in Oregon. And I got there late in the evening, and so I didn't really see anything until after Vigils in the morning. I went into the church to kneel down, and some of the monks were just then coming to their private Masses. Well now in the old days we had a lot of priests here who said private Masses, and after Vigils they would go into the sacristy. They would vest; they would put their hoods up; they would have a server, and he would have his hood up, and then they would all come in kind of solemn procession out around all these private altars scattered around the church. And then these Latin Masses would start up and there would be a kind of rumble and this strange noise all over the place. Now, when I experienced that in 1980 at Guadalupe Abbey it reminded me of Gethsemani in the 1950's. Kind of mysterious and dark and Latin. And so now that's really all changed.

**Kramer:** If you think back about Father Louis, what stands out in your mind about his physical appearance?

**Collins:** Oh, not so much really. He was kind of short, stocky, and he did have kind of a peculiar walk. Now I've heard people describe it as kind of a duck walk. It never did strike me that forcefully, but you could certainly always recognize Father Louis around the monastery. There was something about his total physical manner and the way he walked that stood out from the ordinary monk. He walked fast; he always had someplace to go and kind of kept moving along.

**Kramer:** Now in those years you were pretty close to him and able to observe him, but did you notice any changes toward the end of his life?

**Collins:** Changes?

**Kramer:** I mean, did he seem just as lively and full of energy?

**Collins:** Yes. I would say so. I'd say as the years went by I had a chance to observe him more. He taught more, and we were becoming more and more open. And so in that sense I had contact with him as a person rather than just as a mysterious monk. I mean I think I may have been here a year before I actually was sure who he really was.

Kramer: How would you say some of the other monks thought of Merton during that earlier period of time then, or do you have a strong feeling?

Collins: In those years we didn't know much about what other monks thought, so a lot of this is an educated guess. Now I personally happen to be now, and for some time, more of a disciple of Merton. I'm an enthusiast about Merton; I admired him and what little idiosyncrasies he had to me seemed insignificant. I never found a single major thing about him that I would really disagree with. I mean, I was really quite surprised later on to learn that there were some monks who both in the spiritual area and even more so in other areas like social justice, the question of racism or peace or war, [that there were] people really upset about Merton. And then with regard to spiritual things—since Gethsemani was basically a conservative monastery and the emphasis was on the *status quo*. Whatever we had been doing for a long time was a good thing and anybody that's starting to rock the boat is wrong. I did pick up that some felt Merton is saying a lot of things, or that he's asking a lot of questions, which are undermining some of these things we do just by routine. So I knew this was disturbing to some of the monks. But I didn't really hear people saying that much since we were silent then, and people did make an effort to be charitable and kind about it. They would indicate their displeasure with Merton more with phrases like "Well," they'd say, "that's just Uncle Louie. He's an artist. And he's a writer and he's over there in the woods, and that's just him."

Kramer: Do you have a feeling about his sense of humor? You were saying earlier that he would make a remark, needle, or make comments about what you were doing.

Collins: Yes, he was a very lively person. I had gotten the impression when I first came here that you had to be more serious. You had to look down at the ground. Saint Benedict's Rule said something about not laughing out loud. So when I would see what I thought was one of the best monks in the monastery laughing out loud, and even making jokes, well, I distinctly picked up the sense that here's a man of humor, here's a man who can laugh easily. He had a very sharp mind. So he could see little things that were funny, and you know laugh at things that I wouldn't catch on to myself. So in that sense he would kind of start something, and then eventually I'd see it too. So that's one

way in which he was nice to be around. He would call your attention to humorous things that the ordinary monk would just pass right by.

Kramer: When you were busy with the cheese and fruitcakes and he would come and help, what kinds of things would he actually be doing?

Collins: He would be doing the simplest thing. Father Louis was really very good about going from being the Novice Master and the teacher to being an ordinary monk. When he was assigned to work in the garden or on the cheese, or work with the novices, he would take the most humble, simple job and just fit right in like one of the boys.

Kramer: Do you have any impressions about how he went about his work? I know you wouldn't have had occasion to be directly in contact with him in terms of his writing and so on but do you have any impressions about how he went about his own work?

Collins: That was mostly second hand. Now I do know I am very much a man of efficiency. I believe in making good use of time, and so I was astounded to hear how Father Louis had his day divided up and that he'd spend two hours for writing and two hours for something else. My very strong impression was that he really made good use of his time. He could shift gears easily. He could be into this thing, and be out in the woods working for a couple of hours and then he'd shift over and write. He was a good worker, especially in the things that he could do well. There always was kind of a joke around the monastery, "Don't ask Father Louis [if] you really want some wood cut, or if you really want something done out on the farm, don't ask Father Louis because he's so clumsy or he's so inept." But in the things he could do like writing or whatever, my impression was he did those very well and even in an efficient way; he kept several secretaries busy when he was writing and churning that stuff out. We were always astounded to hear that he had one book coming right after another, plus his talks to the novices and his talks to the community.

Kramer: There are these funny stories about how he couldn't learn to drive an automobile and all the rest of it. But he was apparently very efficient in terms of managing his actual daily work. I wonder if you have any impressions about whether it was in some ways hard for him to be both a monk and a writer, if he didn't feel he was trying to write too much?

**Collins:** I didn't have that impression just from what I could see and from what I read of his stuff. Now I've heard various things about that over the years, but my impression is that since he was a man who could shift gears easily that in one sense it was all the same—being a monk and being a writer. But still it looked to me like he could shift from being a writer to being a monk and go back and forth relatively easy. So I myself saw no conflict there.

**Kramer:** Of course he wouldn't have occasion to say something about that kind of concern so it really is just a matter of speculation. Do you know if within the monastery Father Louis had special interests, if there were things that he felt were especially important. I mean concerns separate from his work as Novice Master or his work as writer—were there things that he was especially concerned about?

**Collins:** Yes, since he was an artist, frequently he made some comments about the liturgy or about the singing or about the chant, and I always accepted the fact that he was knowledgeable in that area and even about the artwork around the monastery. Closer to me, or closer to my experience, would be his comments on a whole range of things about externals. And somehow my impression of Father Louis was that he didn't want the monks to get all caught up in a lot of external things whether it was the habit or the rubrics or rules and regulations. It's hard for a person like you, maybe, to understand how back in those days the monastery was very much controlled by rules and regulations. I spent four years in the Navy and four years in the Marine Corps Reserves so I know what it means to be in service and regimentation. And Father Louis was very much for trying to get people to be free, to be monks in their own way, and not be so dominated by rules and regulations, or to be robots, or all in one mold. So frequently he was making remarks about various aspects of that. The Abbot was kind of like a Bishop or even the Pope. We gave more bows and deference to the Abbot than most people would today to the Pope. And so every little thing he said was important; if we wanted to get the simplest, most ordinary thing you'd go ask the Abbot. There was something troublesome about all that. You could tell by the way Father Louis would comment about it that even though in a way he could go along with it, if he had to, still it just was against his grain. And he had insight into the fact that while that gave the appearance of being obedient it really was something just the opposite of that. People weren't really. When you treat people like children, then they do become, instead of child-like, kind of childish. There are always

exceptions; that's why it's very risky to generalize about Gethsemani or the way it was back then.

**Kramer:** Would you think that, first Father Louis' attitudes, but then attitudes in general during these now twenty-five years, attitudes about what really constitutes the core of [the]monastic life, have changed?

**Collins:** Oh, yes.

**Kramer:** Is it really a completely different set of responsibilities somehow?

**Collins:** Yes, exactly. Completely different might be too strong because now we are talking about ninety-three monks who are here and all those that have been here during these twenty-six years. There's a tremendous variation. Even today a good number of monks haven't changed that much. But still if you talk about the monastery as a whole, which is what we are doing, it has changed a lot and the values that Father Louis stressed, which I would call more the inner values, they are now much more to the foreground, things like the love of God, love of the brethren, meditation, or true silence and solitude.

**Kramer:** Do you think Father Louis' attitudes in those final fourteen or fifteen years of his life were also in process of change?

**Collins:** I think everybody was changing all the time to a certain extent. And Father Louis was somebody who lived life fully. In my mind one of the most characteristic things about Father Louis was that he wasn't afraid to ask questions. He was prepared for some answers or some insight or something that was different than what he had been pretty sure before was correct. So I would say that probably what was happening with Father Louis was some of these values were changing their places on his hierarchy of values; they were kind of moving up and down, maybe a few were dropping out. That's why I think he was open to the East and to other ways of meditating, other ways of leading a spiritual life. When he started having contact with Eastern monks and he saw that these people were really genuine spiritual people [but] they were doing things quite a bit differently than we were, he said to himself, "Well there must be something that they're onto that we are not."

Kramer: So you'd say those kinds of contacts were very valuable for him because it opened up other possibilities. Do you have any feeling about whether contact with people outside the monastery was a help or a hindrance for him? You know especially during the last several years of his life, just the volume of correspondence alone was amazing.

Collins: I'm very well convinced that that was a good thing for him and for all of us. He was maturing, he was much more a man of prayer, he was much more in contact with God. So while I wouldn't precisely recommend that for every monk, I think he was a very good place to handle it. And he had the unique gift for corresponding [with], or attracting to the monastery, outstanding people. He wasn't just talking to the whole range of people that just happened to come by here. You know I've been the Guest Master the last couple of years and so I talk to all the retreatants. Well that's one thing you know has its value. But you could say, in one sense, that I waste a lot of time—you know just talking to the ordinary people about the same thing over and over. But Father Louis, the people he was corresponding with [were] from all different walks of life and all different religious traditions, and so to me even what little I know about it, they were tremendously stimulating to him. It was a mutually beneficial thing. They benefitted and he benefitted.

Kramer: If you had to mention just one thing that you felt was the most important thing to be remembered about Father Louis, maybe not in terms of his writing or his public reputation, what would come to mind?

Collins: Well, to be remembered is that he was truly a spiritual man; that he was a man who loved, that he was a man who had given himself totally to the search for God, and that somehow my feeling is that he actually had done that. Plenty of people write spiritual books, or do all kinds of things about the spiritual life, but my deepest impression is that somehow he had really done it. And so that came through. It's very difficult to put your finger on, but you had the feeling that he was really speaking from experience about something that's way beyond the ordinary. That's why I came to the monastery in the first place, to find God or to do something that you just shouldn't do in ordinary circumstances. And Father Louis, somehow, had done that. And the way he would use words, the way he would describe

things, you could feel that in his works. That to me was the greatest thing about him.

Kramer: Had you read some of his books before you came here?

Collins: Yes, just a few: *Seven Storey Mountain* and maybe one other. I didn't know too much about him until one year before I thought I might come into the monastery. I was twenty-nine years old, and I started thinking of becoming a monk. It had been the furthest thing from my mind. My pastor recommended that I read something about monasteries and so I did. That was twenty-six years ago; even now it's hard to sort that all out. Because in the meantime I read all of Father Louis' books and I've read a lot of other things, and when I look back and try to see what was really influencing me twenty-seven years ago, to be perfectly honest it's not that easy to sort it all out.

Kramer: I think it was something in the air which attracted people to the monasteries already before *The Seven Storey Mountain* was ever published. I don't know what the records show but it would be interesting to find out just how many men actually came and stayed at Gethsemani and were professed in nineteen forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, before Merton was really recognized. I think it would be a pretty good number.

Collins: Yes, that's right. I'm sure that's true.

Kramer: Can you recall any other anecdotes about Merton's life which might be of value for people who are trying to see him within the context of this monastery?

Collins: I remember one thing which gives you some little flavor of Merton. Back in those years we weren't speaking to each other, and so in a way it was always kind of a frustrating thing to be in the monastery here and run into Father Louis every now and then, and you couldn't even talk to him. But I used to cut the grass with a big tractor up around his Hermitage and so he'd be in there writing, and I would see him there, and he'd wave at me, or something. And one day he did come out. It was a hot day like it has been here recently. And through signs he did ask if I'd like to have a drink of water. And I said, "Sure." And not so much that I really wanted a drink of water, but gosh, here I'm going to have a little contact with Father Louis. So he went in and got the water and I parked the tractor and stood there over the fence

and I drank the water. And, well, our rule was then that we couldn't talk to each other. And there we were, the perfect opportunity, and if I'd known what I know now, I would have talked. But anyhow, we didn't, we just shared the water. There was, however, some kind of exchange there in this silence that was really deep and good. Still, I did find it to be a frustrating thing not to be able to talk to him. So I finished the water and went on. But in a way I'd say that's typical of having lived in a monastery with a famous man.

**Kramer:** Would you say that most of the other monks would feel somewhat the same way?

**Collins:** I would think so but I don't really know. I suppose once again it depends on the monks that were sympathetic to him; basically they would be more like me. But there were some monks that weren't all that sympathetic and were just as glad that Father Louis kept his distance and that we had this greater silence.

**Kramer:** Do you think these other monks were, I don't know, impatient or a little bit suspicious, or felt that maybe his notoriety was really kind of interfering with their lives?

**Collins:** Well yes. And usually when people spoke about it they would speak about it along those lines. But you know looking back now over all these years, that sounds a little superficial. There was something to that, but I think it would be more accurate to say that the monks who were not sympathetic to Father Louis, were so more because he was asking questions. He was stirring up their consciences, and he was stirring the waters and, particularly bringing in what I would call the serious dimensions of the world like war and peace, social justice, things the monks just weren't used to dealing with. Somehow it upset their idea of what the peace of the monastery should be—why they left the world. They came here to get away from racism and war and injustice and all those questions: Let somebody else deal with them. They'd just come here to seek God and say their prayers. But Father Louis let you know in many different ways that there was more to this life. Saying prayers is fine, or better praying. See that's the essence of why he was here too. But if you say it "Well you're just going to pray," he never could really buy that.

**Kramer:** I think that's important. He was very aware of the fact that once you are really living a life of prayer you cannot any longer be

content with ignoring the needs of other people. I think that is really an important insight.

**Collins:** Each person would have to respond in a different way. Most of us realized that we weren't talented like Merton was so we couldn't write books: we couldn't talk to people, but as we have seen now in all these years that have gone by, there are things that even ordinary people can do just by showing concern for some of these things. Now I myself tremendously admire the Sisters in this country. I think a lot of the Sisters have really been influenced more by Merton and people like him who are prophetic.

There are also ordinary people all over who are doing what they can wherever they are to raise questions about these universal problems. It's something that is happening in a lot of different areas throughout the whole world. And I think Father Louis would be very pleased to see that you don't have to be a writer or a poet or somebody unusual to influence the world. Every Christian has something he or she can do. But first of all they have to hear about these things and somehow see that abstract questions of right and wrong somehow affect each life too. My relationship to God is affected when people in South America don't have a roof over their head. Father Louis was really good about making those connections. Yes, they're way down in South America and I'm way up here, but that affects me!

**Kramer:** So you would say that in that way his example of being concerned really helps to bring about changes both outside and inside the monastery?

**Collins:** Right, right.

**Kramer:** And I guess in the past it would have been possible (Br. F: Perhaps in the '30s.) for someone to enter the monastery and spend thirty years and never really give the world a thought?

**Collins:** Probably. But I think that has been romanticized, or exaggerated, for whatever purposes. From what I can tell people here were never that cut-off. People who wrote books, they exaggerated these things. But still there was some truth in it.

Kramer: We've already kind of talked around a question that I'd put down next: "Why do you think people are so interested in Merton's writing?"

Collins: I was the Vocation Director here for several years back in the early seventies and so I interviewed a lot of the people who came here trying to search out their vocation. A very high percentage of them had come here because they had read Merton. And even though in the end most of those people were not called to be monks, and they were certainly not called to Gethsemani, still there was something about the way a monk like Merton could write that really did resonate with them, and this somehow opened them up to ask questions and to deal with the more fundamental questions of life that they wouldn't ordinarily have done. Even though they came here, but in the end did not become monks, they were influenced by the monk, Merton. My impression was that those people did go back and live better lives in the world because they had read Merton: they had asked themselves these questions, they had taken a look at a possible religious vocation. And then they went back and they were somehow going to incorporate that in their lives. And Merton had a way of putting all these things—it wasn't just monastic, it wasn't just religious—it appealed to everybody. On a recent trip, someone mentioned Merton. I was on the airplane to San Francisco. It's just astounding the people who knew about Merton.

Kramer: The number of people who are familiar with Merton's writing, is that what you mean?

Collins: Yes, I was riding on an airplane next to a woman who wasn't a Christian, but she had been in the Peace Corps in Thailand. And so somehow Merton came up. And, "Oh yes," she had heard that Merton had died in Bangkok and she said "He was a man she could admire." She didn't know quite why; yet she just knew that there was something about that guy that attracted her. I've experienced that so many times.

Kramer: Yes, I had the same experience. We did a Conference in Atlanta, in February [1980], with the title "Contemplation in a World of Action: Merton's Writings for Urban Man," and there were hundreds of people there and some very interesting things were said and things happened afterwards—reading groups formed and people requested edited copies of papers and so on. Many people at that

Conference had already read a good bit of Merton. There is something there in his writing which speaks to such a wide range of people.

Kramer: When you think about his writings, and some of the objections which have been raised about the positions he's taken, on race or war or whatever, would you say that Father Louis was the kind of person who was swayed in his beliefs and who changed his beliefs? Some people say that he would take one side of a question, and then the next month he would write something which contradicted himself.

Collins: I don't know quite what you mean about beliefs, but the way I would put it is this: I think Father Louis stuck to his convictions which I would tie in with something much deeper all the way through but I don't think his deepest beliefs really changed. I mean Father Louis was undoubtedly a man of enthusiasm and I think that he could get caught up in certain enthusiasms and be pulled in a certain direction. He could move a good distance before he was aware of where he was moving. And then he would come back to more of a middle position or rethink it and that would result in him making seemingly contradictory statements. But even the things that I've heard people call contradictory, that doesn't quite sound like the right word. Father Louis was a fantastic educator. And from what I know about education and my own experience of it, you really do need to stimulate people and if you don't somehow phrase things in a way that catches their attention, a lot of times you're going to lose them. At the very least they're going to start using their own minds.

Now Father Louis would make a couple of these statements and people would start thinking. "Did Merton say that? Something is wrong when he said this, and he earlier said that. The two don't fit together." Well I mean I've seen a few monks, and people, try to get Father Louis pinned down on those things. Okay, there was some truth in the apparent contradiction; he would explain what he was really attempting to do in the bigger picture, just as an educator, or to stimulate them, then it would make sense. And so in many ways his mind was logical, but still there is a kind of a truth beyond logic you know. (K: Right. ) So everything doesn't have to be so logically consistent. He was a man of intuition. He saw truths, here and there, that other people thought were contradictory that weren't necessarily so.

Kramer: I want to ask you a question which doesn't have an answer. But you know when Father Flavian was elected Abbot, Merton had

indicated he didn't want to be considered. I wonder if you think he was the kind of person who could have been an Abbot? Would he have been able to do that kind of job?

Collins: Yes. I was down in Chile when the election was scheduled. And so it was kind of unusual. The Superior of Chile who was a Gethsemani monk and myself were given permission to come back to the States to participate in that election in 1968. Now I myself had heard nothing about what was going on at Gethsemani. So I left Chile with the idea of coming up here to vote for Father Louis to be the Abbot. I was astounded to get here and find out that rumors were going around the monastery that Father Louis was not going to be available to be elected Abbot. And then in the next hours sure enough Father Louis put a notice up on the bulletin board asking all the monks not to vote for him, that he wouldn't make a good Abbot and on and on. And so you know I was kind of trying to read between the lines: "Now what does he really mean? Was he really putting it in some absolute way?" I forget now, but since my mind was all set on voting for him I think on the first round, I did vote for Father Louis and several other monks did too. But then it was clear that there weren't too many and that we were going to have to look elsewhere. And so to answer your question, which was "Do I think that Father Louis would have made a good Abbot?" All the things considered, I think that I still would answer "Yes," even though I can see the hand of Providence that Father Flavian was elected Abbot and Fr. Timothy since then.

And here's the sense in which I think Father Louis would've still made a good Abbot: Gethsemani at that time was really blessed with a lot of topnotch administrators. Father Louis could easily have gotten a lot of good advice from the various people in the areas where he was not knowledgeable. And since the essence of what I see an Abbot doing in the monastery is something more to do with the spiritual part, and since that was really where he was the best, I think that it would have worked out. It might have been somewhat of a risk, and he might even have made some kind of imprudent business decisions. But still that's okay. Even if Gethsemani lost money in any one year that still wouldn't have been the end of the world.

Kramer: Yes. That's good, that's good. And then you were going to say something about the Redwoods, and being out there, in relation to Father Louis.

Collins: Yes, as you know Merton visited the Redwoods on the way to Bangkok and the Far East. And he made several strong statements about how much he admired what they were doing. And I myself had visited the Redwoods in 1966, before I went to Chile and didn't know too much about them then. And they hadn't really started to change. But in the fourteen years that have gone by since 1966, the Sisters out there have in my opinion really incorporated many of the things that Father Louis was talking about in all those years at Gethsemani and in all his books. And while it's always risky just to put it into a few words what I would say has happened at the Redwoods is that the place has become whole.

There's a wholeness about it. Everything kind of fits together. The prayers, the meals, the community life, the work, etc. They do have a small community, so they have an advantage. Some of these things would be much more difficult to do in a big place like Gethsemani. When you have only eight sisters and two monks living there, things can work a lot more smoothly and a lot more flexibly. Yes, but what I see them doing is that they, especially Mother Myriam, the Abbess who is a very intuitive woman who very much admires Merton, have put the various elements of the life together in a new way. They have a schedule, but they don't hesitate to change the schedule. Some days they might not have Mass. They may have Vigils some mornings and other mornings they may just sit. The visitors they have there, both men and women, are sometimes incorporated into the meals. They are definitely included in the Mass and the prayers in common. Visitors pray right with the Sisters. There's a kind of flexibility; there's a kind of freedom which is certainly one of Merton's key ideas and which can be easily misunderstood. I think those Sisters are a living example of freedom lived out properly. When I was there one of the more striking things was that a couple came there for their honeymoon. They had both just graduated from the University of Michigan and they went out to Berkeley and they both got Master's degrees in theology, and had just graduated. And they came up, made arrangements ahead of time, and spent their honeymoon there that week. And they were both people who had done a lot of sitting. I could tell from the way they meditated that they were really into it. Now can you imagine anybody thinking that going to a monastery would be an acceptable place to spend your honeymoon? Obviously this is an unusual couple and monastery! As a visitor you could tell the various people who come there really have a deep appreciation for the fact that the Sisters are doing something genuine.

And whoever they are, from all different walks of life, they can fit in, feel comfortable, feel at home.

A POSTSCRIPT: 1991-1992

I learned many things from Fr. Louis about Christianity and how to live the monastic life in a genuine way, but what I would like to mention now is the conversion I experienced in regard to violence (war) and Big Business (Capitalism). Through Merton's influence I came to know the nonviolence of Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. Over many years I began the slow process of questioning my assumptions about war and violence and eventually came to my present convictions about nonviolence. That was relatively easy compared to my conversion from the mentality of Big Business which had been so deeply ingrained in me by my education and work experience before coming to the monastery. Merton was not too willing to admit that there were some good things about the way our economic system works in this country, but having said that I am well convinced that he had a good insight into some of its major deficiencies. The years that have gone by since his death are making Merton look very prophetic about the justice of our economic system—not to mention environmental issues.