

# THOMAS MERTON ORAL HISTORY: A BEGINNING—A REPORT ON NINETEEN ARCHIVAL INTERVIEWS

—by **Victor A. Kramer**

It has become increasingly evident that Thomas Merton was an extremely complex figure, and it seems clear that as much source material about him as possible should be gathered while persons who were close to him are still alive. Because of such a realization the decision was made in 1979 to begin gathering information from some of the monks who knew Merton, as well as literary associates of his, through taped and transcribed interviews. That modest project has led to the completion of more than a score of interviews which have been conducted during the past four years. Much of this material consists of personal memories and comments. Collectively these transcripts have provided many facts, anecdotes, and memories of Merton/Father Louis.

The first set of edited transcripts (19 separate interviews, 464 double-spaced pages) has been completed and now is on deposit at selected archives and Merton research centers including the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine, The Merton Center at Columbia University in New York City, The Abbey of Gethsemani, and the Special Collections Department of Georgia State University in Atlanta. It is hoped that the primary material gathered through these interviews will prove of value for future researchers.



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Since the interviews were conducted with no immediate plans for publication the persons interviewed were encouraged to speak freely about their memories of Thomas Merton. Many of the persons interviewed were Merton's fellow monks, and along with information about him these interviews also frequently provide details about the nature of monastic life at Gethsemani, and at other

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monasteries as well. Therefore an additional value of this project is that it provides a composite picture not just of Father Louis, but of his brothers and their impressions about the nature of the contemplative life during the past several decades.

Other persons interviewed in this oral history project were some of Merton's literary friends and editors. Within this first gathering are included interviews of Robert Lax, Robert Giroux and Walker Percy (whose interview was generously included by him in the recent volume *Conversations with Walker Percy* (University of Mississippi Press (1985)).)

Since these interviews were conducted as an archival project, no immediate plans were made for the extensive publication of the transcripts. Each person interviewed has been assured that he will control the edited transcript of his interview. Thus, each interview has been transcribed and edited, then annotated by the person interviewed and approved for inclusion in the printed volume. Permission to quote from the materials will remain with the persons interviewed as well as with the editor.

It is hoped that this initial set of edited interviews might stand as a model for others which could be done in the near future. Many additional persons—both within monasteries and beyond—could provide valuable primary information about Merton for the use of future researchers. Especially does this seem to be the case with two significant groups of persons who were close to him over an extended period. First, literary friends, such as James Laughlin (who was taped in 1985), or the many persons in the Bardstown-Lexington-Louisville area who knew Merton might be sought out and interviewed. Secondly, there are many men — sometimes monks who reside in monasteries scattered across the world, and some who have departed religious life — who might contribute to an information gathering project such as this one.

The persons interviewed whose transcripts have been included in the first volume are the following: Dom Flavian Burns; Dom Augustine Moore; Brother Patrick Hart; Mr. Charles Skeehan; Brother Paul Quenon; Brother Michael Casagram; Father Chrysogonus Waddell; Brother Frederic Collins; Mr. Robert Lax; Father Paul Bourne; Father Joachim Tierney; Father Matthew Kelty; Father Phillip Richert; Mr. Robert Giroux; Dr. Walker Percy; Father Regis Tomkins; Dom John Eudes Bamberger; Brother Brian Kerns; Brother John Baptist Schmidt. The monks reside at the Abbey of Gethsemani and other monasteries which are daughterhouses of Gethsemani. Merton's many literary friends are, of course, scattered throughout the world. Systematic interviews of as many of these people as possible could prove invaluable for future researchers.

It is my hope that the existence of the first set of nineteen edited transcripts may stimulate other scholars to pursue similar work. A considerable number of interviews might be made during the next several years. A few more have already been completed by me and will eventually be transcribed. Merton scholars who see the value of such a continuing project might well cooperate to insure that a more systematic Merton Oral History be established.

Should other scholars share this interest in doing additional oral history interviews about Father Louis/Thomas Merton, it might be to possible coordinate efforts in the future.