

DOM JAMES AND "GOOD FATHER LOUIS":

A REMINISCENCE

--Compiled by **Robert E. Daggy**

James Fox, Merton's abbot for twenty years, wrote little himself about his relationship with "good Father Louis," as he invariably referred to Merton in letters. On February 1, 1969, several weeks after Merton's death, he wrote a letter of reminiscence which was circulated in mimeographed form. This letter was later revised and expanded and included as "The Spiritual Son" in Brother Patrick Hart's *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (© 1974 by The Abbey of Gethsemani; excerpts are reprinted with permission). Other anecdotes, stories, and letters are included with Dom James' own reminiscences. We dedicate this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* to **Dom James Fox** who played so large a role in Merton's life and who was, in his own way, as talented, dedicated, complex and contradictory as Merton himself.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"At Gethsemani, boys give -- not fifty per-cent, seventy per-cent, ninety per-cent, nor even ninety-five per-cent -- but one hundred per-cent for God and Country."

--James Fox, *Gethsemani Magnificat* (1949)

"Good Father Louis, as you know, is really a genius in writing books. He is very dynamic, and bubbling over with energy, and has a very expansive imagination."

--James Fox to Giovanni Montini
[later Pope Paul VI], 1955

"Be assured, that the cause of Catholic education in our Archdiocese is very close to the hearts of Gethsemani monks, and it is daily in our prayers."

--James Fox to Msgr. Alfred F. Horrigan
President, Bellarmine College, 1963

"Since I am of the masculine gender, I always have my fears and trepidations in writing to those of the feminine gender -- because I don't know too much about their 'inner psychological workings.'"

--James Fox to Naomi Burton Stone, 1966

"Aim high -- real contemplative intimacy with Jesus. Thru Mary & always with a smile."

--James Fox to Thomas Merton, 1967

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It was Tuesday, December 10, 1968, about fifteen minutes before 1:00 in the afternoon. I was about to prepare a little midday lunch, when I glanced out of one of the windows, and saw the jeep from the Monastery pull up in the yard and stop. No one ever comes at that hour, because the monks are all at dinner in the Abbey. So I watched with curiosity to see who might climb out of the jeep.

First came Brother Patrick. He had been my secretary for some ten years while I was Abbot before he went to help out at our General's House in Rome. On his return from Rome, he was appointed secretary to Father Louis. The other person who stepped out was Brother Lawrence, secretary to the new Abbot.

I thought to myself: "What on earth is bringing these two secretaries up here to the hermitage at this time when they should be eating their dinner?" I anxiously opened the door of the porch and they came in.

First, we made a little visit to Our Lord in our chapel. Then all three of us came into the "study." Brother Patrick spoke first. He said to me: "Reverend Father, you had better sit down before I deliver the message which I have for you."

I said: "Go ahead -- shoot. I don't need to sit down for anything."

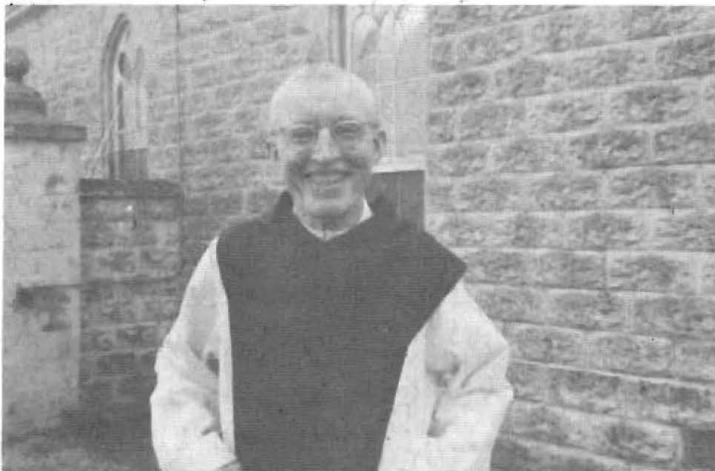
"Well, I think you had better sit down."

I realized that this day, December 10, was my birthday, and probably they were up to some trick or other to help me celebrate. Perhaps Abbot Flavian [Burns] had sent them up with a surprise dinner. I was determined they wouldn't pull any tricks on me.

Brother Patrick then said: "Well, O.K. -- the message is that -- that Father Louis is dead."

"You don't think I am going to swallow that, do you? What is really on your mind? Come on, tell me. What are you two really up to?"

"Really, the Abbot received a message from the State Department in Washington, D.C.," they said. . . . Br. Patrick continued: "Father Flavian sent us up to tell you the tragic news. We are to bring you back to the Abbey. Fr. Flavian wants to talk to you."



DOM JAMES FOX
Gethsemani / Ca. 1951

I looked at both Br. Patrick and Br. Lawrence in utter bewilderment. I saw only too clearly that indeed they were not joking. They were in deep sorrowful sincerity. Then I really sat down repeating over and over: "What a loss -- what a loss."

Then I realized a strange coincidence -- rather personal indeed. It was on December 10, 1941, my birthday, that Fr. Louis entered Gethsemani. And now, it was December 10, 1968, again, when he entered Eternity -- his Birthday in Heaven -- "Natalitia."

--From *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart



Just happened that Brother Pat mentioned a marvelous story I had not heard. He said that at the time of Tom's death, rather at the time of the funeral, one of the Brothers (Lawrence Gannon) went up to fetch Dom James in his hermitage to bring him down for the funeral Mass.

Dom James began to say what is almost a cliché in religious houses: "Now dear Father Louis knows more theology than all the rest of us."

Brother Lawrence replied spontaneously: "He always did."

--From *The Hermitage Journals*, by John Howard Griffin



I was wondering about your personal reaction to Father Louis publishing a journal while he is still living. . . There is so much, necessarily and unavoidably of the I, I, I. . . If Father waited until after his death, then there would be no criticisms or question. What's when the Little Flower published her autobiography.

--Dom James Fox to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, 22 September 1951



There is one point that sometimes appears in articles about Fr. Louis. It is not a little amusing to me to read: "Evidently, the superior had Fr. Louis chained to a typewriter to keep on turning out articles, prefaces, periodicals, poems, books, and so forth."

Indeed, the contrary is true. Fr. Louis had maximum freedom within the bosom of our cloistered family in all particulars. In fact some of the monks complained to the Visitor that I allowed Fr. Louis to do just about as he pleased. However, realizing that Fr. Louis was not an average person, but more in the line of genius, I allowed him what one would call "exceptions" to various rules.

Thus in regard to his writings, he was perfectly free to write, or not to write at all. He was free to write whatever he wanted. Plainly, he had a real compulsion to write.

Once he said to me: "I am most grateful that you put no obstacles to my writing. If ever I were forbidden to write, I would soon land in a mental hospital."

Indeed, I never asked him to write any single thing except on one occasion. Several years ago a friend was helping to prepare the Papal Pavilion for the World's Fair in New York. He asked me if I would have Fr. Louis compose an appropriate prayer for a souvenir card for all those who would visit the Pavilion.

Fr. Louis graciously complied, and the prayer was published. . . All the rest of his voluminous writings are his own individual works.

--From *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart



In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott states: "Dom James was overprotective, not only of Merton, but especially of Merton." In 1966, Merton's friend Edward Rice, then editor of *Jubilee*, visited Gethsemani and apparently indicated to Dom James that he was not entirely thrilled at Merton's living conditions in the hermitage. Despite Dom James' fears that Rice might publish his misgivings, Rice's eventual account in *Jubilee*, titled "Thomas Merton Today," contained nothing negative about Merton, the Abbey or living conditions. Yet, Dom James felt it necessary to explain to Naomi Burton Stone that Merton liked his life.

Ed Rice. . . comes from the big city of New York, with all its modern conveniences, etc., and he comes down here to Kentucky to a bunch of monks who are used to live this tough old life. The contrast in his mind, therefore, must be terrific. But to us it is only normal -- and we are all conditioned for it.

He happened to wander up to Father Louis' hermitage after supper --or about suppertime --and of course, there was no sunshine. It was rather gloomy that day --and Father Louis pulled out a can of sardines and a few sandwiches, and they munched. But he didn't realize that Father Louis had a wonderful hot dinner at noontime with plenty of meat and vegetables. And all the monks eat only one meal a day without meat, and that good Father Louis always takes back to his hermitage at noontime for his supper a big bag of sandwiches, so there are no dishes to wash --don't you see? And Father Louis just loves all this. If it were any different he couldn't stand it.

Of course, he doesn't have running water, or New York City plumbing, and he does not have a steam-heating system -- but he has a tremendous big fireplace, and he tells me that the logs are always still burning in the morning, with plenty of embers. He has an electric stove, which he tells me: "I never turn it on -- I don't need it."

And even with zero outside, he tells me: "Why, I had the window open all night --just put on more blankets. I couldn't sleep otherwise. . ."

Father Louis just wrote me a note in which he says: "Concerning temperature in hermitage --just for your information -- it was below zero outside -- and some water in the pitcher in the room was frozen, but it is perfectly comfortable, and I have no complaints. Just mentioning it for your information. Conditions at the hermitage are just as I would have them, and I have never manifested anything but the highest satisfaction to anybody."

--Dom James to Naomi Burton Stone, February 2, 1966



Dan [Walsh] had stayed in the Trappist monastery a week. He told me of the life of the monks. He told me of their silence. He said they never conversed, and the impression I got was that they never spoke at all, to anybody.

"Don't they even go to confession?" I asked.

"Of course. And they can talk to the abbot. The retreat master talked to the guests. He was Father James. He said that it was a good thing the monks didn't have to talk -- with all the mixture of men they have there, they get along better without it: lawyers and farmers and soldiers and schoolboys, they all live together, and go everywhere together and do everything together. They stand in choir together, and go out to work together and sit together in the same place when they read and study. It's a good thing they don't talk."

--From *The Seven Storey Mountain*, by Thomas Merton



My first meeting with Fr. Louis was as follows:

In July of 1942, he had been a novice for some eight months. At that time I was Retreat Master for guests who might come to the monastery to make a retreat. The summer of that year brought Fr. Louis' only brother, John Paul, for a visit. At that time, he was an officer in the Canadian Air Force, and was about to be sent overseas.

He came to Gethsemani for two reasons -- one was, understandably, to visit his brother Tom -- Fr. Louis -- and to say "Au revoir." The other reason was that, following in the steps of his older brother, he was to be received into the Church. It was my duty to prepare him for Baptism, and for his First Communion.

During one of my first conferences with John Paul, to my astonishment, in bounced one of the novices. I could easily see that he was bursting with fervor and enthusiasm. I did not know him personally, but I asked him to wait outside for awhile, until I finished my conference with John Paul.

The novice did this most graciously. However, his most expressive eyes pleaded with me, saying, "Please don't be too long. He's my brother -- he's leaving soon for the War -- I may never see him again." And so it was.

--From *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart



According to Michael Mott, Dom James generally "took to" Merton's friends. This was especially true of Merton's old chum from his Columbia days, Seymour or "Sy" Freedgood, a tireless practical joker and play-actor. In March 1967, Freedgood arrived at Gethsemani, bruised, battered and bandaged from a car accident on the way to Gethsemani. He eventually persuaded Dom James, by insisting that his wife would never believe the true story of his injuries, to sign an affidavit stating that he had been assaulted and beaten by monks angry over his criticism of monastic life. In return he promised to have a friend at H. J. Heinz Co. send some products to the monastery. Dom James thought this was just another of Freedgood's "put-ons," but a week later a truck arrived at Gethsemani and unloaded all of Heinz' 57 varieties. Dom James immediately wrote Freedgood a "thank-you letter," a letter as whimsical as any Freedgood might have written himself.

A few days ago a truck pulled up to the monastery and unloaded seventeen cases of "Heinz 57 Varieties."

Enclosed was a card from you -- mentioning this gift from you to help us "keep smiling."

The selection contained soups of all description, Chef size minute meals, ketchup and chili sauce, mustard, pickles and relishes, tomato juice, and a variety of restaurant pack entrees.

An old axiom has it: "The way to a man's heart -- is thru his stomach." And believe me dear Seymour, with such a fine gift -- you have a large place in our hearts.

Be assured we continue to pray for you dear Seymour, in the daily round of our Trappist life of prayer and sacrifice -- that Jesus, thru Mary, will grant you a Summertime which is
 grace-full
 joy-full
 love-full
 smile-full
 peace-full

--Dom James Fox to Seymour Freedgood, May 31, 1967

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A good bit has been written about Father Louis's relationship with his second abbot, Dom James Fox, much of it distorted. It was undoubtedly a most complex relationship. One thing, certainly, cannot be denied, and that is that Dom James had not only a deep love for Father Louis but also a profound respect for him as a spiritual master. Weekly, for more than fourteen years, the abbot knelt at Father's feet as a penitent before his father confessor, placing the guidance of his life in the Spirit in Father's hands. Thinking of some of the notes Tom wrote to the abbot in his more agitated moments, one would very much like to have been a fly on the wall listening in on these encounters. It must have been a ministry that challenged Tom a great deal, making demands on his own humility and compassion. Tom had a way of bringing a light touch to such weighty moments, calling upon an immense repertoire of stories. . . . The confidence that pervaded the relationship between Father Louis and his abbot was strong enough to give Tom the freedom to speak out and speak out with a certain vehemence at times, knowing that this would not be misunderstood as disrespect or a questioning of the true authority that belonged to the abbot as abbot.

--From *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*, by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

During the twenty years we lived together, he never missed a week in coming over to the office to converse with me. This was true not only when he held an office in the Community, such as Master of Students, and later as Master of Novices, but also when he held no particular office. During the last fifteen years he was my Confessor. Sometimes during Confession, our conversation would wander to extrinsic problems. Some five or ten minutes would pass, without either of us being aware of it. Suddenly, he would cry out: "Hey, Reverend Father, let me give you Absolution, and get you off your knees."

To which I would reply, "O.K., but first soak me with a good penance for being such a tough old Superior." He never would.

--From *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In *Merton: A Biography*, Monica Furlong has written: "He [Merton] was not the easiest of monks to live alongside, and many observers feel a keen sympathy for Dom James Fox at having him as one of his community, although since Merton's death Dom James has written of him with affectionate sympathy." Indeed, Dom James went beyond sympathy and attempted to demonstrate that any differences or hard feelings between the two had been confronted and/or resolved before Merton's death, as, in fact, many surely had been from the evidence of the two letters which Dom James quoted. He wrote to Merton in October 1968, a month after he had left on his Asian trip.

In your own regard, dear Fr. Louis, I would not be in the least surprised if at times I have indeed appeared as your "public enemy No. 1" -- your "bete noir" -- your haunting "Nemesis." But in reality, I am not so.

You never had -- nor will you ever have -- one who has been a more faithful and loyal friend and brother than myself. I never had any other motive in any decisions in your regard than your best -- not necessarily your best temporal interests -- but your best eternal interests. As Psalm 76 phrases it: "And I had in mind the Eternal Years" -- "et annos aeternos, in mente habui."

In the face of crosses, crises, and under the pressure of trials and frustration of past years, whether on the part of others or of myself, I always admired your basic faith in God and your ultimate humility.

For example, in regard to your present trip to the Orient which you desired for several years, and for which you did not receive permission, I was only an instrument in God's hands. God's time for it had not come.

Now His time has come. You will see that the fruits which you will reap from it -- for yourself and for others -- will be far more abundant, lasting, and beyond your expectations. Why? --because you waited for God!

Be assured that my poor prayers, sacrifices, and midnight Masses in Calvary Hermitage will follow you every inch of the trip until you return to us again.

Merton replied from Calcutta:

Personally, I never resented any of your decisions, because I knew you were following your conscience and the policies that seemed necessary then. . .

Be sure, that I have never changed in my respect for you as Abbot, and affection as Father. Our different views certainly did not affect our deep agreement on the real point of life and of our vocation.

--From *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart



Dom James concluded his reminiscences of "good Father Louis," by quoting the final lines from the Epilogue of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and pointing out how prophetic the words which Merton had Jesus say to him were: "That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the *burnt men*." He said: "Certainly, we are sure, Jesus took Fr. Louis at the peak of Fr. Louis' union with Him. It sweetens our sorrow, and even gives a supernatural joy to know that he is safe for all eternity." Connected by time and space, by similarities and differences, by coincidences --one was born on December 10 and the other died on December 10 -- their earthly bodies now rest alongside each other at the Abbey of Gethsemani.