

# Beauty and Humanity at Gethsemani

Review of  
*Gethsemani* (60 Minutes) and  
*Time in the Garden: Life at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (23 Minutes)  
 Filmed and Edited by Morgan C. Atkinson  
 Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2002  
 60-Minute Videotape / \$25.00; 23-Minute Videotape / \$15.00

Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

When you visit the Abbey of Gethsemani for the first time, you take a Rorschach Test. Your first reaction to the tableaux of monastic life encountered in Trappist, Kentucky says everything about you and perhaps little that is authentic and true about the ambiguous reality being lived out by the brothers and the deeper meaning of life at their place. But whenever I visit the Abbey, I still enjoy at least one period of sacred reading that catches me up with the Visitors Book in the Guesthouse, to ruminate sympathetically upon the remarks that visitors append to their names as they finish their retreats. Here are the words of the wowed: "Heaven on earth!" "I'm finally home!" "A joy to share time with these holy monks!" Thomas Merton's remark next to his signature in the Visitors Book for April 1941 harmonizes with these fervent responses to encountering Gethsemani cold. He left behind in 1941 a Latin line from the Vulgate (here translated): "You have made them a little lower than the angels." But once a continual returning pierces through these beautiful first pictures, the brothers and the place appear to be a hell of a lot lower than the angels and, thank God for us, much more densely human. Each one of the monks, were we to learn his story, would become a complex, walking parable for us of grace's work with flawed natural materials. In their less angelic states and living way below our "wows," the monks of Gethsemani are in fact flawed and deeply, beautifully human. Although I love reading the Guesthouse book – it's touching and it does reflect a real shimmer covering the Abbey's deep gold – if I am ever to approximate Gethsemani's reality as it truly is, I'll have to shuck my enthusiasms.

Morgan C. Atkinson and his colleagues from his film company Duckworks have produced a complex and rich new film about community life at Gethsemani, the best ever executed thus far. Interviewed via email, Atkinson related to me that his interest in Gethsemani began in 1977 with an Easter weekend retreat at the monastery (shades of Merton's first visit during Easter 1941) that was prompted by Morgan's reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He arrived at the monastery, he wrote me, "a wandering and wondering agnostic who became a Catholic some six weeks later on Pentecost." Say whatever I said above, these first-impression Rorschach Tests, coupled with reading Merton, do have real, life-changing, consequences!

The script and the film's editing is first-rate, and Atkinson, a Louisville native, takes us with

him beyond his interest in Gethsemani that begins with Merton's writing to his unfolding discovery of the Abbey as it is today. "Merton's Gethsemani" is from time to time in evidence, but among the merits of this film is Atkinson's attention to a representative selection of Gethsemani's current denizens. The entire Gethsemani community shines in this film as Atkinson allows his camera to expose the simple and good humanity of the individual monks he films and whose strong characters he allows us to appreciate as much as he does.

Abbot Damien Thompson, the kind of guy you take with you on a fishing trip so as to enjoy an in-depth consultation with your beer, relates his journey from ex-Maryknoll priest, through his work with the radical community organizer Saul Alinsky, to his driving a cab in Chicago, until he finally finds himself at home as he walks down the alley of trees toward the abbey's gatehouse at the age of forty-five. Father Matthew Kelty, a living icon of what's most attractive about being a monk, adds pepper and brio and deep insights on the monastic vocation at Gethsemani throughout the film. He, like Abbot Damien, entered at forty-five, a late start that has been more than compensated by his having attaining wisdom and his eighty-eighth year, the same age Merton would have attained in 2003 were he alive today. Brother Placid Rich, who at thirty-three was Gethsemani's youngest monk at the time of the film, opens his pre-monastic life for us with uncontrived simplicity. He tells us of his divorce (the tree he and his new wife planted in the park to symbolize their life together died a few years after their wedding) and how his failed marriage played its part in instigating his decision to become a monk. Brother Placid's mother and father are prominent in the section of the film devoted to Placid's solemn profession ceremony. His parents are one source of the film's humor and its tears. Placid's mother notes that, when a monk is solemnly professed at Gethsemani, the abbey also plants a tree to symbolize his new vocation. With perfect comic timing, she smiles and adds, "I hope that one won't die, too. But," she continues poignantly, "Who knows? Who knows?" Moments of small truths revealed, like this one, are studded throughout Gethsemani and elevate this film high above a mere travelogue. Father Carlos Rodriguez deflates ecstatic views of Gethsemani by expressing a monk's daily tedium of pushing himself to do the same thing over and over again day after day. I have never seen a monk so graciously smile and sigh at the same time. Finally, Brother Paul Quenon, who came to Gethsemani as a young man of seventeen, appears handsomely honed by his endurance. Brother Paul represents in a special way everyone's best conception of the monk as artist and contemplative. All of these interviews are superbly edited so that the viewer finds wisdom and encouragement in each sentence these monks say.

Atkinson uses several good devices to give his film unity and flow. An unseen woman narrator punctuates various movements of Gethsemani's daily life with appropriate readings from *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Lawrence S. Cunningham of Notre Dame, appearing on camera, adds perceptive remarks on Merton, Gethsemani and monastic life. The original music harmonizes with the film unobtrusively. Several shots of birds in the Abbey's woods (with what great patience Atkinson must have waited to take them!) are stunning. There are particularly striking episodes: the lighting of the fire on Holy Saturday, followed by a procession into the abbey church; the funeral vigil for Brother Nivard and his eventual "green burial" (without a coffin, as is the Cistercian tradition) in the abbey's cemetery. A scene of Buddhists chanting in the guests' chapel (the Skakel Chapel) during the second "Encounter" of Christian and Buddhist monks at Gethsemani is complemented by Brother René leading retreatants in reciting the rosary. Of special interest to ITMS members is a fulsome record of the visit to Gethsemani and Merton's hermitage by participants at the Seventh General Meeting of

the ITMS at Bellarmine University in June 2001. This film has the feel of care and of having been lovingly filmed over eighteen months to insure a thorough job.

*Gethsemani* and its complementary, shorter version *Time in the Garden: Life at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, can serve as teaching resources to introduce monastic life for those involved in presenting retreats or facilitating parish study groups. *Gethsemani* would well serve as another video presentation to enhance the excellent Thomas Merton Curriculum Students' Workbook and Teachers' Guide recently produced by the Thomas Merton Foundation.

Morgan Atkinson's beautifully accomplished film aired on Kentucky Educational Television in February 2003. Repeat showings will most certainly occur on various Public Television outlets. Copies of both films can be obtained through the Thomas Merton Foundation <[www.Mertonfoundation.org](http://www.Mertonfoundation.org)> or through Duckworks <[MorganAtkinson.com](http://MorganAtkinson.com)>.