Thomas Merton: Monk of the Undivided Church

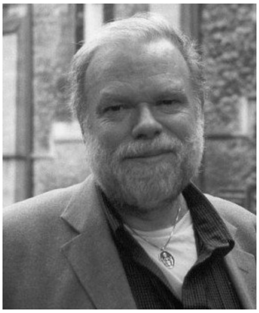
By **Jim Forest**

My contact with Thomas Merton, or Father Louis as he was known by his fellow monks, started in the summer of 1961. I had recently joined the Catholic Worker community in New York City, a house of hospitality mainly for street people in a part of Manhattan. Now called the East Village, it has become a fashionable area in which to live. In those days it was the Lower East Side, one of New York's poorest and most avoided areas. In 1961, a cold-water flat could be rented for just $25 a month, sometimes a few dollars less.

It was thanks to Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker movement, that I came in contact with Merton. Dorothy – perhaps one day St. Dorothy, as the Archdiocese of New York is actively promoting her inclusion in the Church calendar – was one of Merton's correspondents. Knowing of my interest in monastic life and my enthusiasm for Merton's books, Dorothy suggested I write to him. Not many days later I had a response in which Merton noted that we live in a time of war and the need to "shut up and be humble and stay put and trust in God and hope for a peace that we can use for the good of our souls."[1] Our correspondence was to last seven years, until shortly before his death on December 10, 1968 (twenty-seven years to the day after his arrival at Gethsemani to begin monastic life, on December 10, 1941).

In December 1961, Merton suggested that perhaps I would like to come to the monastery for a visit. First I had to prepare the February issue of *The Catholic Worker*, our monthly newspaper, for publication – an issue that included a contribution by Merton. Early in February 1962, I was able to leave for Kentucky, hitchhiking all the way, a three-day journey, and then stay at the monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, for a week or two. Merton and I saw each other repeatedly each day. I was also able to sit in on his classes with the novices. I met him face-to-face only one more time, for a small retreat on peacemaking two-and-a-half years later. Otherwise our contact was entirely by letter – usually a letter or two per month from Merton – plus an occasional postcard.

The postcards were not unimportant. It was thanks to these that I first became aware of Merton's interest in Eastern Christianity and his own journey to the undivided Church. In the summer or fall of 1962 a postcard came, the image side of which I look back on as quite significant but at the time I regarded in vaguely negative terms: a black and white photograph of a sixteenth-century Russian icon: Mary with the child Jesus in her



Jim Forest

Jim Forest is the author of *Living with Wisdom: A Biography of Thomas Merton*, a revised edition of which was published in December 2008. His other books include *Praying with Icons*, also newly reissued in an expanded edition. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Thomas Merton conference held December 10, 2008, at the Cistercian Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle di Fiastra, near Tolentino, Italy.

arms. Jesus, though infant-sized, looked more like a miniature man. The image seemed to me formal, lifeless and absolutely flat, without artistic significance. Compared to the masterpieces of the Renaissance, this sort of thing struck me as little more than a child's painting left over from the kindergarten of Church history.

Shortly after his death, when I made a complete set of photocopies of all Merton's notes and letters to me, I didn't bother to photocopy the image side of this or any of the other icon postcards he had sent me. I always assumed that Merton had no more taste for this kind of primitive Christian art than I did. I imagined some donor had given his monastery a box of icon postcards which Merton was using in the spirit of voluntary poverty. It was only many years later, while writing *Living with Wisdom*, my biography of Merton,[2] that it finally dawned on me how crucial a role icons had played in his life. No one could have been happier in sending out an icon photo to friends than Merton.

In fact I should have been aware of this side of Merton even before I met him. It's something he writes about in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in describing one of two catastrophes of his childhood. The first was his mother's death from cancer when her son was only six. The second was his father's death, ten years later, when Tom was a student at a residential high school in rural England. Owen Merton was suffering from a brain tumor that produced a large lump on his head and made him unable to speak. His fifteen-year-old son would occasionally go down to London and sit in mute silence next to his father's bed in Middlesex Hospital while gazing at his father's eyes. Merton could see no meaning in what was happening to his father, whose misshapen head seemed to him like "a raw wound for which there was no adequate relief."[3] Having already lost his mother to cancer ten years earlier and now on the verge of becoming an orphan, he responded with fury to the religious platitudes he heard from the chaplain of his Anglican school. Clearly there was no "loving God." Clearly life had no meaning. His parents' fate was proof of that. "You just had to take it, like a dumb animal," he later wrote (*SSM* 82). The only lesson he could draw from his parents' fate was to avoid as much pain as possible and take whatever pleasures you could out of life. At chapel services at his Anglican school in Oakham, Merton would no longer join in reciting the Creed. "I believe in nothing" summed up his creed at this point in his life (*SSM* 98).

Yet Owen Merton had another view of his own suffering which he finally managed to communicate to his son through drawings, the only "last word" he could manage in the silenced condition imposed by his brain tumor. Merton came to see his artist father in his hospital room and, to his amazement, found the bed littered with drawings "of little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos," as he puts in is his autobiography (*SSM* 83). The younger Merton at the time didn't know what to make of them. He had no eye for icons. He regarded Byzantine art, he later confessed in an unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Labyrinth*, as "clumsy and ugly and brutally stupid."[4]

Owen Merton died early in 1931. Two years passed. On Tom's eighteenth birthday, January 31, 1933, having finished his studies at Oakham early, with more than half a year off before entering Clare College in Cambridge and with money in his pocket from his wealthy grandfather in America, Merton set off for an extended visit to France and Italy. He hiked along the Mediterranean coast of France, then took the train from St. Tropez to Genoa, then on to Florence and finally to Rome. Once in Rome, for days he followed the main tourist track, a Baedeker guidebook in hand, but the big attractions, from the Roman Forum to St. Peter's Basilica, left him bored or irritated. The architecture, statuary and painting of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation struck him as vapid and melodramatic. "It was so evident, merely from the masses of stone and brick that still represented the palaces and temples and baths, that imperial Rome must have been one of the most revolting and ugly and depressing cities the world has ever seen," Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, words that still sound like the reflections of a bright, hyper-critical teenager (*SSM* 107). It seemed to him that the best one could say of ancient Rome was that it would have been an ideal set for a Hollywood film with a cast of thousands.

Perhaps we would never have heard of Thomas Merton had it not been for what happened when he made his way from the guidebook's four-star attractions to those with three or two stars, or even one, and thus came to know some of Rome's most ancient churches – San Clemente, Santa Sabina, Santa Maria Maggiore, Cosmas and Damiano, the Lateran, Santa Costanza, Santa Maria in Trastevere, San Prassede and others. These moved him in an unexpected and extraordinary way. On the walls of many of these churches he met extraordinary examples of the iconographic art he had seen in his father's mysterious drawings made not long before Owen's death. These were all churches of sober design whose main decorations were mosaic icons, images of deep stillness, bold lines, vibrant colors and quiet intensity that have little in common with the more theatrical, illustrative art that was eventually to take over in the West. These ancient churches house some of the best surviving examples of the art of Christianity's first millennium. In Santa Maria Maggiore, two long tiers of mosaic icons date from the fourth or fifth century. Merton's first such encounter with ancient Christian art was with a fresco in a ruined chapel in the Forum. Later he discovered a large mosaic over the altar at Cosmas and Damiano, on the edge of the Forum, showing a calm, commanding Christ, with a fiery glow in the clouds beneath his feet. This was not at all the effeminate Jesus he had so often encountered in English art of the Victorian period. Along with Peter and Paul, the two unmercenary physicians stand on either side of Christ. "I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics," he wrote in his autobiography. "I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found, and, as an indirect consequence, all the other churches that were more or less of the same period. And thus without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim" (*SSM* 108).

"[W]hat a thing it was," as he recalls in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power – an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say. . . . [an art] without pretentiousness, without fakery, [that had] nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity . . . and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their position and everything about them proclaimed it aloud" (*SSM* 108). Through these icons, he began to understand, not simply who Christ *was* but, far more important, who Christ *is*. In this crucial section of his autobiography, the crescendo comes in two intense paragraphs that read more like a litany than ordinary prose:

> And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first

> saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life.
>
> It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers. It is the Christ of St. John, and of St. Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers – and of the Desert Fathers. It is Christ God, Christ King (*SSM* 109).

The intensity of the experiences reflected in this powerful litany may be due in part to the fact that Merton was alone in Rome, not part of a tour group. There is something about unhurried, unmediated, intimate face-to-face contact that can increase one's vulnerability when standing before a great work of art. There is no schedule to keep; there are no guides or professors to explain, no handbooks, no captions, no bus to board in fifteen minutes, no idle chatter with people more interested in menus than mosaics. Eager to decipher the iconographic images that so arrested his eyes, Merton bought a Bible. "I read more and more of the Gospels," he writes, "and my love for the old churches and their mosaics grew from day to day" (*SSM* 110). The attraction of icons wasn't simply due to Merton's newly-gained appreciation of the aesthetics of iconography but a profound sense of the living Christ he experienced within the walls of churches graced with such imagery. Merton experienced, he said, a "deep and strong conviction that I belonged there" (*SSM* 110). He desperately wanted to pray, to light a candle, to kneel down, to pray with his body as well as his mind, but found the prospect of publicly kneeling in a church alarming. Finally one morning he climbed to the top of the Aventine Hill on the east side of the Tiber, crowned by the fifth-century church of Santa Sabina, one of the oldest and least spoiled churches in Rome. Once inside, he found he could no long play the guidebook-studying tourist: "although the church was almost entirely empty, I walked across the stone floor mortally afraid that a poor devout old Italian woman was following me with suspicious eyes" (*SSM* 113). He knelt down at the altar rail and, with tears, again and again recited the Our Father. At age eighteen, Merton had undergone a mystical experience: an encounter with Christ. From that moment he had something against which to measure everything, whether himself or religious art or the Church in history. He knew what was counterfeit, not because of some theory but because of an experience of Christ mediated through iconography.

The pilgrimage that followed was nothing like an arrow's direct flight to faith, baptism and the Church. The coming winter at Clare College was to prove a disastrous time in Merton's life, "the nadir of winter darkness," as he put it later on (*SSM* 122). He did more drinking than studying and apparently fathered an illegitimate child. His well-to-do guardian in London wanted no further responsibility for Owen Merton's wayward son and sent him packing to his grandparents in America.

Four years after arriving in New York, while a student at Columbia, Merton was received into the Catholic Church. Three years later, in 1941, he was a new member of the Trappist monastic community of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Yet his encounter with icons was far from finished nor were icons the only aspect of the connection he developed with the "eastern" form of Christianity, the Orthodox Church.

For twenty years, beginning in the late 1940s, books poured from his pen at the average of two a year, many of them best sellers, many of them still in print. It is striking to discover that only one book of Merton's got as far as being set in type yet remained unpublished: *Art and Worship*. It was to have gone to press in 1959. The printer's proof sheets survive at the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville. I have a photocopy in my home. But his publisher had second thoughts, fearing such a book would damage Merton's reputation. The publisher enlisted the art historian, Eloise Spaeth, as a kind of professor-by-post to ferry Merton's tastes into the modern world, but in the end she threw up her hands. She was appalled with Merton's "sacred artist" who "keeps creeping in with his frightful icons."[5] Merton made an attempt at revising his book to please his publisher, but in the end gave up the project. I am hoping that sometime in the future the book will at last be printed.

Merton's aesthetic failure was his view that Christian religious art had been more dead than alive for centuries and that what one found in the average Catholic parish church in the mid-twentieth century was third-rate and sentimental. One of the goals for his small book was to help his readers understand and value the icon, so much a part of Christian worship for the greater part of Christian history. But it was a tradition which, in the West at least, had been abandoned since the Renaissance and all but forgotten. "It is the task of the iconographer," Merton wrote in *Art and Worship*, "*to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom in the world*, and to remind us that though we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are, if we believe in Christ the Redeemer, in fact living and worshiping as 'fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone with Christ'" (58; see Kristoff 95). It seemed to his publisher that such an opinion was embarrassingly dated. The sixties were about to unfold, but even in the fifties nothing could have been more out-of-fashion than classic iconography.

Yet Merton was never weaned of his love of this art form. Occasionally Merton returned to the topic of icons in letters. Only months before his death, he was in correspondence about icons with a Quaker friend, June Yungblut, in Atlanta. He confessed to her that books such as her husband was writing, which presented Jesus as one of history's many prophetic figures, left him cold. He was, he told her, "hung up in a very traditional Christology." He had no interest in a Christ who was merely a great teacher who possessed "a little flash of the light." His Christ, he told her, was "the Christ of the Byzantine ikons" (*HGL* 637).

June Yungblut was hardly alone in regarding the phrase "the Christ of the Byzantine ikons" as scandalous. In our culture, the word "Byzantine" is rarely if ever used in a complimentary sense. Didn't Merton feel a shiver to use the word "Byzantine"? Didn't "Byzantine" signify the very worst both in Christianity and culture? And as for icons, weren't they of about as much artistic significance as pictures on cereal boxes? In a letter sent in March 1968, Merton explained what he meant by the "Christ of the Byzantine ikons." The whole tradition of iconography, he said,

> represents a traditional *experience* formulated in a theology of light, the ikon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us . . . . [W]hat one "sees" in prayer before an ikon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation by those who have "seen," from the Apostles on down. . . . So when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the ikons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship,

> prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition. (*HGL* 643)

Even among Orthodox writers, one rarely finds so insightful and yet so succinct a presentation of the theology of icons.

What Merton had learned about icons had been hugely enriched by the gift from his Greek Orthodox friend, Marco Pallis, of a hand-painted icon, originally from Mount Athos. It had arrived in the fall of 1965, just as he was beginning his hard apprenticeship as a hermit living in a small cinderblock house in the woods near the monastery. It was one of the most commonly painted of all icons, an image of the Mother of God and the Christ Child – for Merton like a kiss from God. He wrote Pallis in response:

> How shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me . . . . At first I could hardly believe it. . . . [This] icon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem. . . . [I]t is a perfect act of timeless worship. . . . I never tire of gazing at it. There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual "Thaboric" light, which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe. It is unutterably splendid. And silent. It imposes a silence on the whole hermitage. (*HGL* 473-74)

Marco Pallis's gift was the first of seven icons that made their way to Merton in his last three years of life and found a place in the small chapel of the small hermitage that became his home in these years.

We come upon a final clue to the place icons had in his inner life when we consider the short list of personal effects that were returned with his body when it was flown back to the monastery from Thailand:

> 1 Timex Watch
> 1 Pair Dark Glasses in Tortoise Frames
> 1 Cistercian Leather Bound Breviary
> 1 Rosary (broken)
> 1 Small Icon on Wood of Virgin and Child.

I don't want to focus only on Merton's love of icons and their place in his life. It's no less important to be aware of his study over many years of early monasticism, his devotion to the theologians of the Church's first millennium, and also his close attention to Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, such writers as Paul Evdokimov, Olivier Clément, Alexander Schmemann and Vladimir Lossky. In the small library Merton kept in his hermitage, one finds such titles as *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, *Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, and *Manual of Eastern Orthodox Prayers*. In the last book there is a slip of paper on which Merton had copied the Jesus Prayer in Slavonic along with a phonetic interlinear transliteration. The *Philokalia* was quite important to him. It is massive anthology of Orthodox writings that mainly has to do with the Jesus Prayer or, as it is also called, the Prayer of the Heart. In fact, on the back of the icon he had with him on his final journey, he had written in Greek a short passage he had discovered in the *Philokalia*: "If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present *our spirit naked to God*. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world – no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification – even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world" (see Kristoff 107).

Merton's attentive reading from these sources went on for many years. In one of the books published late in his life, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, there is an important passage on this theme that was based on a journal entry Merton had made on April 28, 1957, nearly a decade earlier. Here it is in its finished form:

> If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.[6]

Merton's search for unity, his attempt to live within himself the unity he sought for the Church as a whole, should be regarded, not as something controversial, but as a normal Christian discipline. Christianity's east-west division is a thousand-year-old scandal. Followers of Christ are required, St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, "to maintain unity of spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Merton spent much of his life seeking to maintain unity of spirit in the bond of peace – and seeking it not simply within himself, but also as a shared unity of spirit in pilgrimage with others.

Merton rejoiced in reading the sayings and stories of Desert Fathers, the monks of the early Church who were pioneers of the monastic life. For Merton these original monks of the East were both a personal inspiration and also a challenge to modern monasticism. As he wrote in introducing one of his books, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, he would not compare the monastic life he knew first-hand with the Egyptian example. As he said:

> With us it is often rather a case of men leaving the society of the "world" in order to fit themselves into another kind of society, that of the religious family which they enter. They exchange the values, concepts and rites of the one for those of the other. And since we now have centuries of monasticism behind us, this puts the whole thing in a different light. The social "norms" of the monastic family are also apt to be conventional, and to live by them does not involve a leap into the void – only a radical change of customs and standards. The words and examples of the Desert Fathers have been . . . turned . . .

> into stereotypes for us, and we are no longer able to notice their fabulous originality. We have buried them, so to speak, in our own routines.[7]

This touches on another aspect of Merton's search for the undivided Church. It is a search not to escape from tradition but to purify traditions which have over time been distorted or calcified. As he puts it in *Cassian and the Fathers*, a text subtitled "Monastic Spirituality and the Early Fathers, from the Apostolic Fathers to Evagrius Ponticus," conferences written for his novices:

> If for some reason it were necessary for you to drink a pint of water taken out of the Mississippi River and you could choose where it was to be drawn out of the river – would you take a pint from the source of the river in Minnesota or from the estuary at New Orleans? This example is perhaps not perfect. Christian tradition and spirituality . . . do not [necessarily] become polluted with development. That is not the idea at all. Nevertheless, tradition and spirituality are all the more pure and genuine in proportion as they are in contact with the original sources and retain the same content.[8]

One can say the monastics of the early Church were at the Minnesota rather than the New Orleans end of the river and that they provide a prophetic example of certain aspects of basic Christian life for our own day: for example, a simpler, poorer, less institutional monastic witness. At the same time, their example of prayer-centered life, poverty, labor, hospitality, repentance and forgiveness is relevant to each of us, whatever our vocation and no matter how far from the desert we live – even if we live in New Orleans.

It was in his exploration of the living monastic tradition of the Eastern Church, which to this day is far less structured than that of the West, that Merton came upon the Jesus Prayer and began to practice it himself. One gets a glimpse of his own use of the Jesus Prayer in a 1959 letter to a correspondent in England, John Harris:

> I heartily recommend, as a form of prayer, the Russian and Greek business where you get off somewhere quiet . . . breathe quietly and rhythmically with the diaphragm, holding your breath for a bit each time and letting it out easily: and while holding it, saying "in your heart" (aware of the place of your heart, as if the words were spoken in the very center of your being with all the sincerity you can muster): "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner." Just keep saying this for a while, of course with faith, and the awareness of the indwelling [Holy Spirit], etc. It is a simple form of prayer, and fundamental, and the breathing part makes it easier to keep your mind on what you are doing. That's about as far as I go with methods. After that, pray as the Spirit moves you, but of course I would say follow the Mass in a missal unless there is a good reason for doing something else, like floating suspended ten feet above the congregation. (*HGL* 392)

It is not that Merton is without appreciation for the aids to prayer and contemplation that have been so much a part of Western Christianity. In the same letter to John Harris, he goes on to recommend the rosary and other forms of devotion to the Mother of God:

> I like the rosary, too. Because, though I am not very articulate about her, I am pretty much wound up in Our Lady, and have some Russian ideas about her too: that she is the most perfect expression of the mystery of the Wisdom of God . . . . [and] in some way . . . is the Wisdom of God. (See the eighth chapter of Proverbs, for instance, the part about "playing before [the Creator] at all times, playing in the world.") I find a lot of this "Sophianism" in Pasternak. (*HGL* 392)

Clearly neither Merton nor any of us lives in the undivided Church in a visible sense. The shores between East and West in Christianity still remain fair apart, though recent popes have done much good work in building bridges and there have been bridge-builders on the Eastern side as well, including the current Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew. Nonetheless Merton helps us to see that each of us can participate mystically in the undivided Church. After all, the Body of Christ is one Body. We can help to heal the divisions in the Church by holding together in our own prayer life those things which are best and by letting the saints of the early Church become our teachers, as they were Merton's. Merton shows us that this journey is not easy, yet we also see that the efforts of even one monk, done with persistence, can make a difference.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 255; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.
2. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991; rev. ed. 2008).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 82; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, "The Labyrinth" [unpublished novel at Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY] 49.
5. See Donna Kristoff, OSU, "'Light That Is Not Light': A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Art of the Icon," *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) 85-108 (see 94); subsequent references will be cited as "Kristoff" parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 12.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 9-10.
8. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) 5.