

A Monk in a Hut: Journey to a Gethsemani Hermit

By **William Mittendorf**

This is the story of the author's journey to meet Fr. Roman Ginn, OCSO, a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, who lived as a hermit on the abbey property from 1990 until his death in 2008.

My first journey to the Abbey of Gethsemani was in 1960 during the frigid days of winter. Members of my high school senior class from St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio made a weekend retreat there. Thomas Merton was there. One of the retreat chaperons told us that the famous monk had his assigned place in choir on the right side of the abbey church (a basilica in those days). Merton didn't impress me at the time. My younger brother had read about him and told me that he longed for greater solitude and wanted to live the hermit life. I imagined that Merton wanted to live in a cave or hut. Strange, indeed, I thought.

In 1996, some 36 years since my initial visit, I began making retreats and visits to the abbey on a regular basis due chiefly to my newly discovered interest in Thomas Merton and his writings. Merton's concept of solitude and his longing for the hermit life now intrigued me. During my visits to the abbey, I would often see an elderly monk of small stature, somewhat bent over, and sporting long white hair and beard. He would concelebrate Mass with his fellow priest-monks on Sundays and holydays. He was noticeably absent from choir and other liturgies during the week. Who was this monk? I later learned from Br. Patrick Hart that he was Fr. Roman Ginn, who lived on the abbey property in a hermitage approximately two miles away. He had two donkeys and walked to the abbey on Sundays and holydays pulling his red flyer wagon, which he would stock with supplies for his return trip. After visiting the Merton hermitage several times, through the kindness of Br. Patrick, I wanted to learn more about Fr. Roman and the hermit life.

One day, while reading Dianne Aprile's work entitled *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox*, I came across a photo of Fr. Roman and brief sketch of his life.¹ I thought it would be neat to meet him and perhaps interview him about my interest and research into Merton's priesthood. Was such a meeting possible? After all, here was a hermit, who I expected didn't want visitors. While talking to Br. Patrick one day, I noticed that someone had given him a brown bag looking like a bottle of booze. It turned out to be a bottle of wine left by a friend for Fr. Roman. Apparently, Fr. Roman did not like the abbey wine used for Mass. Perfect, I thought! On my next visit, I'll bring a bottle and put a note with it about my research into Merton's priesthood and ask if I could meet with him, perhaps at his hermitage. Indeed, it worked! A handwritten note came within a week from Fr. Roman, thanking me for the wine and inviting me to his hermitage on my next visit.

We exchanged Christmas cards in 2007. Fr. Roman sent me a hand-drawn map to the hermitage. On December 31, 2007, before dawn, I journeyed

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to Gethsemani from my daughter's home in Lexington, KY. I had inquired whether the abbot's permission was needed and was told it was not. The weather was extremely cold. I arrived at the abbey about 7:00 A.M. and met Br. Patrick for breakfast. After a good bowl of monastic oatmeal, some bread, coffee and good conversation, as always, I began my journey to see Fr. Roman, armed with camera, brown bag, and map. I followed the dirt road next to the red woodshed (once used by Merton and now by Br. Paul Quenon), and headed in a general easterly direction, passing through the enclosure wall and across a field and bridge erected by the monks years ago. Up and down hills and knobs, through open fields and meadows, I hiked. I took a wrong left turn and had to double back. The air was frigid, fresh, and damp. My hands and ears were freezing. Where is this place? The map said it was about two miles from the abbey. I kept on trekking, checking the map for roadmarks. I came across a deer rambling through an open field. Up, down, and around I trekked. Where in the world is this place? It seemed like I had walked way more than two miles. As I looked at the terrain, I tried to visualize where a good place for a hermitage might be located. Surely, it would be somewhat hidden among the trees and perhaps set on a high spot near a running stream. Finally, the dirt road ended with no sign of the hermitage. Now, what? I looked left across an open field and spotted an Irish-green painted building near the edge of a corn field. Strange place for a hermitage! Too open and not very hidden! I knew it was the right place from the photo in Dianne Aprile's work. Rough tire tracks led across the field. As I got closer, the glass in the greenhouse attached to a small hut came into view. There were also a couple of outbuildings. One looked like a toolshed and the other like a small barn, where the donkeys were probably kept.

I entered the greenhouse and knocked at the front door. No reply. I had noticed smoke coming from the chimney on my arrival and figured someone must be at home. I knocked again. Finally, Fr. Roman opened the door. He appeared a bit puzzled at my presence. I greeted him with my name and a warm hello. He then remembered my coming and apologized for being confused. He invited me in.

Wow! Such a small, rustic, one-room shack. A very humble dwelling, to say the least! It reminded me of huts we used to build as kids out of orange crates. In fact, I subsequently learned that it was built in 1990 out of old scraps of wood from the making of cheese boxes. A huge big iron stove with door wide open was roaring. I got warmed up in a hurry. Fr. Roman asked if I was too warm. Yes, I replied. He opened the window to the west. The room was rather dark but as the winter sun rose, the place began to glow. The main window faced southeast. Good light in the morning to read by, he said. He asked me to sit in his rocker (the only chair in the place) and made me feel most welcome. He sat down on a simple iron bed covered with a military style blanket. A few clothes were neatly folded at the foot of the bed. Plastic containers were neatly arranged under the bed. I gazed around. Not much here! A table, candles, some books in a bookshelf, wooden floor, open beams in the walls, a couple of windows. No insulation. No electricity, no plumbing, no refrigerator and no



Fr. Roman Ginn, OCSO

running water. The focal point was the wood-burning stove. Fr. Roman shut the damper on the stove and opened a window to the west. We sat and began to talk.

Fr. Roman wanted to know all about me. He thought at first that I was a priest. I shared some of my background – my first visit to the abbey in 1960; my days in the seminary; my practice of law; my lovely wife, two daughters, and two grandchildren. I also mentioned my deep interest in Merton and his priesthood. Fr. Roman was a good listener, asking frequent questions. He appeared more frail and undernourished than I had remembered, a small man, somewhat hunched over, with long white hair and beard; no glasses, though; very soft-spoken with small, sparkling eyes. I sensed at once that here was a holy man.

I had made an outline of questions on my yellow legal pad and asked if it was okay to take notes. “Yes, of course,” he replied. I began to ask him about his nineteen years living as a hermit at Gethsemani. How did he ever get such an idea in the first place? He said that after his ordination, he went to Rome to study Sacred Scripture.² There, he became interested in the hermit life as a result of a professor, who sparked something in his interior life. After Rome, he taught scripture for a few years at Gethsemani,³ then in 1966 was assigned to the Cistercian monastery in Chile, a daughterhouse of Gethsemani, where he stayed for six years, the last three as a hermit. Later, he went to Mexico where he lived as a hermit for almost two decades. He returned to Gethsemani in 1990. Was he ever lonely or afraid? How did he survive the cold and heat? Loneliness was never a problem, he replied. He loved solitude and was never afraid. He spent many hours during the day taking care of the place, chopping wood, boiling water, and washing dishes in addition to his prayer life. What did he eat? Mind you, no stove or refrigerator and no electricity. He said that he ate simple things like bread, canned fruit, home-grown squash from his garden, which he kept under his bed in plastic containers to keep out the mice; and, on special occasions, tuna fish. He also drank an “Ensure” type of beverage and enjoyed Ramen noodles. A true monk’s diet! He collected rain water from the roof and stored it in containers, which were evident throughout the place. He had a large garden in which he grew tomatoes and squash. The garden yielded a bumper crop of squash this past year. He fed the whole community at a meal with about fifty squash. As I sat in the rocker, I noticed the ceiling was all black with soot and smoke from the stove. He mentioned that on a recent visit to his doctor, he was asked whether or not he smoked because his lungs showed the signs of a heavy smoker. “No,” he said. Apparently, the years in the little hermitage had taken their toll on his lungs. At night he would bank the fire but by morning it would be freezing. He arose at midnight for office and Mass, which he celebrated by kerosene lamp and candle light on the little table next to the rocker. He said that this winter had been very harsh for him, and he didn’t know how long he could remain. He mentioned that a new hermitage was being built for him near the site of the old hermitage built for Fr. Flavian Burns and later used by Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell. The plans were that he would move in upon its completion in the spring. He seemed excited about the move. I asked about Hallelujah and Hosanna, the two donkeys. With sadness in his voice, he replied that Fr. Damien, the abbot, had given them to an orphanage in Indiana because he could no longer care for them properly. You could sense that he deeply missed his companions in solitude. Proudly, he remarked how they worked to haul wood and other items from the surrounding woods to the hermitage.

Fr. Roman was born in Denver, Colorado on January 19, 1925. He entered Gethsemani in 1946, after a stint in the military, where he played the trumpet. After his duty, he played various gigs in



Fr. Roman outside his hermitage with Br. Conrad Fleischmann

New Orleans with some famous jazz guys. He learned of the Trappists from a brochure and thought it sounded good. We discussed the austerity of monastic life at Gethsemani in the early 1950s, and especially the harshness of work in freezing winters and sweltering summers. We also talked about the strictness of Dom James Fox, Gethsemani's abbot from 1948 through 1967. Fr. Roman said that he was a tough taskmaster. It was a harsh life in those days, which in looking back probably prepared him well for his hermit life.

We then got into Merton. Fr. Roman said that he knew him well. At one time he was Merton's Undermaster of Novices. He fondly referred to him as Fr. Louis or simply Louis. Merton was already at Gethsemani when Fr. Roman entered in 1946. Merton had entered in December, 1941. He recalled Merton's ordination to the priesthood in 1949. He also recalled the initial publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. A great hit, he said. What did the priesthood mean to Merton? How did he carry out his priestly ministry at the Abbey? Fr. Roman answered that he was a wonderful confessor and had been his personal confessor for several years. He was also his scholastic master and gave him a private retreat in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood. Merton was an outstanding teacher of the monastic life and had a great fatherly love for his students. He spent a lot of time in counseling, hearing confessions, and giving spiritual direction. He said that Merton was always into books. He didn't always read them entirely, but knew how to get in and out of them to get the real gist of the material. I asked about Merton's relationship with Dom James. He said that Merton truly looked to him as a father but never cared for some of his ways. He didn't like all the hustle, bustle, and business of the place. Merton often sought solitude to get away. Dom James graciously granted him permission to spend time in the woods for prayer and study. He knew that solitude was important to Merton and his writing. For Merton, contemplation was the real focus. Many of the monks didn't care for Merton's negative comments on war. Some thought, perhaps, that he was un-American. Fr. Roman said that he didn't think that he could add very much more about Merton's priesthood other than that he was a dedicated minister to the young and old in the monastery. Of course, there was the personal aspect of Merton's priesthood not evident to his fellow monks. He was extremely reverent in the liturgy and loved his private Mass. We also discussed Merton's hermit life and how different it was from Fr. Roman's. Some have expressed the

notion that Merton was never a true hermit and that he could have never lived life alone. I thought how Merton would have been somewhat jealous of Fr. Roman's life, yet I don't think he could have survived in that lifestyle.

After much discussion, I gave Fr. Roman the brown bag containing my gifts of a bottle of wine, some Trappist preserves, and candy. He thanked me for the gifts and gave me a glass of wine to warm my spirits for the journey back. A Beaujolais, very good! After receiving his priestly blessing, I departed. I stopped to take a photo of the place. Fr. Roman was at the window waving good-bye. What an experience I just had! Truly, I had been in the presence of a holy man! How was he able to survive such austerity? The answer came: "God Alone"! That was enough for him!

In the summer of 2008, I visited Fr. Roman for the second time. He was now in his new hermitage, complete with electricity, heat, refrigerator, stove, and running water. A separate room was being prepared for a chapel in which the Blessed Sacrament would be reserved. The hermitage had a separate kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom, and chapel. What a palace compared to the old hermitage! Fr. Roman said Mass for me on his desk prepared as an altar. What a beautiful Mass it was. I shall never forget it. After Mass, we sat and talked. He seemed truly at peace in his new surroundings. That was the last time I saw him. I later learned that he died on November 7, 2008, at the age of 83. I shall never forget him! He's quoted as saying: "I'm not here to produce, I'm here to be" (Aprile 184). Truly, Fr. Roman you lived as you spoke! Farewell, my friend, good and faithful monk of Gethsemani!

1. Dianne Aprile, *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox* (Louisville, KY: Trout Lily Press, 1998) 184; subsequent references will be cited as "Aprile" parenthetically in the text.
2. Merton mentions accompanying Fr. Roman to the Louisville airport on September 25, 1958 as the latter headed off to Rome (Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 218).
3. See Merton's letter of November 25, 1963 to Mother M. L. Schroen: "Fr. Romanus [Ginn], who did Scripture at the *Biblicum* . . . takes care of Scripture" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 185).