

“Not Himself, but a Direction”: An Interview about Thomas Merton with John (Jack) H. Ford

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George Kilcourse: How and when did you first meet Thomas Merton? Had you read much of Merton's work before that meeting? What were your impressions of him and of his work?

Jack Ford: I think I would talk about my encounter with Merton at two different times. To begin with, I, like everybody else that I knew, had read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and that was the thing I guess that attracted me to him, to Gethsemani. I started going out to the monastery after World War II. Ironically enough, it was a non-Catholic with whom I went to the monastery for the first time to meet Merton. I had been taking the Leader's Great Books Course here in Louisville, and there was a fellow named William Hobick who was in that course and, one day, said he was going out to Gethsemani and would I like to go along? I had been to Gethsemani only several times before, with other people, but this was an invitation I accepted because he said he was going to see Thomas Merton. And I thought, well that's impossible, but I'll go along. I think at that time I had a rather distorted and elevated notion of Gethsemani itself. I thought it was a holy place different than the way it really is holy. There was a kind of image people got who read things like *The Seven Storey Mountain* that everybody was wearing a hairshirt and fasting excessively and being tormented in the name of the Lord. I think it was later that you found it was a place of joy, and that this was very important.

This old brother led us back to the old house; there was no guest house at that time, but it was a big room with two or three beds. It

was wintertime, and you had to put your hand on the radiator to realize that there was anything like heat in anybody's mind. But Merton came in, and I approached him with a great deal of awe, waiting for him to levitate and that sort of thing. I really did, I had this very exalted and distorted notion of what the Trappist life was about and who Thomas Merton was. So, I remember just getting on my knees asking for his blessing. I'm not sure that's what I was supposed to do, but it was a very uncomfortable experience, I'm quite certain, for him; and in retrospect it's a very uncomfortable experience, so far as memory is concerned, for me.

Then there was a space of years before I really got to know Tom again, and that was when Dan Walsh came to Bellarmine. It was through Dan that I really got to know him, and then later on we developed a relationship on our own. But without Dan, I think there would have not been the relationship for a lot of us in Louisville, especially Bellarmine College. I think that it was through him—he was the conduit to Gethsemani and Merton. And so when I did get to know Merton that second time, I think I knew a real person better, and not an image, and I think we built a friendship based on a more solid understanding of him, and of Trappist life, and the Church in general.

Kilcourse: Any particular impressions of him when you got to know him that second time, just as a person?

Ford: It was significantly different. I think that I was not simply in awe. I always had great respect for him, but never a saccharine kind of awe. But I think the thing that's always struck me about Merton was his capacity to relate to people, and people of all levels. I don't think that I ever, in all of this time—and when I knew him at the beginning he was just beginning to grind out his writing, as he became famous and was corresponding with people throughout the world who were prominent, from Pasternak to Maritain, to Dorothy Day—I never sensed a bit of arrogance in the man. I think that he had not a pseudo-simplicity but a genuine simplicity that came through, and I don't think I ever saw that change.

Kilcourse: You became quite involved in the plans for the hermitage. Could you recollect how that came about and what developments punctuated Merton's vision of the hermitage and its coming-to-be?

Ford: I think that Merton occasionally, as I remember at least, became restless. And the schedule at Gethsemani was so unbelievably demanding, and he had, from time to time, health problems. I think the most remarkable thing about this man is—and it's been said time and time again—that he kept the life that he did. He was faithful to all of the monastic rules. He was an effective teacher of the novices, a leader of the novices. I don't just mean directing; he was a *leader* of the novices, and yet at the same time he sat down at the typewriter and produced material the way he did. If he didn't have anything else to do but that, it was remarkable that he did it. So I think that there was this need to find some space and some time to do some of these things. If you remember in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and other places, he said when he went to Gethsemani that he didn't want to become a writer. That changed. I believe since he did see that was going to be his vocation, that he would want to do that as best as he could. I don't think this was a purely selfish reason or that he simply wanted to be away from the monastery itself.

We were sitting on a hill out there one day, and talking, he was always talking about what might be over the next hill, and he said he'd like to have a hermitage. One of the other things he said he'd like to have was a little building next to it where seminars could be held. And we talked about it for a while, and it occurred to me then that the Ford Foundation was doing some rather creative things, and I thought, well, with his name and the ambition that he had for that shelter and getting people to come from all over and talk, that it might be very productive in many ways.

So I mentioned this to a good friend of mine, Art Bec Var, who was in charge of design for General Electric. He got one of his staff, and we went out there and again sat on the hill and played a rather unmerciful joke on Merton. We brought all this good food, and I think we even had a bottle of wine, and we unwrapped a little package of cheese and gave it to him, but he soon got beyond the cheese. Anyway, they later returned and had this beautiful design of a building, and since it was going to be outside in the beautiful surroundings of the abbey, they designed it in glass. And so in this whole thing you would have been in the woods but inside talking.

Merton got very excited about it. The only thing that he objected to was that it was all glass, and he still had this thing about what was going on at Fort Knox. In those days you could hear the guns

going off at Fort Knox, but he thought how horrible if we had an atomic war. He could just see that glass flying into people. But again, it was kind of funny now, and it was funny then to me, that he would stop and worry about how in the world he's going to die, or how in the world he's going to be preoccupied.

Things were moving along and we finally got word from Abbot Fox that he couldn't have the seminar building. But it was a leverage because it was going to be hard to say "no," "no." He could more easily say one "no" and one "yes." Well, he didn't have to, but he did. He said you can't have the hermitage built, but we'll build it for you, and you'll have to put the seminar building off. At the time Merton wrote a letter to Art Bec Var, which was lost until the last few years when he went to a book when he started talking about remembering the guest house and the letter fell out. And the letter said, in effect, that Merton hoped that someday there would be some seminars at Gethsemani and that people would come.

I had an embarrassing thing happen in connection with that. I always was very respectful of the monks, but in jest I wrote a letter saying I was very disappointed we were not going to have the seminar building, and I asked do you think we ought to do the abbot in in a vat of monk's cheese. He called me the next day, rather genuinely excited, and he said, "My God, don't you realize he reads the mail?" (*laughter*). So after that, there was no more attempt at humor! Shortly thereafter, the hermitage was put together. I think the brothers did most of it, but it turned out to be very nice, and I think Merton was very happy. I thought in a way, though there was never another building there, that there was activity from there that was going to be lively.

Just by way of a digression, I remember when I heard that he was going to go to the hermitage, I felt that this was going to be good-bye forever. He went to the hospital for a physical, and Gladys and I went down to see him, and I offered to give him a kitchen shower. But I was sad because I felt I would never see him again. I went out to Gethsemani a short time later and said something to one of the brothers. I said, it's really kind of an uncomfortable feeling telling him goodbye because I'll never see him again; and the brother, I can't remember who it was, just smiled and said, "You'll find that Father Louis is a very gregarious person." As a matter of fact, I saw him much more after he got into the hermitage, but I think that's kind of interesting. He really did get away, but at the same time he opened himself

up to do things that his vocation was demanding he do. I don't think this was a luxury he sought, but I think it was something he saw as related to his vocation.

Kilcourse: When several of Merton's celebrated visitors came to the Abbey and later the hermitage, you accompanied them. Who were the most memorable visitors? What do you recall about such meetings with Merton?

Ford: Well, I guess that there were four or five. The first was Father Ford, who had baptized Merton, if I remember correctly, when he was at Columbia, I can't remember the name of the church. . . .

Kilcourse: Corpus Christi.

Ford: Corpus Christi, that's right. And he had not seen Merton, since he had been at Gethsemani. So I met him but I did not get involved in the conversation, I just left him there and stayed for a while, and then he came back with me. But it was a great event for him, and I'm quite certain it was for Merton.

The next one was Rosemary Haughton, who was then living in England and beginning to write extensively, had some beautiful stuff out. She was on a lecture tour in this country, and he had called and asked if Gladys and I could meet her, and keep her overnight, and bring her out the next day to the monastery. Rosemary at that time was pregnant, I mean very pregnant. I joked with him later on, "eleven months pregnant," because I could just see her getting in the woods out there and having to rush her to the hospital. But it didn't turn out that way, it turned out very well, and we were there for awhile. I think we had a picnic. We excused ourselves and they had a chance to talk. We brought her back, and I stand in awe of the fact she got on the plane to go and give a lecture someplace else. How she'd been doing this I don't know. But she also raised the windows in our house because she couldn't stand the heat—English you know. Very wonderful person, and I believe I've mentioned to you before, George, when we had a seminar out there recently, that it was about twenty-five years to the month that she had been out there.

I guess the most memorable visit for me was the time that I took John Howard Griffin out. John had his leg in a cast at the time. He had severe diabetes, like Merton sometimes in ill health of a variety of kinds. Father Murphy from Toronto was there and John Howard

Griffin, and Jacques Maritain, and Dan Walsh, and Merton and myself. And there was a fellow named Penn Jones who came with John. He was a retired general in the army. And Kennedy's death had been, maybe a year before, and Penn Jones was on this kick about a plot, and he had written a book. I have a copy of the book still, I think, but he was saying that there was some hanky-panky going on in this whole business of the assassination. Years later there was a movie made called "Executive Decision," and I was sitting there watching the movie, and after it was over, the credits came on and he was given credit for part of the research in the movie itself. I brought Penn Jones and John Howard Griffin back to wait at the house for awhile, and I kept Griffin for a little bit after that. Maritain himself was there with shawl, and this was spring, but it was warm and he was out there with that shawl. Some young woman, I should've mentioned her name but I don't remember, who was kind of a nurse taking care of him. I would like to say that very profound conversation went on, and maybe it did after I left (*laughs*). That night I think Maritain and Father Louis had a chance to go on in French and talk to one another. But that was just a very nice sociable day, and I think Griffin took some pictures of that encounter that have been floating around for years. Very, very pleasant.

I guess at one time or the other, maybe we took people out, but those would be the most significant. I remember taking our children out for some picnics.

Kilcourse: You earlier mentioned Joan Baez's visit?

Ford: Joan Baez, that was a going-the-other-way visit. Joan Baez had gone to Gethsemani with her husband to meet Merton, and I think was a bit shocked, for some reason or other, about Merton. She went out there perhaps with some of the idea that I had when I went for the first time, expecting him to come out and levitate, and I don't know what else. In any case, she found a real down-to-earth human being. They had rented a car, and again, I think, with the profundity of mind that Merton had—he didn't always look at practical things—he got in the car to take her back to the airport, and after he got there he realized he didn't have a way back to Gethsemani, so he called the house, and I got him. Then the problem got to be whether he'd spend the night or go back. I taught class the next morning so he had to be back. Anyway, he went back that night. So that was a reverse trip.

Kilcourse: In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton gives a vivid description and account of Dan Walsh and his influence as a philosopher and teacher. You chaired the department of philosophy at Bellarmine College when Dan began teaching there. What was he like as a teacher? As a colleague?

Ford: I think *The Seven Storey Mountain* pretty well described Dan when Tom said here was a self-effacing, elfish kind of man who was sitting there talking about St. Thomas at Columbia University. Dan was teaching at Columbia and Manhattanville and while at Manhattanville, of course, he met the Skakels and the Kennedy girls, and also Tommie O'Callaghan from Louisville was there at that time, and he got to be a very good friend of Tommie's. Right after Vatican II there was a suggestion that the monasteries realized that their priests should be getting theological and philosophical training that had been pretty much taken for granted. I think what was being suggested was that they'd better update and do this. I have heard that Abbot Fox wrote to Dan and wanted to know if he'd be interested in coming to Gethsemani to do some teaching. In the meantime, I think Dan had had some health problems and was in an accident or something, but he was at a time when he could have used a sabbatical or some rest.

He came to Gethsemani and began teaching there, and within a short time, perhaps within a year, he was teaching at Bellarmine part-time. Dan lived in that old guest house and I'm terrible talking about space, but if you remember there was a cot and a chair and a little table for a desk and a wash basin and little else, and Dan lived in that room for years. Now he wasn't a guest, he was living there. So you would go in that room and it would be so piled up with books and stuff that you couldn't get in. I think for him to have lived like that was rather remarkable. Not that he stayed there all the time. Dan could stay in Gethsemani so long, and then he had to get away. I think the relationship with Bellarmine was good. He came to Bellarmine (and this was before I was the chair) and began teaching and also, then, became the conduit between Bellarmine and Gethsemani.

As a lecturer, I would have to put Dan down as certainly dull. I mean he was nothing other than that. And yet at the same time, if you were patient enough to sit there for ten minutes and listen to him and not look for theatrics, but listen to what the man had to say, then he got to be a great influence on the students at Bellarmine. I don't

think there'd be any other way of putting it. And students who were willing to sit and listen for that first few minutes, who began to listen to what he was saying, got to be very devoted to him. Dan had a real following at the college. At the same time, he was getting to be kind of an institution in some respects.

They had a gatehouse at Gethsemani that had (I use the word loosely here) some art objects and religious gadgets (there's no other way to put it) and cheese and fruitcake were sold there too. And Dan had this shopping bag, and he would fill up the shopping bag and he would come in and he would be walking down the hall and see people with whom he was working or liked, and here would come some fruitcake or cheese. I was convinced they were paying him with fruitcake and cheese at Gethsemani for a long time. He was a very, very generous person. He had no car. The whole time that he was here, he never drove. That meant that some of us would be taking him back to the abbey. And when he got back to the abbey, he'd tell you to wait a minute. And he'd go in the gatehouse and pretty soon you'd see him coming out. My children had more rosaries and scapulars and statues of the Sacred Heart than you could shake a stick at! Dan, incidentally, became godfather of our youngest child.

To get back to Bellarmine for a moment, there had been no relationship at all between Gethsemani and Bellarmine College. I think some of us may have gone out there. But after Dan came and began making some contact, several things happened. First, we had faculty retreats start. I was working with a faculty organization that got it started. Actually, Merton gave the first one. So we went out there for about three days, and that was when it was an all male school. And for all practical purposes, except for maybe the librarian, we had an all male faculty, which meant that there was no great difficulty. But this was an exceptional thing, a Merton conference for two days and a half for faculty. We had great esprit de corps.

Kilcourse: How many people were involved?

Ford: I'd be afraid to guess. I guess we had maybe forty people. But there was a thing about Bellarmine College at that time, where people did not get divided so much among departments, but they really shared in the teaching experience. You took great pride in the fact that the chemistry department was doing such and such if you were in the philosophy department, and they were taking pride in what we were

doing, and I think all of that is coming out of the fact that there was a spiritual integration going on as well as an intellectual one.

Dan had an effect on the faculty that way. He amused a lot of people, but this was the kind of amusement that you get from a grandfatherly type person, which he would never want to be. Dan would not, I think, desire to be a grandfatherly type, but I think that's the way he was looked at. Many students loved him and admired him and imitated him. He didn't get involved to a great extent in department activities. Dan was a very lonely person. I don't want to say a loner. That would be incorrect, but he was a lonely person whereas he had a great many friends, but I don't know if Dan had intimate friends or not. As I say, I question that, I don't know, but he was a great force in the college then with his getting Merton to meet with us and for us to feel that. We could go out to the abbey, then at the same time Merton was coming and using the library. I don't think Tom ever taught a class, I don't think he ever lectured a class, but he did use the library at the time, and he got to know people at the college—Fr. John Loftus especially, and Father Horrigan. That's when I think the whole idea of the collection started. Dan would have to be responsible for any relationship that Bellarmine College did have, and consequently has, with Gethsemani.

Kilcourse: I know Dan did read, didn't he, the statement that Merton wrote for the 1963 inauguration of the collection.

Ford: That's right. He did.

Kilcourse: Dan never really wrote much of anything did he?

Ford: No, he didn't.

Kilcourse: A lot of tapes of his things are in the library at the abbey.

Ford: Yes, that's right. I think that some of the students took tapes. I know Tom Bizot was one of his students, and he took practically all of his courses. And in a way you were not taking a course, for example, in metaphysics, you were taking a course in Walsh, that kind of thing. One of the monks told me that when Dan was teaching there (I taught some there a few years back, and I was trying to get some type of book that would be a survey of all Thomistic philosophy) and I had a book, and Father Flavian looked at it and said, "Oh Dan used to use that, except he never opened it" (*laughter*).

Kilcourse: Could you comment on how Dan Walsh became a priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville?

Ford: I think you'd simply have to stress the word surprise. Dan's work at the abbey had been going on for years, and his work at Bellarmine. He didn't do that much in the community. I think he'd attended a couple of dinners with Archbishop Floersh at the time, and of course Dan was a great name-dropper in terms of the Kennedys and so on. But here was this very conservative archbishop who called Dan on the telephone one day, and I happened to be in the office. This was not a call to come down to the chancery, I want to talk to you about something. He got a call on the telephone, and he said to me "The archbishop said he wants to ordain me." And to give you some idea of what my reaction was: "You're getting older, you've been a good layman, and now you want to go be a priest!" He had to decide about this, and it didn't take him long. And I think he went through a brief routine of some presumptuous person taking him by hand through some theology quickly for a matter of weeks.

But a short time later, we're not talking about a year or two later, we're talking about months later, Dan was ordained at St. Thomas Seminary. There was a celebration, and Merton came in for that, and the abbot, as a matter of fact, did too. We had a big party over at Tommie O'Callaghan's and it was quite an event.

I don't think that Dan (and maybe this is not appropriate for our conversation) was ever accepted by the priests in the archdiocese. First, he didn't go through the seminary with anybody. He didn't associate with many priests. He hadn't been to the parishes for Mass or anything. As a result, in later years, he became ill and retired. If he had been lonely before, this loneliness was unbelievably compounded now. After Kennedy had died, I think the two great shocks that finally did him in were when Merton died and then Fr. John Loftus died shortly thereafter, all of these things within a space, what, of months. I was still at Bellarmine when Kennedy died. But then, I think that Merton's death was devastating. They had become friends, intellectual friends. But for Dan now Merton had become kind of an alter ego. I don't know how to explain it. He was really immersed in Merton's life and I mean that in a very positive way. I guess if he had a relative or person close to him it was Merton that he identified with. And as a result, I think

Merton's death was devastating to him. And then, Father John shortly thereafter, a matter of weeks.

So he wanted to quit teaching after that, and did. This is a digression from the priesthood, but not completely. Then he was going to be at Gethsemani for awhile. I don't know how much we want to get into this, but then he got a trailer moved over on Thompson Willet's property and lived there for some months. But again, as a priest he was not anyplace. So actually when he came back to Louisville and got an apartment, why Bishop Maloney, who was very kind and had always been kind, went to see him and encouraged him to ask for anything he might need.

But then even when Father Timothy and I were at Dan's death bed, the question got to be, what do we do with this man who's dead? I put a telephone call in to Bishop Maloney, and he asked what are we going to do, and I said I guess put him in a funeral home for a while then take him to Gethsemani to be buried. And he said, "Wait just a minute, I think we always have the priests of the archdiocese have a Mass together. Could you arrange for him to be here at the cathedral?" So we had a Mass at the cathedral, but very few people showed, very few priests showed. Again I think that what I would stress would be the loneliness, even for the vocation to the priesthood that Dan had.

At the same time, I think he did a lot of good. I remember vividly his coming to Baltimore to visit one time. I wanted him to come up as a priest and teacher, and he got off the bus with a shoebox with his chalice in it and a shopping bag with his clothes. He was going around like pretty much of a vagabond who would be willing to sit down in the next breath and talk about the distinguished people with whom he had dinner, and the Kennedys, and how they would go on a plane to go swimming in Florida.

Kilcourse: A beautiful man.

Ford: Yes.

Kilcourse: Could you describe how Merton has affected your faith and intellectual life? What did Merton's life of prayer mean to you?

Ford: Well, I don't know . . . that's very hard. I think what Merton did was help me remove a lot of intellectual garbage that I had

carried around, such as, that there are certain ways that you do things, there are certain paths that if you follow you were going to be a Catholic Christian. And I think what he helped me do as much as anything was to show me the relationship between the faith and the world in which we live. I was raised in a time when social concerns, even though the social concerns were there, were out of the line of vision. You know we've got a lot of good thinking today that people don't pay attention to. But the bishops are at least recognizing the social problems even if they are not tormented by the search for answers. I think that what Merton did for me was to show me the implications and the obligations of the faith in terms of community. This famous scene at Fourth and Walnut for him was something he used for other people to see that talking about the Mystical Body was not talking about something only in the order of grace or grace working through nature, but the implications of these in society. So I think he did that.

In terms of prayer life, he taught me at least what prayer was going to be in the truly contemplative sense of the word. Not necessarily verbalizations, but you could also in prayer let God happen to you as well as going after God. And I think that to see that what you were doing, even though you said these things, I became even more deeply aware that what you were doing was prayer. Meister Eckhart has a line that I think was true of Merton, and he may have known about it, "It's not so much what you do that makes you holy, the idea is that you make holy what you do." I think this is something he did, and did for a lot of us.

I concluded a book review I did on Merton once by saying given the fact that he had the warts that he had, and there were not many, that here is a man who joined his voice in the chorus that had been intoned by a young Jewish woman who simply said "Yes." And I think that that was the most fantastic thing about him, that the "Yes" was a total "Yes." And his legacy enabled others to say that "Yes." If anybody had been a betting person, you would never have guessed that this man who went to Gethsemani would have ever had a chance at making it for a month. But I think this is a testimony to the grace of God. This is another thing I don't think people talk about enough with reference to Merton. There's an old line about when somebody writes a biography of a saint you always see how good the saint was, but when the saint writes an autobiography you always see how good God was. And I think there's not enough about the demonstration of God's

love for this man, and the grace he gave to him for him to do what he did. Because you read, especially in Mott's book, where this was a spoiled, indulged man, even though he had his own sense of loneliness as an orphan. And that this man could go to Gethsemani and do what he did, and then get to be who he was in terms of the world and the relationship that Gethsemani was to have in the world and the inspiration it was to give to the world. Not all particularly Thomas Merton, but at the same time that faith that we have to keep emphasizing, the grace of God working through him. No one has been able to explain it, for me at least.

Kilcourse: That's probably why he was as transparent about it or at least as open about it because he realized that was the story that was being told.

Ford: Yes, yes.

Kilcourse: Not his own story, but the story of God.

Ford: Yes.

Kilcourse: How would you describe Merton's place in Catholic intellectual life as a Catholic philosopher and theologian?

Ford: I think that he was growing more and more all the time from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was for people like Frank Sheed and Fulton Sheen another *Confessions* of Augustine—that was one of the blurbs that was on the book. And I think that one of the big things here was that people could find out that somebody could leave the world, and the kind of world that he had, and go into that place. Gabriel Marcel has a line (I think Marcel), "It was not so much that I believed in faith, but that I believed in the faith of somebody else first." I think that, here again, Merton was a great instrument in terms of being a step toward a faith of one's own, because you were reading this man who was doing this thing, and then got to go beyond this. In that respect it was a kind of awakening about the implications of the faith, and then of course as it went on, the implications of this as it was going out to politics and to society and to the contemplative life and so on. He was beginning to go beyond the laity and influence a lot of the clergy, and I think it's not unfair to say that Merton had some effect on the Second Vatican Council—I don't think there's any denial of that. That being said, if

you talk about him being a theologian and philosopher, then I would have to say—and I'm not in a position to judge theology—but I'd have to say philosophically he was certainly not structured. I suspect he was not theologically, but what he had was this great poetic insight into the core of philosophy and the core of theology, and this was something you didn't get through a discursive process. I'm convinced that he had this insight into truth that a theologian and a philosopher could look at their own and say, "I should have thought of that, I should have seen this." Then, I think also he had a gift of prophecy. He was a prophet of our time. And I don't think those of us who were around him then understood this well enough. I know I've told you before that when I was sitting at my desk in Baltimore and I got the phone call about his death, I wondered if ten or fifteen years from now anybody would ever hear of Thomas Merton. And I think we now know that his influence has gone far beyond even what those of us who loved him suspected. About twenty-four languages, now, I think he's been translated into. Touching people, especially young people, nobody had ever touched. So I would never classify him as a theologian or a philosopher as such, but as a poet who could really get to the core of what a lot of theologians were missing and what a lot of philosophers did miss.

Kilcourse: What spiritual writers most influenced Merton? You mentioned Meister Eckhart.

Ford: Yes, but I wouldn't be capable. . . . I think again the fantastic accomplishments of this man. He read and read and read, so I wouldn't be able to say who . . . I know that he went through stages. He went to the Desert Fathers. He didn't start off at this end, he went back to the Desert Fathers and came through. The reason I mention Meister Eckhart is because I think that he, in the later years, had great effect on him. This getting to God beyond God, for example. It was not recognized at first. All the people who read books about him added that all up. People talk about so many other people influencing Merton, and I think that Meister Eckhart is overlooked. I think Dan [Walsh] told me this one time, too.

Kilcourse: That will be a good assist for the readers of *The Merton Annual* and the interview, Meister Eckhart. What of Merton's own writings attracts you the most in your reading?

Ford: That would be difficult. I'd go back to (even though he considered it to be corny later on) I think *The Seven Storey Mountain* for all of us, a beginning. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was another one. *The Sign of Jonas*. One of the best pieces I think he ever did, a short piece, was the introduction to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. That was a good hunk of work. And of course *New Seeds of Contemplation* you can always pick up and get good insight. It's hard for me to single out stuff, because everything he did I thought was good. He gave me a lot of things that had not been published. Among other things he had was an article on Camus, which may have been published since then, because Brother Patrick [Hart] gets all of this stuff published somewhere. But he maintained that Camus was moving up toward Christianity. Again, he was just pouring out material.

Kilcourse: You were also a close friend of Dom Flavian Burns, who was abbot at Gethsemani at the time of Merton's death. What can you tell us about their influence upon each other?

Ford: Well, not very much. I was away when Father Flavian got to be abbot. I do remember one thing. I think Father Flavian told me this himself. The tension between Abbot Fox and Merton—too many people looked at it in a very negative way. This is not the question you asked me, but I think it has a bearing on this question. I've always tried to figure out why the stress was there. I was having dinner one night with Bob Giroux. And I was talking about this thing, and this tension, and "there's one thing," he said, "that you must never forget. Merton was an orphan." And even though he had other people taking care of him, the trust that took care of him and so on and got him out of jams and the like, he was an orphan. And I think that there was this paternal relationship between Father Abbot and Merton, if you see that relationship in this light. But the interesting thing, and the thing I eventually want to get to in terms of this is that Merton needed the abbot's strength. So it was also kind of restrained, but at the same time, I think Merton, even though there was tension and irritation at times, had the affection of a son. Maybe I'm completely wrong about this, but this is the way I guess I've read it. Consequently, when Father Flavian came in, who had been junior to Merton, why this was a different ballgame altogether. The story that I get, that I find so amusing, is when he was talking about going to Bangkok, that he went to Father Flavian and said, "I want to get permission to do this,"

I think maybe he was suspecting that he was going to get a "no." But then Father Flavian turned to him and said, "Make up your own mind." And Merton couldn't quite handle this for awhile. So maybe this is a complete distortion, but you were asking for personal opinion, and I'm giving it. I think that Merton had an affection for Abbot Fox. Hostile, maybe at times, but that's going to be true of any family, of father-son relationships.

Kilcourse: That's part of the relationship.

Ford: Sure.

Kilcourse: Sudden affection.

Ford: Yes.

Kilcourse: Wasn't Dom James Merton's confessor?

Ford: Yes, this is interesting. I don't think, again, from the outside, that we people who look at the abbey know what community means in a Trappist monastery. The closest we get to it is a family. But there's a twist here to it that I don't pretend to understand. But it's there, a kind of affection there, and inevitable tensions that you're going to get in any family. But at the same time, it's a source of fantastic growth, or destruction. I think the spirituality has to come out of that tension.

Kilcourse: In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott mentions you and your wife Gladys once being on an abbey picnic, including Merton and the nurse with whom he fell in love. Do you have any insights or reflections about this crisis late in his life?

Ford: Crisis can depend on viewpoint. It can be anything from loss of a loved one to the dissolution of an adolescent crush. I do not really know what Merton felt about this matter. But you asked for a viewpoint. So I'll give one with the caution that my wife does not agree with me completely in this matter.

First, I think that this event takes up too much space in Michael Mott's book. Second, I would make, from my viewpoint, a distinction between love and infatuation. If one stands back and looks at this in some detached way, the fact that a fifty-some-odd year-old monk was during a hospital stay smitten by a beautiful young nurse, young enough to be his daughter, one could certainly have varied reactions.

One could be just plain amusement. At some other extreme there could be talk of love crisis.

We use the word "love" today so very casually that we can easily forget its implications—commitment, dedication, loyalty, to some extent abandonment of self. Infatuation can be many things, from glandular reaction to very real human feeling, if perhaps fleeting, the later can lead to the former but. . . . Even though there are some love poems which were published, I can only wonder if they are born in the deep feeling of Abelard (Heloise) or Kierkegaard (Regina) or Dante (Beatrice)—where the unattainable leads to more romantic thoughts than would the sustained actual encounter. Here I but guess.

Gladys, Fr. John Loftus, and I took the young nurse to Gethsemani for a visit and a picnic. She and Merton had some private conversation, and subsequently there were other brief meetings. It at least got to be such a matter that like some adolescent Merton was making night telephone calls from the gatehouse. Some would certainly justly question Merton's judgment in the matter. And while I am happy for any beautiful human relationship—and I hope I am not a hardened unromantic—I believe that in this Merton made a fool of himself. I believe that the reported response of Abbot Fox was quite appropriate. He laughed at him. And haven't we all been in positions we felt to be very very serious when even a smile could shake us. If one talks about Merton and love, then I would have to talk about the abbey where Merton loved for decades with men in community, keeping promises, sustaining irritation to do something productive with it, growing in dedication to an unfolding mystery.

But I do not think this episode should be overlooked or dismissed. It may have had a beautiful effect on even more than two lives. So all of this for me is speculation. One thing I am certain of is that I definitely agree with his taste in young nurses.

Kilcourse: Twenty-five years after Merton's death, we're still making efforts to follow his vision of spirituality. What do you see as the most urgent but unfulfilled parts of his vision which we still need to undertake?

Ford: It was easy for some people like myself to isolate aspects of life—religion here, work there, family life and vocation, other compartments of life—to fail to work at integrating these into a wholeness of life that is Christian. This was not so much a deliberate stand as

an unawareness. I believe that Merton awakened us to see that the search for the Kingdom must be attained through efforts in the political, economic, and social climates in which we live and that a Christian response is demanded in these issues. Silence is a loud denial of required response.

Merton was a counterculturalist, sensitive to the weaknesses in a society and church which he loved so much he was giving his life for it. There was a time for honest critical response. Too often we have hidden cowardice with the conviction that certain issues are just none of our business.

We have to realize that faithfulness to the Church is more than assent to Creed; it is responding to the often harsh message of the Gospels where Christ placed some social burdens on our consciences. Merton can in this matter ever be a gadfly reminding us through his work and life that new issues must be faced with some old tried and true values—those of Jesus!

Kilcourse: We'll put an end to this. Jack, from your point of view as a friend of Merton's, how would you evaluate Thomas Merton's interests as they're expressed in many of the Merton circles and activities that claim his name and spirit?

Ford: I think that there would be so many ways to look at this. And I guess I would have to look at it in terms of the needs of the people involved. To imagine that Merton was going to be out there as a vehicle of one kind for all people to use to get to the truth would be a distortion. Because I think we have different needs. And so I think some people need to be continually immersed in Merton himself, going back and looking at his works and seeing the implications of these. I think others of us would want to see Merton as a direction, who through his works urges us to look beyond him, in other words, not to have him be an end in himself but to have us breaking more the ground he plowed to begin with. So I think those would be at least two paths. And, of course, Merton the artist will be viewed not only by what he said but by what persons bring to his work.

Kilcourse: How do you think the Church and the world will remember Thomas Merton one hundred years after his death, and how should we remember Thomas Merton one hundred years after his death?

Ford: I have difficulty grasping a question like that. I think that Merton has not been simply a popular writer sustained by a particular age. The roots of his writing go too deep for that. I believe he will be read as something of a prophet of our time, but that he will also become part of a tradition of spiritual writing that has nourished the Church.

As for how we should remember him? That he was a man loved enough by God to use him effectively in a confused world. That he loved God in himself and God in us. If we remember that, the rest is a matter of footnotes.

Kilcourse: Jack, thank you for a delightful conversation.