

Time of Transition: A Selection of Letters from the Earliest Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal

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Introduction

The following exchange of letters represents the earliest correspondence between Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest, poet, and revolutionary, who was for two years a novice of Thomas Merton's at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Written between August and December of 1959, these letters shed light on what was for both a time of transition. Having discovered that he was not suited for the rigors of Trappist life, Cardenal had left Gethsemani and returned to Latin America, settling for a time in Mexico where he studied for the priesthood. At the same time increasingly frustrated with the constraints of Gethsemani, Merton had renewed his search for a place where he might live his monastic vocation more fully and faithfully. These letters offer an intimate record of a trying time for Cardenal and Merton as each struggled to discern what God was calling him to be and to do. When Merton wrote to Cardenal that "the important thing is that you have clearly a vocation to a contemplative life . . . the only thing that needs to be found out is exactly how and where," Merton could well have been speaking to himself for he was voicing a conviction and posing questions that were very much his own.¹

1. See letter of November 18, 1959, pp. 194-197 of this text.

Reading Merton's letters to Ernesto Cardenal, first published in *The Courage for Truth*,² we glimpse many facets of Thomas Merton. We meet the monk, novice master, priest, poet, and social critic as well as the friend who regarded his relationship with Cardenal among his most treasured friendships. The opportunity to read both sides of the correspondence³ further enriches our understanding of Merton, particularly as it enables us to appreciate the significant role that Ernesto Cardenal played in Merton's life both while he was at Gethsemani and after he returned to Latin America.

For Ernesto Cardenal, to become a novice of Merton was quite unexpected:

I learned of Merton for the first time when he began to be known in the United States, when I was 23 years old and was studying at Columbia University in New York, where he also had studied. I read his first books when they appeared and translated his poems which were published in Mexico. I always continued being a reader of his, being interested in him as much for the literary aspect as for the religious. At age 31 I had a radical conversion to God and I decided to search for the place where I could be more removed from the world and nearer to God and then I felt that my vocation was to be a Trappist.

The only Trappist monastery that I knew about was the one of Gethsemani for it was the one in the books of Merton. I assumed that Merton no longer would be there because in one of his last books he had said that possibly they would send him to another foundation. It was a very great and pleasant surprise when I found

2. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 110-163. See also Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) for the full text of Merton's letter of October 8, 1959, unavailable when *The Courage for Truth* was published, and Merton's letter of October 22, 1965, which was also unavailable earlier. See 207-209 and 227-228 of *Witness to Freedom*.

Merton's letters to Ernesto Cardenal are reprinted with the permission of Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

3. The letters of Ernesto Cardenal, published here for the first time, were translated by Roberto S. Goizueta. I am grateful to Ernesto Cardenal for his enthusiastic support of the publication of these letters and for his willingness to share his reflections on his relationship to Thomas Merton, to Roberto Goizueta for translating Cardenal's letters, and to Mary Lee Bishop, S.S.J., and Dr. Edward Malinak for their assistance.

out that he was not only there but that he was the Master of Novices and the one who would be entrusted with my religious formation.⁴

Equally surprising to Cardenal was the direction his conversations with Merton took.

The first conversation that we had he informed me that the Abbot wanted to make a Trappist foundation in Latin America. It would be with Merton, who had thought first about the Virgin Islands, then Columbia, or Ecuador, in a place in the Andes, with the indigenous people. I talked to him about Nicaragua and Nicaragua began to be another alternative, in addition to Mexico. Later he changed his mind: it wasn't practical to establish a Trappist foundation there, but rather a contemplative life more free and more simple without the rigid anachronism of the old orders, without habit, rules, bureaucratic structures, a group small and poor. . . .⁵

When he met with Merton "for spiritual guidance," Merton "would ask about Nicaragua, Somoza, the poets of Nicaragua, the Nicaraguan countryside, poets from other parts of Latin America, other dictators. . . ." Though Cardenal had thought that entering the Trappist Order meant that he would "have to renounce everything. . . —my books, my interest in my country, in politics and the dictatorships of Latin America, in Nicaraguan politics, in Somoza, in everything," Merton helped him realize he would not have "to renounce anything."⁶

Though Merton's fascination with Latin America did not begin with Cardenal's arrival at Gethsemani (before entering the monastery, Merton had visited Cuba and became enthralled with the land and its people), conversations with Cardenal roused his passion for Latin American literature and culture. He read voraciously and peppered Cardenal with questions. He began to feel a deep affinity for the people of Latin America and to experience a sense of solidarity with them in their struggle for freedom. Merton began corresponding with friends of Cardenal's in Nicaragua, and before too long he was in contact with writers throughout Central and South America.⁷ Just as surely as the

4. Ernesto Cardenal, unpublished comments (July 2, 1995).

5. Ibid.

6. Ernesto Cardenal in *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*, edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper 1984) 36.

7. See *The Courage for Truth*, 164–243, for Merton's letters to Latin American writers.

novice master initiated the novice into the mysterious world of the monastery, the novice drew the master into a world which both novice and master thought they had left behind when they came to Gethsemani. Merton was very much at home in that world and he felt a deep kinship with its people, particularly its writers, and in 1959 he made plans to move to Mexico, after that to Nicaragua.

Latin America appealed to more than the poet in Merton. As he and Cardenal talked, they began to envision monastic life as it might be lived in Latin America—simply and poorly—in true solitude, untethered by the restrictions of monastic life he experienced at Gethsemani. Merton's deep attraction to Latin America, his growing unrest at Gethsemani and his persistent longing for deeper solitude combined to make him very receptive to Dom Gregorio Lemerrier's invitation to come live as a hermit near Cuernavaca. Dom Gregorio, Prior of a small, experimental Benedictine community, visited Merton several times during the summer of 1959. Earlier that summer, Merton had sent letters of inquiry to bishops at Bluefields, Nicaragua; Reno, Nevada; and San Juan, Puerto Rico, inquiring about the possibility of living in their dioceses. These letters and others, published in *Witness to Freedom*, chronicle Merton's "vocation crisis of 1959–1960."⁸ In September, he wrote to Archbishop Larraona who headed the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome, to request an indult that would allow him to leave Gethsemani and live elsewhere as a monk.⁹

Throughout his monastic life, Merton's desire for the hermit life was deep and intense. That he should be a monk was never the issue, but periodically he grappled with the question of how, and where, he could best live the monastic life. The crisis of 1959–1960 needs to be read in the context of Merton's ongoing struggle with stability and his deep desire for solitude. In the early fifties he had considered joining the Carthusians or the Camaldolese, attracted by the solitude he might experience there. In 1965, when his longing for solitude was fulfilled, at least in part, by his move to a hermitage on the grounds of the monastery, Merton still did not entirely close the door on Cardenal's suggestion that he might join him at his newly founded community at Solentiname. And by 1968, Merton realized that his hermitage was far too accessible to ensure the solitude he desired, and throughout

8. See *Witness to Freedom*, 200–226.

9. Ibid., 205–207.

his travels, during the last year of his life—to New Mexico, California, Alaska, and finally the Orient, he kept his eyes open for a new site for his hermitage.

Given all that they shared—both were converts, writers, contemplatives—it is understandable that Merton and Ernesto Cardenal became close friends. “From the beginning,” Cardenal writes, “there was a great affinity and friendship between us, especially because we were the only poets in the entire monastery, and also because we both had studied at Columbia.”¹⁰ But Merton was also a solicitous novice master—his deep concern and care are evident in his first letters to Cardenal; he was full of encouragement, tempering words of hope with honest realism. Cardenal’s deep respect for Merton is also evident: the young poet valued Merton’s advice and turned to him as he mourned what he had left behind and discovered what he would do next. Merton was doing much the same: anticipating the difficulties he would experience when he actually left Gethsemani and imagining what lay before him as a monk living in Latin America.

But as Cardenal recalls, Merton “did not want to leave in disobedience,”¹¹ and the indult Merton sought was not granted. Informing Cardenal of that fact in his letter of December 17, 1959, Merton appears surprisingly resigned to the decision. That letter, which Merton managed to get out in the Abbot’s absence, was the last he would write to Cardenal for more than a year. Unconvinced by Merton’s insistence that he was offering needed spiritual advice, Dom James Fox prohibited Merton from corresponding with Cardenal. Merton obeyed. And though he characterized himself as at peace with the decision, less than a year later, in August 1960, he wrote to Archbishop Paul Philippe, secretary of the Vatican’s Congregation for Religious, once again raising the possibility of leaving Gethsemani to live as a solitary in a place like Cuernavaca.¹² Merton did not leave Gethsemani then, nor in 1965, when Cardenal invited Merton to join him at Solentiname.

In the intervening years, Merton’s life changed in two important ways. In the early sixties he became an articulate and insistent witness for peace, writing against war and the proliferation of nuclear weapons and calling attention to the injustice of racism and the misuses of technology. This return to the world was followed by a retreat

to the hermitage. In 1965 Merton finally received permission to live in a hermitage on the grounds of the monastery. For a time, leaving Gethsemani to live elsewhere as a monk lost its appeal for Merton. Yet thoughts of going to Latin America were not entirely behind him. Before embarking on his journey to the East, Merton shared with Cardenal “the news that he would travel to Asia and that on returning he would visit a Trappist foundation in Chile and then would go to Nicaragua to be some three months in Solentiname.” Continuing his reminiscence, Cardenal wrote: “We were constructing for him a small hut with a palm roof and we were expecting him at any moment when I received the cable from Gethsemani with the news of his death in Bangkok.”¹³ Though Thomas Merton never visited the community at Solentiname, his influence was certainly felt there, as it was in Nicaragua where he had developed a circle of friends, and as it is throughout Latin America where Merton is known by many writers and read by countless people. Ernesto Cardenal had drawn Merton into his world—the world of Latin America, and Merton had found his place there.

Correspondence: August 9, 1959 to December 17, 1959

Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton

Universidad Iberoamericana
August 9, 1959

Rev. F. M. Louis, O.C.S.O.
Gethsemani.

Dear Father Louis:

I have just arrived in Mexico because my trip took one week. There were some errors in the itinerary they gave me and it turned out to be two days later than what they had told me. Also, I arrived in New Orleans on Friday evening and had to wait there until Monday because the Nicaraguan Consulate, where I had to renew my passport, was not open on Saturday. But I did not have any other trouble, except a boring wait in New Orleans, without finding anything to do there.

13. Cardenal, unpublished comments.

10. Cardenal, unpublished comments.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Witness to Freedom*, 221–223.

The day after arriving in Mexico (the day before yesterday) I went to visit the monastery. There I told the Father Prior everything I had to say and he understood everything clearly. We agreed that I would arrive in two weeks, and that I would stay there as a guest or postulant for some months, until I could clearly see what God wants from me.

The monastery is in a very beautiful place, fairly removed from Cuernavaca (about half an hour on foot) and in an isolated place, surrounded by tropical vegetation, and with woods in front, somewhat similar to those in front of the novitiate in Gethsemani. The monastery is on a kind of hill, from where one sees a stupendous panorama of the whole valley of Cuernavaca, with the city below, and in the background great mountains and volcanoes. They are building a very revolutionary church, in accord with the most modern Mexican architecture, directed by a young monk who is an architect. Nevertheless, something strange happened to me upon my arrival: and it was that, in spite of all this which I describe to you, and which I saw that I liked, I felt sad and depressed, with a strange melancholy that I never felt in Gethsemani (where, from the moment I entered, I felt overcome by a great joy which I never lost during all the time I was there). I spoke with this young architect, who is very charming, and I found him radiant with joy, as I had always been in Gethsemani, and that made me see the difference with my current mood. I do not know if this is a passing, psychological reaction, because I do not see there any objective reason to be depressed. In any case I have resolved to enter there, whether sad or not, and to stay there as much time as is necessary until God reveals to me what I ought to do—unless my health does not allow me to do so. This does not worry me because I am completely in God's hands, and I feel that He is with me and that He directs my steps and brought me here. At the same time, I have no desire to return to the world, nor would I consider for a moment the possibility of staying in Mexico, despite the fact that here I could give classes at the National University or the Jesuit university, because there is a great scarcity of professors with university degrees and I could get them immediately if I wanted. But I cannot live in the world, because I do not belong to it. Therefore, I am sure that I have not lost my vocation, that I belong to God alone and that He will take me to where He wants me to be, and I am at peace.

My stomach is more or less the same as in Gethsemani. Some-

times I am bad and others well. During the trip I was worse, probably because I was nervous and because of the delays and the disagreeable wait in New Orleans. Upon entering the world I discovered, from my arrival in Louisville, that the world is a truly unlivable and horrible place. Especially life in the cities of the United States, because life in Mexico—even in Mexico City—is more human. In New Orleans, other than the library and the Tulane museum (which were closed almost the whole time I was there) and the churches (which are always closed or empty), I had no place to go. I spent most of the time in my hotel cell. On the streets, there are only shops and restaurants and movie theaters. Wherever one looks, there is nothing but advertisements about sex or food. There is nothing more boring than walking on these streets when one no longer has any interest in these things. In Gethsemani, I often thought that our life was monotonous. But there is no comparison between that exterior monotony accompanied by a very intense interior life and the dreadful monotony of modern city streets, all frightfully alike, and where one finds absolutely nothing interesting to do. What gave me greater sorrow was thinking about the great number of novices of Gethsemani who have left to live in these cities. And it does not surprise me that many want to return having just left, for I am sure that if I had left of my own accord to live in the world I would have immediately asked to be readmitted to Gethsemani. I tell you this because perhaps, in your lectures, you may want to give this message to your novices in Gethsemani, whom I am always remembering and for whom I always pray. I wish you would tell them that my experience of the world is that it is unlivable and if they leave because they think the world is more interesting they will be sorry as soon as they leave. Upon arriving in Louisville I went to a restaurant to eat some sandwiches because it was already noon, and upon opening the door I became horrified and retreated immediately, because inside there was noisy music coming from a juke box, so horrible and loud that I thought I would rather starve to death than eat with that music. From outside, through the glass walls, the restaurant appeared to be in profound silence, and inside it was a hell. I entered another after having determined that there was no music. But no sooner had I ordered my food than the juke box started and I had to resign myself. I have seen in this an image of what the world is: from the tranquility of the monastery it can appear calm and serene, but when one enters, it is a hell.

I received the telegram with the address of Mejía Sánchez. I am staying at the Jesuit university, because it is more monastic here and with more facilities for Mass, etc., and I am with Father [Angel] Martínez and with another Nicaraguan Jesuit who is a good friend of mine. The rector of the university is another Nicaraguan Jesuit who is also a good friend.

The translations of your poems are ready to be published and we await only [Armando] Morales' illustrations (before coming, I wrote asking him for them). The boys, friends of mine, who are in charge of the university press are very happy with the poems, which they have liked a lot, and they are very eager to publish the book. Under separate cover I am sending you a journal with [Boris] Pasternak's letter and also the last issue of the *Journal of Literature* with some poems of mine from among those of the *Hora O*. They will also publish this collection in a small book. They have also told me that they are about to publish my *Epigrams*. Mejía Sánchez has read my anti-Somoza poems in lectures and I am told that they have been very well received. They have also been published in some revolutionary journals, and in a Chilean communist one directed by [Pablo] Neruda. [Robert] Lax's translation will appear in the journal of the university.

Father Martínez received your letter and will be writing you soon. He tells me that your letter has made a great impression on him and has made him think a lot. He sees that my situation is the same as his, and he tells me that his situation is that of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins. He has suffered much like Hopkins, and still suffers, but he tells me that Hopkins resolved his problem the wrong way. I do not know if he will be able to resolve his.

The disturbances continue in Nicaragua. The day I arrived the Mexican papers carried news of a new attempted invasion on both fronts, but we do not know if it is true. There are two movements that are preparing invasions: one infiltrated by communists and the other a democratic one. But those that are infiltrated have not been able to organize themselves and the democratic ones have a greater probability of success. There have been protest demonstrations in León and Managua, and the students have been machine gunned and they have killed a number and wounded many persons. This has incited new demonstrations and protests. The clergy have acted courageously and the priests have denounced the government even from the pulpits. The invaders were accompanied by a priest chaplain, who was im-

prisoned. This makes more incredible the pro-government declarations which the Archbishop has made, and which I am enclosing with this letter. My cousin who had been lost in the jungle appeared after fifteen days; he was recognized by the police and is in prison. It seems to be true that, miraculously, this time they have not tortured the prisoners. I will write you again when I have more things to tell you. Do not feel obliged to respond if you do not have time. But I count on your prayers, just as you are always present in my poor prayers. As are also all the novices. In Christ.

Ernesto Cardenal

[P.S.]

I am not too sure of the price of the train ticket. On the ticket it says \$50.84 but it seems odd to me that it would be so inexpensive because I thought that it cost more. Since they have sent me a \$50.00 check from home I am sending it to Gethsemani, in case that is the price of the ticket. If it is not, please let me know so that I may send the remainder. Farewell.

Thomas Merton to Ernest Cardenal

August 17, 1959¹⁴

Dear Ernesto:

Thank you for your letter. I was relieved to hear you had finally arrived, because I thought interiorly that the plan would very probably not be quite as simple as it looked on paper. Certainly when it was expected that you would reach Mexico City from San Antonio in eight hours, I knew it was impossible. And so you had two days in New Orleans: they must indeed have been miserable. I think the weariness of the journey and the other effects of your leaving here, with the inevitable let-down, must have been chiefly responsible for your sadness. I know of course how you would feel, and it was to be expected.

14. Unless otherwise noted, Merton's letters were written at the Abbey of Gethsemani, on monastery letterhead, bearing the inscription: Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky. It was generally Merton's practice to observe the monastic habit of inscribing each letter with the letters "jhs."

You came here under ideal conditions, and everything was of a nature to make you happy and give you peace. You had given yourself completely to God without afterthought and without return, and He on His part had brought you to a place where the life was unexpectedly easy and pleasant and where everything went along quite smoothly for you. Hence in reality the first real Cross you met with, in your response to God's call, was the necessity to *leave* this monastery, under obedience, after having been told that it was not God's will for you to stay here.

You must not regard this as the end of your vocation, or as a break in the progress of your soul towards God. On the contrary, it is an entirely necessary step and part of the vital evolution of your vocation. It is a step in your spiritual maturity, and that is why it is difficult for you. Certainly it would have been pleasant to remain in the state of almost passive irresponsibility here—that is one of the qualities and one of the vices of this monastery: everything is geared to keep one passive and, in a certain sense, infantile. This is from a certain point of view excellent, and it can quickly bring many souls into a state of detachment and peace which favors a certain interior life. But unfortunately also the peculiar circumstances of this monastery prevent real spiritual growth. Underneath the superficial and somewhat false good humor, with its facade of juvenile insouciance, lies the deep fear and anxiety that comes from a lack of real interior life. We have the words, the slogans, the notions. We cultivate the pageantry of the monastic life. We go in for singing, ritual, and all the externals. And ceremonies are very useful in dazzling the newcomer, and keeping him happy for a while. But there seems to be a growing realization that for a great many in the community this is all a surface of piety which overlies a fake mysticism and a complete vacuity of soul. Hence the growing restlessness, the rebellions, the strange departures of priests, the hopelessness which only the very stubborn can resist, with the aid of their self-fabricated methods of reassurance.

Your own interior life was perfectly genuine. God gave you many graces and brought you close to Himself, and perhaps you would never have come so close to Him anywhere else. For these last two years, Gethsemani was ideal for you, and you must regard it as a great grace that God brought you here. It is something that has changed the whole direction of your life. But at the same time if you had remained here, the general spirit of unrest in the community and the growing fear of

falsity which has disturbed so many of our best vocations and made them leave, would have reached you too. And by that time you would have been professed, and in a very difficult position.

The fact that you were in danger of developing a stomach ulcer was a warning sign of the very painful and harmful experiences that would have awaited you if you had stayed here, and I assure you that the happiness you had known in the novitiate would not have lasted long.

What next? You must wait patiently, prayerfully, and in peace. No one can say yet whether you should enter another monastery. I do not know if you will be happy in the choir anywhere, since you do not sing. I advise you not to think too much about whether or not you are happy. You will never again reduplicate the feeling of happiness which you had here, because it is not normal to do so. You would not have known such happiness even if you had remained. Your life now will be serious and even sad. This is as it should be. We have no right to escape into happiness that most of the world cannot share. This is a very grim and terrible century, and in it we must suffer sorrow and responsibility with the rest of the world. But do not think that God is less close to you now. I am sure you are closer to Him, and are on the path to a new and strange reality. Let Him lead you.

J. Laughlin tells me that he is publishing my translation of your Drake poem ["Drake in the Southern Sea"] in the *New Directions* annual. Along with some poems of Pablo [Antonio Cuadra]. Lax will be glad to hear that the *Circus* [*The Circus of the Sun*] is being printed in Mexico. Have you contacted Mira?

I have little time now, so I will finish and write you again later. Keep me posted, and let me know when you enter at Cuernavaca [Benedictine Monastery of the Resurrection in Mexico]. I told the novices your message, that the world was unlivable, and they received it with awe. I am sure they do not doubt it. If one wants a pleasant and harmless existence, certainly Gethsemani is the place for it. And I don't think the average novice who enters here will ever be deeply effected by the sense of nullity and falsity that underlies the facade. Yet it is strange how some of them remark on the tension. A more mature postulant, who stopped at a French monastery on the way here, says he felt no tension at all in the French monastery, but feels it here. It is very strange, and I think very significant.

Please give my best regards to Dom Gregorio [Lemerrier, O.S.B.,

superior at Cuernavaca], and say I pray for him and for his monastery. Your description of it sounded very beautiful.

And now, God bless you. Best regards also to Fr. Martínez, to Mejía Sánchez, etc. And here is a letter from Morales, in Peru. Nothing from Pablo Antonio yet about the islands. With all affection, in Christ,

fm Louis

[P.S.]

The magazines just arrived—many thanks.

Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton

Feast of St. Louis, King
[August 25, 1959]

Rev. Fr. Louis, O.C.S.O.
Gethsemani

Dear Father Louis:

Today, the feast of St. Louis, is my second day in Cuernavaca. The evening before coming, I received—very propitiously—your beautiful letter of the 17th, with the marvellous timeliness with which the Lord sends me everything. In it, you admirably strengthened my spirit for my entrance here. It infused me with a great peace, and I received it as coming directly from God, dictated by Him. And I remain very grateful to Him and you for this letter. It is the most important one I have received in my life. It reminds me of the first one I received from you when I was going to enter the Trappe, and which I did not dare to answer because, thinking that you did not know Spanish, I found that I could not write an adequate response in English to that letter. Now, also, I am unable to comment adequately on your letter, not even in Spanish. The following morning, I went to say good-bye to Fr. Martínez and to assist at his Mass, and, after Mass, I gave him your letter to read. Reading it with great care, he was deeply impressed, and he asked me to leave it with him so that he might read through

it again and reflect on it some more, and later he came in a taxi to give me back the letter.

I'm very convinced of your advice that I should not pay too much attention to my happiness, which I enjoyed so much in the novitiate at Gethsemani, nor pretend that this can repeat itself, nor think that this is necessarily identified with union with God. Nevertheless, I am happy, not with the exalted rapture in which I entered Gethsemani, but I am truly in much peace. The oppressive experience which I had the first time I came has not repeated itself this time. But neither do I feel any attraction to becoming a Benedictine. I am with a happy peace, and with a kind of indifference, without feeling either repugnance or attraction toward them. The only thing I am sure of is that I do not want to return to the world. As he said good-bye, Fr. Martínez told me what you, too, think, and what I also think with ever greater conviction: that I should become a priest. The Jesuits recommend the seminary in El Salvador, which they administer. Because they tell me that in Nicaragua I would not be able to make progress in my studies, because there are few professors and I would have to take the courses with everyone else. In El Salvador, they would have me do my philosophy studies in one year. And, also, they would admit me for free, since the financial issue would be another problem. It will be hard for me to adapt to Jesuit formation. But every seminary will be hard, and I accept it happily if it is what God wills. The courses in El Salvador begin in February. They also recommend a seminary for delayed vocations in Salamanca, but I don't want to go to Spain.

Dom Gregorio has not even called me to speak with him and I have not even disclosed these things to him, nor have I given him your letter to read. Today he was going to Mexico City for the day.

I am in the guest house, in a marvelous room, with a large window as wide as the whole room, through which one contemplates the entire valley and the city of Cuernavaca. It is a city of some 80,000 inhabitants, and to look down there at night is a beautiful spectacle—as if from heaven—the lights of the city burning bright.

I think that the first unpleasant feeling I had when coming here was due to the fact that I had in my mind a kind of fixation on the memory of the Trappe, which imposed itself on my reality. I didn't like the Office in Spanish because the cadence was different from that of Gethsemani. I have now become accustomed to it, and I enjoy the Office intensely, much more than in Gethsemani. I didn't like the

habit because I found it ugly in comparison with ours, which was so beautiful aesthetically—and which I still miss at times—and, above all, because I only saw strange faces instead of a community to which I had become accustomed. There were none of my friends from the novitiate, for whom I felt and always feel a great affection: including those who had already left before me, but who remain present in my memories of the Trappe. Tell the novices that I always pray for them, just as when I was there.

I am a Proustian and I live on memories. Above all, I'm going to be very nostalgic about those days. They were days in which, more than any others in my life, I lived least in the past, and in which I most enjoyed the beauty and happiness of the present. With the passage of time, I forget the unpleasant details and remember only what is most beautiful and poetic of the Trappe. But this is not important, because I know that these days in Cuernavaca will, later, also turn into unforgettable memories.

Dom Gregorio is constructing small groups of cells in the neighborhood of the monastery, and he told me that he would transfer me to one of them when they are finished. In time, he plans to put the entire community into small groups of 5 or 6 cells, isolated—something more like Subiaco than Monte Casino—and leave the actual monastery only for guests, novices, and community events.

They are finishing the church, built by a monk, which is the most beautiful and original I have seen in my life: it's round and constructed with a wall of unequal stones, without a single window, like a well. In the center, on a circular base of black stone, is the altar, carved from a single block of white stone. Around the altar is the choir, circular, in levels, like a small stadium. The light enters directly from the sky, through a mica opening in the ceiling, which is like a circus tent. One feels as if one were in a hole inside the earth, or in the crater of a volcano, or in a pre-historic cave.

My friends from Mexico, all leftists and some even communists, have received me with great enthusiasm. My experience in the Trappe was extremely interesting to them, and they didn't tire of asking me. And I didn't tire of telling them about it. They all want to come visit me in Cuernavaca, and I've told them all to come. The most interesting case is that of León Felipe, one of the best Spanish poets in exile. He was always very religious, but heretical and even blasphemous, and above all resentful toward the Church because of the Franco ques-

tion. He is now more religious than ever, after the death of his wife, and through the friendship of Fr. Angel he is today practically converted. We have given him your books and he is reading them avidly, staying up at night. He will come to see me next week with Fr. Angel. I'll send you some of his poems. We also gave him your essay on Pasternak ["Boris Pasternak and the People with Watch Chains"] to read. (This essay is stupendous. Angel Martínez liked it a lot. Mejía Sánchez wants to see if it can be published in Mexico, even though it will also appear in *Sur* because he considers it very important.)

I'm sending you the letter from Morales which you sent me, so that you may read it. The book is ready, and they only await the illustrations. I've written to Pablo Antonio urging him to send them. "The Tower of Babel" will be published in a collection of drama of the University of Mexico, and we've given "Prometheus" and the "Signed Confession" to the Journal of the University. Lax will appear in the next issue of the *Mexican Journal of Literature*. Mejía Sánchez has been very active in arranging all of this. I'm thrilled with the publication of "Drake" in *New Directions*.

Fr. Martínez was going to write to you this week when he has some free time. They overwhelm him so much with work that he doesn't even have time for his Act of Thanksgiving. And he often has to stay in bed with his ulcer pains. I think he suffers tremendously.

Pardon the abuse of so long a letter. I am praying a lot for you, especially today, and every day. And also for all the novices. Give them my best.

With an embrace, in Christ,
Ernesto Cardenal

Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton

September 5, 1959

Dear Fr. Louis:

I enclose some poems from Gethsemani, copied in all haste. I had them there in rough draft, and here I've given them more-or-less definitive form. I'm not too sure of them. They seem to me somewhat

mediocre. I think the ones I had written before entering the Trappe are better. They're valuable for me because they're a chronicle of those days. I'm making some more, which I'll send you in the future. If I publish them, I plan to give them the title: GETHSEMANI, KY. What do you think? I've just read your article on Mt. Athos ["Mount Athos"] in JUBILEE, which the monks have lent me, and it's very interesting. Above all the end. My stomach is very well. I'm better every day. So I think I'm recovering. My spiritual life is the same: very passive and very simple, so simple that I'm almost unaware of it. I'm only aware that God resides within me because I feel a detachment from all other things and, when I'm alone and in silence, I am happy. While in Mexico, I felt strangely immunized to all city life, and I was also happy. During those days I was almost unable to pray, except for a tacit prayer, because as soon as I tried to do so more formally, I felt discomfort in my stomach. This doesn't happen any more. And I also attend all the Hours of the Office without feeling any discomfort.

I think that smoking is good for me, and I've been smoking since I left, but I do it only a little, as you told me: some 7 cigarettes a day.

Morales has given an exposition in Lima with tremendous success. Artists, critics and all the persons who attended said that it was the finest painting they've seen in a long time, and he's sold his paintings in such a way that he's broken all records.

Fr. Jacinto Herrero has written me that his directors have advised him to carry out his ministry in Avila for some two years, and that he then decide as to his contemplative vocation. He says that thus it will be, and he asks me to give you his best.

Today I read by chance a newspaper from Mexico and, in it, I found out that a friend of mine was rebelling in Argentina against the Argentine president. He is Gen. Carlos Toranzo, who was ambassador to Nicaragua. He lived across from my house and we were good friends. He was one of the principal leaders of the revolution against Perón. Now the new president has removed him and the army is in rebellion because he is very popular among them, and they don't want to honor the president's order. I don't know what's going to happen. He is very Catholic, and very democratic, and a great person. In Nicaragua they continue to prepare a larger invasion than the first. The disaster of that one was in part because Nicaraguan communists prevented Fidel Castro from sending assistance which he had offered to my first cousin Pedro Joaquín, with whom he greatly sympathized,

since they told him that he was a reactionary and very pro-American, and then Fidel didn't help. Nevertheless, there are two groups fighting in the mountains. One of them seems to have assistance from Castro, because it is a Nicaraguan [group] that fought with Castro and gave him a great deal of money for his revolution. But I don't know what its leanings are. My brother Gonzalo [Cardenal] is currently head of the underground movement in Nicaragua, undertaking very dangerous activities, such as the introduction of weapons, communication with the revolutionaries outside the country, and the production of dynamite bombs which they place in buildings belonging to the Samozas or *Somocistas*. I've found this out just now, when my brother-in-law passed through Mexico and came to visit me in Cuernavaca, because earlier they couldn't inform me by letter. There is great need for our prayers.

You are always my first intention in the Mass and in many of the Hours of the Office. I also pray a lot for the novices.

Did the pieces of ceramic I sent to the oven of St. Meinrad arrive there?

In Christ,
Ernesto Cardenal

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

September 12, 1959

Dear Ernesto:

Not only have I received two good letters from you but a charming one also from your dear Grandmother thanking me for helping you, etc. I can see indirectly from her letter and from what she says people say of you that your stay at Gethsemani made a very great difference in your life and that you have changed and developed remarkably. It is my own experience that God did much work in your soul when you were here and I believe He will continue to carry on this good work, all the more so when you are passive and quiet and content to let Him work without desiring to see anything that He is doing.

I am very pleased to hear that your stomach is better. That is a good sign also, but you must expect that in times of stress you will have the same trouble. It may happen that trouble in the stomach may come when you are evolving toward a change or a new step—when a new phase of your life is beginning to come into being. When the step is made, the stomach will be quiet.

Both Dom Gregorio and I agree that it is utterly providential that the Jesuit Fathers have offered you hospitality in their seminary and will educate you for the priesthood without charge. This is another evident sign of God's love for you, and with all peace and joy you should accept it, with no anxiety and care about where or how you will exercise this priesthood when the time comes. Simply receive the necessary education and seminary training, with great humility and love, and do not fear the effects of a different kind of formation. If for some reason it is insisted upon that you behave officially as a Jesuit-formed spirit, let your conformity with the party line make contact with only such men as Caussade, Grou, Lallemente, etc. who are all strong on peace, passivity, abandonment, and not aggressive or systematic at all. But I am sure any director will recognize in you the value of your tendency to silence, childlikeness and peace.

The pieces of ceramic work returned from St. Meinrad and the larger crucifix is definitely one of your very best works. It came out a deep brick red, and has a very heavenly and spiritual joy about it which I like greatly. I am having Fr. Gerard put it on a walnut Cross and it will hang here in our room. I will have a picture taken of it if I can. The other smaller pieces are all good. Should I try to send you any of them?

Dom G. showed me pictures of the church of the monastery at Cuernavaca and it is certainly very interesting and effective. I should imagine that saying Mass there with the roof open to heaven must be a wonderful experience. His visit here was a great success and we had some good talks. It is good to find someone who agrees so completely with one's views on the monastic life. I am sure your stay there will be very profitable and that it will carry you forward, far beyond what you reached when you were here. Gethsemani is a very limited place, in its way. The Holy Spirit is certainly working here, but there comes a point where further development is frustrated or impossible and where truth becomes seriously falsified. Of course I suppose that is true wherever human institutions are found.

Your poems about Gethsemani [*Gethsemani, Ky.*] are very effective and have a special meaning for anyone who knows the scene and the incidents. The simplest ones are the best—for instance the little song "Hay un rumor de tractores . . ." and the other one about the smell of the earth in the spring in Nicaragua, and the ones that bring to mind contrasts and comparisons with Nicaragua. The one about the snow is very effective: perhaps it is the best. Though once the statement is made here, it loses force when repeated, more diffusely, in the other poem where the pigs and the motor horn come in. The paradox there is good, but less successful.

I think you are right in saying that these are less good than the ones you wrote before coming here. Certainly they have less power. But they should be what they are, simple and quiet and direct. And with that charming Chinese brevity. On the other hand your poems in the *Revista de la Literatura* are splendid. They constitute some of the few really good political poems I have read—they have the quality, and even more, that the left-wing poets had in the thirties. They are powerful and arresting and I am very happy with them. I wish I knew more about the background and the story. I think they are clearly your best poems.

I have been reading some more of Carrera Andrade and think I will have to translate some of them. He is very good.

Stephen Spender's wife came through here and we had a very fine conversation together. She is a splendid person, very interested in religion, liturgy, St. John of the Cross, Yoga, etc., etc. I told her about Corn Island [an island off the coast of Nicaragua where Cardenal and Merton thought about locating a contemplative foundation] and she was enthusiastic. I have had no information about it though, and do not know whether the Bishop will stop by to talk about it.

Morales' letter was deeply moving and I can see part of the reason why his exhibit was a great success. The news fills me with joy and I hope to hear more about it, see some reproductions of the pictures. I hope the book of poems is coming along, with the illustrations. I am returning his letter, I pray for him as well as for you and Pablo Antonio every day at Mass, not forgetting Mejía Sánchez and P. Martínez.

Fr. Paul of the Cross left, but I am forwarding your letter to him.

I shall keep Gonzalo in my prayers and Masses. It is dangerous work but I hope it will be fruitful. I think you must all go a little slow,

and don't depend too much on Castro. I think he is a little out of his depth and there is danger that he may make decisions and gestures that have no basis in reality, in order to salvage something of his own position which will be more and more menaced. Take it easy. There is great danger that the revolution in Nicaragua may serve as nothing but a cat's paw for the communists. Let *them* get burnt. However, I cannot claim to know the political situation.

I value and appreciate your prayers. Keep them up. I am sure God will hear them. I have great confidence in the future, though I do not know exactly what will come out. I think there is considerable hope of a really constructive answer and solution to everything. More later.

God bless you, and please mention to your Grandmother that I was very happy about her letter which I will try to answer when I get time.

With all affection, in Christ,
fm Louis

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

October 8, 1959

Dear Ernesto:

I have received very good news from Dom Gregorio in Rome. He has seen Fr. Larraona and it seems that the dispensation will be granted, but still the Superiors of the Order must be consulted and this may be quite an obstacle. But it seems as if in the long run the move will be completely successful. This is very fine and encouraging news, and is certainly the result of much prayer, including your own prayers, for which I thank you. Keep them up, they are more necessary than ever.

I have written Dom Gregorio a letter which was mailed in the usual way, open, and so I was not able to speak very freely. Father Abbot [James Fox] does not know all the details as yet, as far as I can tell, though I have told him in a general way that since I cannot obtain a leave of absence from him I am appealing to Rome. I do not know

whether or not Rome has as yet contacted Father Abbot. At the moment he has been in the Bardstown hospital with a hernia operation.

Since I can more easily write you a conscience matter letter, I think I will take this opportunity to send you some important remarks which you can convey to Dom Gregorio at the proper time.

First of all, about entering Mexico. I think it would be safer if I got a passport and a regular visa to enter as a permanent resident. This will take time. If there is some special difficulty I will simply enter, as you did, on a tourist card. I imagine that to obtain a visa I would have to have some kind of document or affidavit from Dom Gregorio. I hope he will know what to do, and will take steps to produce the necessary evidence that I will have a home and support in Mexico. This could be sent when it is definite that I am to come.

The plan I thought would be most convenient would be, when I get the indult, to leave here and go to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and take up the question of the visa with the Mexican consul there. While I am waiting for things to materialize I could then take a look at some of the Indian pueblos in that region, which would be very interesting. I could even perhaps spend a few days on one of the missions and make a kind of retreat in the desert.

If Dom Gregorio thinks best, I would simply come to Mexico as fast as possible on a tourist card and then get the visa later, as you have done.

From time to time I will send you packages of books—they will be our books and perhaps you could keep them for me. I think there is still one book of yours here, Max Jacob. I will enclose that in one of the packages.

One small trial is my health, at the moment. There have been some complications in my usual infirmities. I hope I do not have to spend any time in the hospital. I think it is just a providential event that will help me prepare for a new step. Often sickness has the function of slowing a man down when he is about to turn a corner. Please pray that it may be no more than this and that everything will go well. This is such a wonderful opportunity to reach out for a more simple and solitary life, and to put into practice the ideas that have come to me for so many years. It would be a shame to spoil it. I am very happy that things are turning out well, and I want to correspond perfectly with the opportunity. It is so important to try to realize in actual fact the simplicity of the monastic ideal, and to get away from all the ar-

tificiality which grows up in the monastic institution. Let us pray that we may find the ideal of a simple, non-institutional, contemplative life in the mountains, in true poverty and solitude. Meanwhile I hope there will be a little house available soon.

How are you? I have not heard anything from you since Dom Gregorio brought your poems. I am wondering if a letter of yours has failed to reach me. If you answer this one, it had better be conscience matter. Let me know any other hints or suggestions you think will be useful. When travelling in Mexico perhaps I ought simply to dress as a layman. I will need prayers in the next two or three weeks as the struggle with Father Abbot may be quite difficult though there is nothing he can do now, at least as far as I am concerned. Keep well, and God bless you.

Faithfully, in Xto [Christo] Domine,
fm Louis

[Letterhead]
St. Anthony Hospital
St. Anthony Place
Louisville, KY
October 17, 1959

Dear Ernesto:

I am in the hospital for a few days, but it is only a question of a minor operation, and everything seems to be all right. I hope to be fully recovered in a day or two.

So far there is no indication that Father Abbot has heard anything from Rome. At least he has not said anything to me about it, and his attitude does not indicate that he feels upset about anything. I should be very surprised if he had heard from Rome, & at the same time I presume that nothing will be done until he is consulted. Hence I may have to wait quite a long time. But it is worth being patient about.

Before I came to the hospital I got all the Carmelite nuns at the Louisville Carmel to pray for this intention. I also had the happiness of saying their proper Mass of St. Teresa on the Feast day—which was the day of my operation. I am sure their prayers will be very powerful.

[D.T.] Suzuki is finally sending his preface to my *Desert Fathers'* book [Suzuki's preface was not published in *The Wisdom of the Desert*]. It has not arrived yet but it should be very interesting. I am very happy about it. Naturally I look forward very much to coming to Mexico, and continue every day to pray that this venture may be successful for the glory of God. One must expect obstacles & difficulties but there seem to be so many indications that this is God's will & I trust He will bring it to completion in His own way. I look forward to hearing news from you when Dom Gregorio returns from Rome. I am very pleased that his requests were successful and that Cuernavaca is now established as a Priory.

I remember you everyday at Mass, along with Pablo Antonio and all your intentions for Nicaragua. And I know you will not forget to pray for us. I am expecting to return to the monastery tomorrow or the day after. There is no special news at Gethsemani—everything is as usual. There are very few new postulants, but Fr. Robert made his profession on October 4th.

With all best wishes to you, and all affection in Christ our Lord,
fm Louis

Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton

October 17, 1959

Dear Father Louis:

I have just received your stupendous letter, which has given me much joy. I am extremely happy and am giving many thanks to God because everything is turning out so well, as we have asked. During the Mass and all the hours of the Office I have been asking most especially for this intention, and it seems that it is God within me who has been seeing to it that I have this intention permanently in the Office, and I will do so even more during these last remaining days.

I am also very grateful to you for your other letter, after mine in which I sent the poems. I had not written you again since then because I thought that Dom Gregorio would pass through Gethsemani again on his return, and I was waiting to see what new news he would bring—and in the meantime I had nothing new to tell you. Apparently Dom Gregorio was not going to pass through Gethsemani again on

his return since you have sent me this letter for him. We expect him this week and I will give him the letter as soon as he arrives.

Pablo Antonio has just sent me Morales' illustrations. They seem marvelous to me, as they do to him. I sent them to Mejía Sánchez so that he would take them to the university. They would proceed immediately to publish the book since they were eager to begin, and I told them that while they prepared to publish the text they could send you the illustrations so that you could see and approve them (which approval I was sure you would give). If they no longer had time because they were going to publish the illustrations immediately, that they would at least send you the page proofs. I do not know if they will do one or the other. But perhaps neither the one nor the other is now necessary since you are coming soon and can see them here yourself.

A guest who came to the monastery told me that some friends of his have made some translations of your poems and were expecting to publish them around December. He told me that they would bring them first to me so that I could review your translations.

I suppose that you will want to stay a few days in Mexico City before coming to Cuernavaca to see some important things (Our Lady of Guadalupe, murals, bookstores, the pyramids of Teotihuacán, some persons, etc.). In that case I would want to go spend those days in Mexico to be your guide in the city. You would have to notify me of your exact date of arrival so that I may go to meet you.

I suppose it will be best for you to come in completely secular clothes. Some priests use the Roman Collar, but it is not necessary, nor is it common.

I will keep here those books of yours which you send me. Please send the copy of the poems of Gethsemani which I sent you with Dom Gregorio, if you still have them, since I have lost one of them. You do not need to send me any of the ceramic figures which I made there, since I have the molds and can make them over again. But I would like—if you can—a photo of the crucifix in the novices' chapel.

I am sending you a letter which Pablo Antonio wrote me. Everything he says about Ometepe [another possible location for a contemplative foundation] seems very good to me. But it also seems to me that Corn Island is a marvellous place. The ideal would be to live for some time in both places. I wrote to the Bishop of Bluefields [Carthusian Bishop Matthew A. Niedhammer] when I left Gethsemani, as you had

told me. I do not know if he got to talk with you. He did not respond to me, but he had no reason to do so.

I hope your illness will be nothing serious, and I will also be praying a lot for your health during these days. I have again begun to feel bad as before; at times I am better and at times worse. When Dom Gregorio comes I will ask him if I can see a doctor, since he offered me medical treatment should I need it. I do not know if this will be an obstacle to entering the seminary in February as I had planned. I will see what the doctor says, and also what you advise me. Whatever happens does not worry me because, since it is something outside my control, it will be God's will and, that being so, it will also be what is best for me. I will write Father [John] Eudes [Bamberger], because he told me to let him know how I was doing once I had been here a while, and because if I still did not feel well he could advise me what to do.

I have no apparent reason for not being well, because in every other way I live a life of total peace and much happiness, of perfect solitude and silence. I spend time on the Office, lectio divina, Latin, some literature, prayer, scripture, and a new translation of the psalms into Spanish which we are doing in the monastery and I think it is turning out to be stupendous. I do not have problems or anything that worries me. I do not think of the future, I am one with the will of God, and I live completely in the present.

I am reading *The Sign of Jonas* for the third time. I read it the first time when it was published, with a purely literary interest. I read it again, with a different interest, when I was about to enter Gethsemani. Now it has a new interest for me after having lived, more or less, the whole book. I was planning to read only certain passages because I had already read it twice, but I found that all of it interested me and I could not skip even one line.

Mira is here in the guest house waiting for Father Prior in order to enter the novitiate. He is very happy to have come here and not to Gethsemani. Also in the community is Franco, the one from Oaxaca, who applied for admission to Gethsemani and you advised him to reenter this monastery. He is very happy to have done so. He says he is very happy and is very grateful to you for your advice, and he has asked me to give you his best. I hope that God will continue to hear our prayers. In Christ.

Ernesto Cardenal

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

October 24, 1959

Dear Ernesto:

I got your letter of the 17th safely yesterday when I returned from the hospital, so everything is ok. Father Abbot left this morning for California and will return before November 1st. Things are evidently going to move quite slowly, but I have every hope of success, but I have not the slightest idea what is taking place. But that is very well. The thing is in the hands of God and we must let Him work it out as He pleases. Certainly our prayers are being answered, in due season. The only thing that surprises me is that so far nothing difficult or unpleasant has occurred, and somewhere along the line there is going to be a hard and nerve racking obstacle to negotiate, in the very difficult rupture that will have to be made with Gethsemani and with its Father Abbot. That is what I most dread and feel will be most difficult, because of all the personal ties and even obligations that exist. This is what . . . will now require the most prayers and the greatest help of the Holy Spirit. A work of God can often and usually does demand a complete uprooting that is extremely painful and disconcerting, and which requires great fidelity in the one called to do the work. The difficulty comes in the darkness and possibility of doubt, in the mystical risk involved. I am very glad that the danger and the risk appear very clearly to me, and I am resolved to be faithful in this risk and not cling to the security of the established position I have here. But I dread going off with imprecations hurled after me, and being treated as a traitor, etc. This must not be allowed to affect things so much that I become influenced by it. Yesterday I had a very fine long conversation with the Prioress of the Louisville Carmel [Mother Angela Collins] who is a fine person and who has her nuns praying for our project. But we will all have to be very determined and struggle without discouragement, trusting in God and accepting difficulty and delay.

That brings me to the question of your own health. I certainly do not think that the stomach trouble you had here will necessarily be an obstacle to your entering the seminary, and I would not let it become an obstacle by worrying about it. The reason for your leaving here was that this life puts an exceptional pressure on one who tends

to have ulcers: but seminary life is closer to normal and it would hardly burden you more than an ordinary life would. You will doubtless always be molested with stomach trouble in one form or other so I would just make the best of it, do not let it deter you from undertaking the things that are for God's glory; accept the handicap He has willed for you and take the normal care of your health that will enable you to support the work you have to do.

Pablo Antonio's letter contains a lot of wisdom, and I agree with him that a place like Ometepe has about it all the elements that are called for in a contemplative foundation that is to play a really vital role in Latin American culture and society. It will take a little time before we might be ready for Ometepe but that is the kind of thing that really makes sense. Corn Island has natural advantages, but that is all. I feel, as does Pablo Antonio, that one must also be rooted in the Indian and Latin cultural complex in a very definite way. Besides that, the Bishop of Bluefields, when he finally got around to replying to my second letter, became very timorous and told me that he could not take me unless I were actually *sent* by my Superiors. My explanation of this is that I sent the letter to him open, with permission of Father Abbot, and Father Abbot evidently enclosed a letter of his own which put the fear of God into the good bishop and told him, in no uncertain terms, to steer clear of anyone who wanted to leave Gethsemani. The bishop really sounded frightened.

It would do no harm to send proofs of Armando Morales' pictures, as I may yet be a month here, if not more. I am glad that they are very good, and think the whole edition sounds very promising.

I will certainly let you know when I can hope to come to Mexico and it would be wonderful to look at the city and its environs together. I shall want to see all the best things and meet your friends. It will be necessary for me to really soak in the atmosphere of Mexico and get thoroughly acclimatized, though naturally I am not looking for a lot of hectic social life. But it is certainly a duty to become quietly and gradually really a part of the nation and of its life and not simply be a gringo tourist. I just want to look and learn and be quietly receptive for a very long time, and become integrated in the whole cultural atmosphere of the city and the nation. Above all I hope no one will expect me to come as a kind of celebrity with something to say and a part to play, because that would be very harmful to the whole project. Everything should be done quietly and discretely, for very many

reasons—first of all for my own personal and spiritual good, and secondly for the success and right working of the plan. Because it is very important that no publicity be given to the fact that I have left Gethsemani and the Order, but that even those who know about it should understand it simply as a normal leave of absence. Later when the new venture begins, it will make itself understood on its own terms. Above all nothing must be said about new or special projects, and the worst thing that could happen would be for me to be surrounded by eager inquirers and prospective postulants ready to join a “new Order.” That would be fatal.

I am glad to hear of Mira and Franco being there, and the fact that they are happy about it sounds very good and augurs well for the future. Give them my best wishes and my blessing, and I will keep praying for them.

I shall take your advice about wearing plain secular clothes. I don't even want to wear black. If I don't look like a priest, at least I don't want to look like a Jehovah's witness. But of course it all depends what I can get. The suitcase they gave me, to take to the hospital, fell open in the middle of a street in Louisville and I was scrambling around to put books, shirts, etc., back in. It was raining, too. I haven't sent the books yet but I am getting together a package today.

My regards to Dom Gregorio—he will have received the letter from you and one I wrote the last day at the hospital. I still am not sure whether the indult is to be sent to him or to me—or both. The simplest would be, if he gets the original, to send me a photostat. But he doubtless has thought out what he intends to do, and I leave the whole thing in his hands and those of God. When I told the Carmelite Prioress how Dom G. had come here and proposed his plan, etc., all unexpectedly, her simple comment was: “He who is sent by God speaks the words of God.”

So let us keep up our hope and our desire to serve Him truly and sincerely, devoting our limited and fallible wills to Him with all purity and fidelity of heart. It is not a question of building a great edifice, but of living a simple life and preserving as much as possible of the values we already have found, in experience, here and elsewhere—eliminating as far as possible the great defects and obstacles of a highly organized life. A woman wrote recently to the monks: “We would have expected the Trappists more than anyone else to put Christ back into Christmas, and instead you have put cheese into the Mass.”

With all affection and blessings, and with great gratitude for your prayers. I remember you every day by name in the memento, with Pablo Antonio, Mejía Sánchez, Armando Morales, etc. God bless you all.

fm Louis

Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton

October 27, 1959

Dear Father Louis:

I have just received your letter of the 24th, and I have also received the one you wrote me from the hospital. I am very happy to know that your stay there was very short because it indicates that your operation was not serious.

Dom Gregorio came two days ago. I gave him your letters and I have just spoken with him today. He told me to write you that you should come with a *tourist visa*, since the other was currently very difficult to obtain and one would have to wait an extremely long time. Being here, it would be very easy to renew this visa, or, as well, exchange it for a residency visa. He has done this with some foreigners staying here. But it would not be advantageous to give the address of this monastery to the Mexican authorities, because these procedures for exchanging visas are somewhat illegal; and it is best if they do not know the foreigner's place of residence; that way, they will be unable to carry out any vigilance or to maintain any records on him (records and vigilance that hardly exist in any case).

I can only imagine how difficult the departure from Gethsemani must be for you. I had been thinking about that for days. It is a very great test which very few religious have. It is like leaving one's home and family for a second time. But I was also thinking that perhaps God would make this departure unexpectedly easy for you. As was my departure from my home, which I had feared so much, and which nevertheless was later, by some miracle, so easy that I felt as if I had taken some sort of drug (and my departure from Gethsemani, which was already for me like a second home, was equally simple). I am fully convinced of the immense good that your coming will do for Hispanic

America. As are the three or four persons in this monastery who are aware of your visit (the superiors, since the community knows nothing), and who are waiting for you with extremely intense interest and a great deal of prayer.

It was precisely yesterday that, during the Mass, I was inspired to offer up all my stomach ailments for your plans. But don't think that these ailments are very great, because, on the contrary, they are extremely easy to tolerate. Nevertheless, they are the only ones I can offer up since I have no others, either physical or moral or of any kind; and I think that few people—religious or otherwise—suffer less than I do.

Next Sunday Mejía Sánchez will come to visit me. He will bring the illustrations and poems so that here we can make arrangements for their distribution. I understand that soon he will be able to send you copies of the illustrations, since the university told him that he should personally be in charge of making the prints and I suppose that he was going to proceed to do so immediately.

Morales has just returned to Nicaragua after his trip through South America, where he had great success. He was in the Sao Paulo Biennial Exposition and there received an award as the best Hispanic American painter, or something like that. He has participated in five international expositions and has received awards in all five.

It is possible that [José] Coronel [Urtecho] will also come to Mexico soon. Fortunately for him, he no longer has a diplomatic post in the government, and he has a son in jail as a revolutionary. He currently does not have economic opportunities in Nicaragua and it is possible that he will come to Mexico in December, where he could give classes in both universities, the national university and the Jesuit university. It would be great if his stay in Mexico coincided with yours.

I have been thinking about which place of residence would be most suitable for you during your stay in Mexico City. Perhaps in a small hotel, discreet and quiet? Or perhaps also in the Jesuits' Universidad Iberoamericana, which will be quiet and empty since the students are leaving on vacation in November. There you could choose to live in two parts: in the university itself, staying in the Jesuit community, which is small since there are only five or six living there and some of them will also be on vacation; or in the student residence, where I stayed, which is directed by a Nicaraguan Jesuit who is a very good friend of ours, and which will also be empty. They could give

you an apartment there by yourself; in both places you would have a chapel to celebrate Mass.

It would be much better if you came in common, everyday, colored clothing, which is how the Jesuits dress, and that way your presence will be more inconspicuous. It seems to me that we will be able to avoid all undesirable and sensationalist publicity. For that, it would perhaps be advisable that you come with your maternal last name, or simply as Father Louis. Several friends of ours work in the newspapers, and we could later make arrangements with them for a serious, official version of the news, and when it is opportune.

I want to tell you again that the good which your presence will do here is incalculable, especially among certain people—the leftists—which are the most important and most energetic groups in Mexico (the Catholic groups are mediocre and reactionary and it is necessary not to mix with them or collaborate in their publications so as not to lose one's reputation). When I have spoken with them I have been impressed with how they go about seeking God along odd paths, or how God mysteriously seeks them within themselves. All they need is the apostolate of a presence such as yours, without preaching, since it is the preaching which has alienated them.

Father Prior has told me that he will make me see Dr. Garza, a famous psychoanalyst in Cuernavaca, a friend of Suzuki, and a disciple of Dr. [Erich] Fromm (though they have told me that Dr. Fromm himself has not been able to cure his own ulcer and, not long ago, was very ill because of it). I think all I need is some orientation talks so that I can treat myself, and so my ailments will not interfere with my vocation, since I do not pretend to be without any suffering.

My cousin Luis Cardenal escaped from the prison in which they were holding him strictly incommunicado, at the foot of the Presidential Mansion, leaving at night in military dress. Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and one hundred others are being tried in a War Council which has already become long and tedious.

This morning the monastery is marvelous because the whole community went to some priestly ordination in Cuernavaca and the only ones left in the house are a postulant and myself. I end this letter in order to pray a while for the things which I write you about here, in this empty monastery. I embrace you, in Christ.

Ernesto Cardenal

P.S.

Dom G. asks me to tell you that the normal procedure for the indult is that they send it to you. In case it comes to him, he will send it to you immediately. And that in case there is some delay, he will get in touch with their Procurator in Rome in order to accelerate the process.

Also that I tell you that he spoke with Father [Jean] Danielou in France and that he is in complete agreement with all the steps you have taken and approves it all.

Also that you should look at number 50 of the *Supplement de La Vie Spirituelle*, where there appears an article on the statutes for hermits, and in which it is stated that the only solution to this problem is exlaustration.

I have received a very charming and friendly letter from Laughlin asking me about you and your plans. I have just answered him bringing him up to date on how things are going.

Odilie Pallais, in Nicaragua, who is interested in this, is offering many prayers for the success of your plans (from her sick bed). And surely also offering up much suffering, because her best prayer is her illness.

Affectionately in Christ,
Ernesto Cardenal

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

November 18, 1959

Dear Ernesto:

When your letter arrived three, or maybe two weeks ago, Father Abbot made a lot of difficulty about giving it to me, but he eventually did so. There was not much else he could do, since it was a conscience matter letter. I was glad to get it. And I made known to him that I thought such correspondence should not be interfered with. At the same time I told him that I would assure you that he was unfavorable to it. In a word, there is considerable opposition to the correspondence. But still the rights of conscience remain, and if there is something important then I think he is bound to allow a conscience matter letter

to pass. He probably will not pass any other kind of letter, that is from you at Cuernavaca.

The other day Rev. Father left quite suddenly for Rome. I have no doubt his journey was intimately connected with the matter which interests me closely. At first I thought he had left of his own volition. Later I realized that he had been summoned to Rome, in actual fact, by the Abbot General. No one knows exactly what is the purpose of this journey, but if he was summoned to Rome against his own will, that puts a different complexion on the matter. However, prayers are certainly needed at the moment. I just learned today that Fr. Larraona, the head of the Congregation of the Religious, has been made a Cardinal. That seems to be very good news, as far as I am concerned. I am sure Dom Gregorio will be equally pleased by it.

I was very interested to hear of the progress on the book of poems. New Directions is bringing out a paperback of my *Selected Poems*, almost the same selection but not quite. Mark Van Doren has written a very fine preface. I wonder if you heard about the trouble his son Charles got into. That TV program, on which he won so much money last year, was "rigged" and unfortunately Charles was an accomplice to the whole thing, which was very unfortunate. I don't think he clearly realized where it would lead, and he was not the most guilty one. Still, there has been a big fuss about it, with a lot of self-righteous speeches by senators on the shame of lying! As if senators were notable for telling the truth.

I am very happy to hear of the wonderful success of Armando Morales and I hope he will keep it up, though success is not the important thing, but the spiritual work of the artist. And I look forward to receiving copies of his illustrations from Mejía Sánchez—they have not yet arrived but I will inquire about them. It is a pleasure to know that [José] Coronel [Urtecho] may be in Mexico soon. Incidentally, Laughlin will probably be stopping here in December. I will be glad to see him.

About your own difficulties: I hope and pray that your conversations with Dr. Garza will be helpful. Of course, you understand that you will never be completely without difficulties and I would not be discouraged at all from continuing either in the seminary or at the monastery, whichever you prefer. You certainly have a vocation, but not necessarily a conventional type of vocation. Whether you are actually called to the priesthood cannot be decided without further trial, but

the important thing is that you have clearly a vocation to a contemplative life, in a general way, and the only thing that needs to be found out is exactly how or where. And that is not too important because wherever you are you will be tending to the same end. The only problem about the priesthood is whether you can be a priest without getting too involved in an exhausting and time-consuming ministry. That is the question. But for the rest you need have no doubts and no fears. God is with you. Incidentally I am touched by the simplicity and kindness with which you offer your troubles for me. With so many friends praying for me I am sure everything must inevitably go very well with me, and no matter how dark and obstructed things may sometimes appear, I have great confidence that everything will eventually work out well. But there is need for patience. I am glad too that Odilie is praying for me. I greatly value her prayers.

Prayers are the most important thing at the moment. And deep faith. The inertia of conventional religious life is like a deep sleep from which one only awakens from time to time, to realize how deeply he has been sleeping. Then he falls back into it. It is true that God works here also, but there are so many influences to deaden and falsify the interior life. A kind of perpetual danger of sclerosis. The psalms become more and more of a comfort, more and more full of meaning when one realizes that they do *not* apply to the conventional situation, but to another kind of situation altogether. The psalms are for poor men, or solitary men, or men who suffer: not for liturgical enthusiasts in a comfortable, well-heated choir. I am sure you have greatly enjoyed the work of translating them.

In a couple of days they will dedicate at Washington the immense new shrine of the Blessed Virgin which looks like a big substantial bank. Strictly official architecture, and the thing that strikes me most forcibly is its evident Soviet quality. There is a kind of ironical leveling process that makes Soviet and capitalist materialism more and more alike as time goes on. Who is more bourgeois than Krushchev? And he made a very "good" impression in the USA, except on the fanatics who refused to see him as one of their own. A successful gangster, who is now affable and a good family man in his declining years.

I will not continue this letter, as there is not much more news. We wait in silence and in peace for the coming of the Savior—in an advent atmosphere. I pray constantly to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Thank you again for all your prayers and your faith. I agree with every-

thing you said in your letter, everything hopeful and all the positive outlook you express for the future. I think the University would be the best place for the stay you plan in the city.

Trusting that nothing will happen to prevent this letter reaching you, and with all blessings and regards to you—kind memories to Dom Gregorio. I wrote him the other day, and wonder if he received the letter.

With all affection, in Christ,
fm Louis

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

The Brown Hotel,
Louisville
November 24 [1959]

Dear Ernesto:

I told Fr. Abbot I would write you a conscience matter letter and did so at Gethsemani but I don't know if it was sent. Do not be misled by the stationery. I have *not* started on the trip. The indult has not yet arrived & I have no news of it. But Father Abbot has *gone to Rome* & is evidently opposing everything with his power. But I also think he has been called to Rome to answer some questions. He may be back this week.

If the indult is coming, it should come about next week. If you do not hear from me soon—say by December 8th—then perhaps there is something wrong. J. Laughlin is coming here in the middle of December & if you write to him he might get it in time to relay information to me. Father Abbot is very difficult about conscience matter letters now but I still think he will *have to* let one through. Put not only "conscience matter" on the inner envelope but also "sub gravi."

If all goes well I hope to be there before Christmas. I will come by plane, I hope, & will arrive in the evening about 6:30 or 7 & we can go to the University. If you are not at the airport I will go to the University by taxi & ask for Fr. Martínez.

Gethsemani is *terrible*. Tremendous commerce—everybody is going mad with the cheese business. I want to leave very badly.

Today I said Mass for the F[east] of St. John of the Cross at Carmel. The nuns are praying very hard.

My mind is completely made up to totally cut off all ties that attach me here. It is *essential* not just for my own peace but for the glory of God. I must advance in the way He has chosen for me & I am sure He will make everything easy.

My best regards to Dom Gregorio—it is impossible to say all the things I want to say to you & to him. Pray that we may meet soon. I pray to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

I'll send a telegram to Cuernavaca as soon as I am ready to leave & have freedom to do so.

If things get very difficult, I can be reached via Fr. Danielou who can always get a conscience matter letter to me but I think yours will still get through—but there may be difficulties.

God bless you all—pray for me. Thanks for offering your suffering.

If things get *very bad*—I will be in Louisville in January for one day & can be reached through the Prioress of the Louisville Carmel, 1746 Newburg Road, Louisville.

With affection, in Christ,
fm Louis

The letter from Rome for which Merton was waiting was sent on December 7 and arrived on December 17. The indult Merton had sought was not granted.

Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal

December 17, 1959

My dear Ernesto:

Fr. Prior has given me permission to write Dom Gregorio in the absence of Rev. Father and this is my last chance to get a note to you also. As Dom G. will tell you, a letter from Rome has given absolutely final negative decision of my case. Or at least, a decision so final that I am not at liberty to take any further steps on my own behalf, but

can only accept and obey. I must stay here until the Church herself places me somewhere else. I still believe that the mercy of God can and perhaps will accomplish this, but I can only wait in darkness and in faith, without making any move. I have hopes that Dom Gregorio will still be able to do something for me. But what?

I think the reason the Congregation swung in favor of Dom James is that he told them a lot of irresponsible remarks about me by Gregory Zilboorg, a famous Freudian psychiatrist who is respected in Rome and has died recently. Zilboorg said of my desire of solitude that I just wanted to get out from under obedience and that if I were allowed a little liberty I would probably run away with a woman. I don't pretend to be an angel, but these remarks of Gregory Zilboorg were passing remarks made without any deep knowledge of me—he had seen me around for a week at a conference at St. John's [University, Collegeville, Minnesota]. We had not had much to do with each other, he never analyzed me, and Fr. Eudes said that Z. frequently made rash statements on the spur of the moment, which he later changed. Well, anyway, I think that is why Rome rejected my case, for certainly Dom James will have made everything possible out of these statements of Zilboorg. He has probably made enough out of them to queer my reputation in Rome forever. I remember now that you may have seen Zilboorg when he came here—or was that before your time?

I have seen the illustrations of Morales and they are fabulous—I wrote Mejía Sánchez about them. I think Mejía Sánchez will be able to reach me still with correspondence about the poems. I would like half a dozen copies of the book at least, and be sure to send me yours when they appear. Could I have a subscription to the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* and to the *Revista de la Universidad*? I think they will still get through. Of course there is always Laughlin, if there is something important. He will be down in January. However, as I say, for my own part I can only obey the Congregation and remain passive and I have no hope of making any move to leave this Order. I have in fact promised not to leave, but will only await the action of the Church to move me elsewhere if she sees fit.

So many people have prayed hard for me: their prayers will not be lost. I received the decision of Rome without emotion and without the slightest anger. I accept it completely in faith, and feel a great interior liberty and emptiness in doing so. This acceptance has completely liberated me from Gethsemani, which is to me no longer an obstacle

or a prison, and to which I am indifferent, though I will do all in my power to love and help those whom God entrusts to me here. I know we will always be united in prayer, and I assure you of all my affection and of the joy I have had in our association. Do continue to write poetry, or above all continue with your art. Everyone thinks highly of your poetry. Laughlin will probably come and see you some day. I must now get this letter out before Rev. Father returns. I close with all love to all of you. I suppose Pablo Antonio will still be able to write. God bless all of you—all my affection in Christ Crucified and Risen. *Christus Vincit, alleluia.*

fm Louis

Merton's exchange of letters with Cardenal was interrupted when Dom James Fox prohibited him from corresponding with Cardenal. Merton resumed writing to Cardenal in March 1961.