



The Dalai Lama and Abbot Timothy Kelly visit the grave of Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, April 25, 1994. (Photo by Amy Taylor, *The Kentucky Standard*. Used with permission.)

## **“The Great Honesty”: Remembering Thomas Merton An Interview with Abbot Timothy Kelly, O.C.S.O.**

*Conducted by George A. Kilcourse, Jr.  
Edited by Kimberly F. Baker*

*The following interview was conducted on January 25, 1996, at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Abbot Timothy Kelly entered the Cistercian life in 1958, and Thomas Merton was his novice master during the years 1958–60. From 1965 until the summer of 1968, he studied canon law in Rome, where he received his J.C.L. degree. His responsibilities include being master of novices at Gethsemani from 1969–73. Timothy Kelly was elected abbot in 1973 and continues to serve the community in this office.*

*Kilcourse:* Could we begin with questions about your own entry into the abbey in 1958? Can you tell us something about your decision to leave Canada and become a Cistercian monk in Kentucky?

*Kelly:* I originally thought of being a monk when I was in high school, but my family was very opposed to it. They thought it was a waste of a life, so instead I did a year of college at what was then Assumption University of Windsor. Then I went to the Basilian novitiate [in Toronto], which was the initial study to be a priest in the Congregation of St. Basil which operated Assumption University. I did novitiate, and then I did three more years with them and, in fact, came back to Assumption and the University of Windsor and finished a degree in philosophy and history. I taught a bit in a high school and became convinced that I was not a teacher. I wanted to do something

other than be an administrator, so I decided that I should try being a monk at Gethsemani since the Canadian monasteries are all French-speaking and my French is a bit awkward. So, on the strength of that, I applied to Gethsemani after college graduation in June of 1958.

In fact, the French element enters into my life when I was much younger. I used to go around with a French-speaking girl in the Windsor area, which was all right as long as I had my French-speaking friend go in and pick her up. One night her father caught me bringing her home and so my career, my love life, was brought to an end! What else could I do but come to a monastery?!

*Kilcourse:* Sounds like a familiar monastic biography! From something that I recently read, your family did have some mixed reactions.

*Kelly:* They were very opposed to my coming to a monastery. They thought it was a waste of a life and were just very opposed to it, but I persevered.

*Kilcourse:* Didn't your father do something dramatic?

*Kelly:* My father worked for the Canadian lighthouse service and also for a company that supplied lake freighters, and so they flew a flag at his lighthouse. When I went to the monastery, he flew it at half-mast. One of the ship captains asked who was dead, and he said, "My son."

*Kilcourse:* He's become a Trappist monk! Could you tell us something about what Gethsemani was like in those days when you arrived here.

*Kelly:* I suppose that my first impression was that it was a very crowded place. There were over 200—210 or so—in the community when I came. It was summer; it was late August and very hot. That was when the church was crowded with monks, and at the end of a hot day in Kentucky (we worked in the fields and so on), you were aware of a lot of bodies present in the church. So my first impression was crowdedness. Not so much noise, but just an awful lot of people and certainly activity. When you're the introvert that I am, you're inclined to want your corner and hold on to it for survival.

The refectory was crowded and busy and the food was more or less our own produce from the garden. It was nourishing but not that appetizing. One of the great observations of my mother was how

could I ever live there since I was so finicky about food. The first day I arrived, my plate was served. There was the plate before me with mashed potatoes and watery spinach, just this great big goop in the middle, and I thought, "Well, either I'm going to have to say my mother's right or do this."

*Kilcourse:* It's an act of liberation, is that it?

*Kelly:* Yes!

*Kilcourse:* How many would have been in the novitiate in those days?

*Kelly:* There was a lot more movement in and out, candidates coming in, candidates leaving. Probably we had a central core of fifteen who were more or less stable. There were fifteen or twenty and then back down to fifteen or so. This was the end to the big influx of vocations.

*Kilcourse:* In the hey-day, how many would have been there?

*Kelly:* At 10:00 some morning in July, I think in 1954 or something, there were approximately 275 people! The number fluctuates, but that's about correct.

*Kilcourse:* Do you remember your first contact with Thomas Merton?

*Kelly:* I do. I was in the guest house for a week or so, which was normal when new people arrived for entry, and just washing dishes and living there. One evening the guest master said, "The novice master will come to see you." I didn't know Thomas Merton was novice master. And so, this one evening the guest master said, "Be in your room at 6:30, the novice master will come and see you."

And so I was up there, and the novice master came and knocked on the door and introduced himself as the novice master and asked the usual questions a novice master would ask. Since I'd been involved a little bit at the University of Toronto, he was interested in the Medieval Institute and the people there like Etienne Gilson. He was asking me about that, and then he said, "Well, what do you know about the life?" And I said, "I've read all of Merton's published works and all of Fr. Raymond's published works and have a certain amount of historical awareness and so forth." And he said, "What do you think of the books?" And I said, "They're both rather romantic, although

they have different perspectives." I said, "Certainly, Merton's style is much easier to handle than Raymond's." And he said, "Yeah, you really have to be careful what you read." With that the interview ended.

*Kilcourse:* That was the novice master!

*Kelly:* Yes, and the next morning the guest master said, "Oh, did you see Thomas Merton, did you see Thomas Merton?" I said, "I saw the novice master." And he said, "Well, that's Thomas Merton." "Oh-h-h."

*Kilcourse:* That's an interesting first step.

*Kelly:* A few hours later, I was brought to the novitiate, and I was a bit embarrassed when I met him and he said, "Ah, good to see you," or something like that. That's life!

*Kilcourse:* Merton was also the master of scholastics as well as master of novices.

*Kelly:* He had been master of scholastics before master of novices. I came in 1958. I think he had only been novice master then for about a year. He'd just finished his time as scholastic master.

*Kilcourse:* What kind of a teacher was Merton?

*Kelly:* He was a very enthusiastic teacher, a very excellent teacher. His conferences were always very well-prepared, and often they were parts of some article he was writing. He called forth a lot of enthusiasm from his students. He would wax eloquently on some Latin father, and when you went to read it on your own, it just didn't quite have the same gripping interest. Of course, it was a time of silence in the community, and he didn't evoke much interchange with the students and didn't seem, in one sense, to appreciate questions.

He was well-prepared and had a certain amount of material he wanted to present. He wasn't that desirous of student commentary. That was an impression, but again the community had a very strict regime of silence in those days, and that would also be a part of his teaching method to avoid conflict.

*Kilcourse:* Less controversy on his part. Part of his persona?

*Kelly:* Yes, he also didn't want to gather disciples around him. He was always very objective in his teaching and if someone showed a bit of interest in his own person, who he was and so on, it was generally a sign that the person wasn't going to be around that much

longer. It was just a part of his desire that *he*, Merton, not be attracting them to the monastic life but rather that the novices find their own basic monastic identity.

*Kilcourse:* You were away for a good while in Rome. Those would have been what years?

*Kelly:* 1965 to 1968, just when Fr. Louis completed his last year as novice master. I had been his assistant during that last year. They, or rather the abbot, was willing to let Merton move to the hermitage full-time. And so it was time for the assistant to go also. I went to Rome to study. I'd just been ordained that summer.

*Kilcourse:* And you came back as novice master?

*Kelly:* I came back in the late summer of 1968, and then in April 1969 I was made novice master. I was novice master until 1973.

*Kilcourse:* So you saw him only briefly when you came back before he left for Asia?

*Kelly:* Very briefly. At the time I was teaching moral theology having just returned from Rome. We were doing studies on justice and peace. Completely unwittingly, the night before he left for Asia (I knew nothing about his trip), I met him going in the library, and I asked him, "Hey, we're just dealing with peace issues in class and you're one of the most vociferous of the peace people around, why don't you come to class tomorrow?"

Now, in retrospect at least, I can see this anxious look on his face, but I didn't really read it at all. He just said, "Oh, there's not much you couldn't say about peace that I could say," and gave a rundown of the basic principles of the peace and justice questions. And he said, "I'm sure you can do a more than adequate job and it'd be kind of hard for me to fit it into my schedule at this point," or something, and he went off. The next morning he left for Asia. -

*Kilcourse:* So you didn't really have a chance to say good-bye?

*Kelly:* No, I didn't.

*Kilcourse:* You wrote an essay about Merton in the *Canadian Catholic Review*.<sup>1</sup> As I recall, there was a wonderful story about

1. Timothy Kelly, "My Brother Thomas: Merton at Gethsemani," *Canadian Catholic Review* 3 (Sept. 1985) 290-5.

Merton's humility in the wake of a visit by a Scripture scholar. Is that the story that you tell?

*Kelly:* Yes. Barnabas Ahern used to come to the community—oh, once a month or whenever he could come—and give these wonderful scriptural conferences which were introducing us to modern scriptural exegesis. For Barnabas Ahern to stand up in the midst of this community and talk about whether the magi were historical figures or not was quite admirable in 1963–64. But with his own giftedness as a teacher and truly holy man that he was, he was quite able to pull it off.

In those conferences, at one time or another, he talked about Jonah as midrash. I'm quite sure most of us didn't understand what the term really meant. The next Sunday, Merton was giving the novices and juniors a conference based on the Scripture reading for the night office; we were reading the book of Jonah at the time. He waxed very eloquently in a poetic way about Jonah, who was a very special person in his own life. It is in *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) in "The Firewatch" he talks about Jonah and the mercy upon mercy that is our gift.

One novice kept raising his hand, and finally, he acknowledged him. He said, "Fr. Barnabas said Jonah's nothing but midrash." And with that, Merton closed his books, and he walked out and for a year or so never gave another Scripture conference. He said something to the effect that modern biblical scholars are ruining the culture of Christianity. I wouldn't say that's an exact quote, but it is something along that line.

*Kilcourse:* He took umbrage.

*Kelly:* He took a very grave umbrage.

*Kilcourse:* That's a wonderful story, though.

*Kelly:* Never made anything out of it, never condemned Barnabas Ahern or anything, but just was upset.

*Kilcourse:* Barnabas Ahern and he had corresponded, hadn't they?

*Kelly:* Oh, yes, in fact, when Barnabas came for conferences, he would also spend some time with Fr. Louis. I think Ahern helped Dom James understand Merton. Certainly Merton would be the last person who would negate scholarship.

*Kilcourse:* Barnabas did help him, I recall, in his own struggles about his monastic identity.

*Kelly:* He did.

*Kilcourse:* It's an interesting twist, though. . . . One of Merton's responsibilities was assigning work for the novices. He also combined that with his responsibilities as chief forester here. He did a lot of work in the woods?

*Kelly:* Yes, he used to go out and plant trees and thin trees, and it was always an enjoyable time just being out of the tight enclosure and seeing the big, wide world. A lot of the trees out around what we call Dom Frederic's lake, one of our reservoirs, would be trees planted by Thomas Merton.

*Kilcourse:* I've heard that he nearly decapitated one of the novices once when he was driving the Jeep.

*Kelly:* That was before my time. He was not a very mechanical person, not at all. That's why none of us who knew him had any trouble believing the story that he was electrocuted by a fan. We wouldn't expect anything else to happen. He just wasn't mechanical, and so the stories are innumerable about his close misses, by himself or with novices.

*Kilcourse:* And machinery?

*Kelly:* And machinery! There are various myths about brothers having tried to teach him how to drive.

*Kilcourse:* We talked a little bit earlier about Merton being impatient with people who were preoccupied with his notoriety or celebrity in the monastery. He didn't have much patience for that. But he did have prominent visitors and friends. Did they interact with the community?

*Kelly:* If they could fit in with what we were about, he was always very generous with getting them to give conferences to the novices or to the wider community, if it seemed proper. Also, I can remember when I was undermaster, being aware of these very famous guests here to see him, and he'd be visiting with them. But when time came for him to see a brother for spiritual direction, he would leave and go to see him. He was always very conscious of his service to the community. He didn't use his notoriety as an escape from the day-to-day life of the monastery.

*Kilcourse:* He combined the temperament of an artist with an enormous capacity for self-discipline. I always think of the hermitage years as being the culmination of that.

*Kelly:* He was even more disciplined in the community. In those days the schedule was cut up into little sections, and he always was very disciplined and used every moment. He tried to inculcate this discipline into the life of novices. He encouraged us to know what we were going to do, what we were reading, what we were working with when the schedule gave us time; not to waste time, but to start immediately.

He was an excellent example of this. When it was time for reading, he would begin reading and read very assiduously, and when it was time to do something else, he did that very assiduously, too. He would even say that in the old schedule, in the very truncated, cut-up schedule, he actually thought he got more work done than he did in the great empty periods in the hermitage, which I don't think is quite accurate. Even at the hermitage he was always a very disciplined worker.

*Kilcourse:* How would you characterize Merton's personality, his approach to life as you experienced him?

*Kelly:* Always really alive! I wouldn't want to say exuberant, that would be too strong, but always "up." You really never experienced him as being down about something or negative. Always very positive, always very present to life, very present to the moment. Always seeing the humor of the present moment and also the pathos of it, and always very, very conscious and very alive to the place, to what he's doing and so on.

He was a scholar and a poet by temperament, yet one never really ran into him when he was preoccupied by other things. He was always really present. If you were speaking with him, he was very present to you. If he was doing something else, that's what he did. For example, because we eat in silence at some meals, brothers would bring a book to read at the meal. Fr. Louis would say, "Don't do that. When you eat, eat, and be present to what you're eating. Enjoy it, be aware of what you are eating. When finished eating, go do the reading."

*Kilcourse:* That is really a great contemplative streak.

*Kelly:* Yes, very Zen.

*Kilcourse:* John Eudes Bamberger commented once in publication about Merton's rare, but poignant references to his own woundedness as a young person,<sup>2</sup> which in many ways was a catalyst for his experience of God's mercy and his own vocation flourishing.

2. John Eudes Bamberger, "Wrestling With God," *Commonweal* 111 (Oct. 19, 1984) 555-7.

*Kelly:* Yes. I don't recall his speaking that much about his own life. Fr. Eudes was a little before my time. One thing you'd say, Merton was always growing. That would be one of his weaknesses, even as a novice master. He didn't repeat himself. He was always having new visions or new ways of seeing things.

The only incident that comes to mind is one Christmas time, on the feast of Thomas à Becket, when he read us great pieces of Eliot's drama *Murder in the Cathedral*. I can remember him getting very choked up with emotion and in fact, ending the conference at that point where Becket speaks about the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason. He did a little speech on that, and he basically broke down, saying that this is one of the great dangers in life, one of the great trials in life.

That would be about the only time I really recall much personal show of emotion. He would often refer in a very general way to the fact that we all have things to do penance for, reasons why we struggle with life now because we made such a mess of it earlier or something like that. It wasn't a recurring theme, or at least I didn't pick it up as a recurring theme.

*Kilcourse:* I've heard divergent opinions from monks here in the monastery about their assessments of the hermitage years, 1965-1968. Some emulate him for his eremetical life. Others describe the experience as a failure. What do you say?

*Kelly:* Well, having been absent during those years, I guess I'm free!

*Kilcourse:* You've been exonerated?

*Kelly:* I've been exonerated from commenting on it! I think he himself would be slow to describe his own life as "hermit life" and would see it more as a life apart and a life used more for intellectual pursuit or scholarly pursuit. I would say I had heard him say that, but I realize there are a number of his fans who would not agree with my comment at that point. I would say again his great honesty would make him say something like that because he certainly did use the time to do a lot of very good work in his own pursuits but at the same time, for the most part, lived a very rigorous life or a very disciplined life. So it was an interesting mixture of a life that had both a very real spiritual quest as part of it, and also this very intellectual interest. It was a great time of transition in his own life, a great time of transition

in the Church, so he couldn't help but be aware of a lot of the questions that were coming.

I remember I was in Rome at the time, and in many ways I would say we were friendly, but I had never really written to him or sought his direction. I was somewhat under a cloud in Rome, and Abbot James and I had had some disagreements, so I wrote to Merton about my concerns. A lot of my concern was that they were doing a lot of renovating at the monastery and I felt they weren't asking the community enough. They weren't being aware enough of some of the traditions of simplicity in the order and so on. And so, I presented him my concerns wondering if I had a place at Gethsemani. He responded that he hadn't entered into the real questions involved at the monastery because he felt like his own life was then beside the community, so he wasn't really aware of the dynamics or whatever that were involved.

But then he brought me to task and said, "But, you know, you're doing the same thing as these people you are accusing. You are saying they don't have the answers and you do, and they are saying you don't have the answers and they do." He said, "The one thing I've learned in my twenty-five years of monastic life is that one has to compromise." He continued, "I realize it is a very bad word for some in a spiritual discipline, but it is a reality that is also gospel." And with that, I felt chastened.

*Kilcourse:* He was still being novice master.

*Kelly:* He was still being very much novice master.

*Kilcourse:* If you were to pick out a single memorable experience of Merton in the community that epitomizes his life as a monk of Gethsemani, what would it be?

*Kelly:* Well, the story that comes to my mind that epitomizes Merton as I would have known him isn't about a "living Merton" but is a story of a small incident at the time of his death. The day his death was announced to our community, it was announced in the refectory at the main meal. In those days, we used to get our mail put at our place in the refectory. There was an old monk; Fr. Alphonse was his name at that time. He had changed his name; it used to be Idesbald. He was Belgian by birth and had come to this country in 1917 or so, right after the First World War, and never really learned English. He was only in the country for about a year when he joined the community here. So as an old man, he really didn't have a language. He'd for-

gotten his Flemish, if anyone could speak Flemish here, and he never really did learn English, and he didn't know that much French. He was a person who had certainly a lot of frustration in his life. I guess nowadays you'd put it in terms of anger. But a real character in the community. Always a bit marginal, but just a "character." It is the only word I can use, a good person but someone to whom you didn't pay that much attention.

So the day Merton died, it was announced in the refectory. Fr. Alphonse comes up to me with a postcard in his hand trying to understand it. He said, "You know, they said he died, but I just got this postcard from Fr. Louis." And I thought, "Wow!" It was true. He had a postcard sent from Thailand just saying, "Hi, how are you? I hope it was not too much work with cheese and fruitcake this year, and I'm going to be with the monks in Hong Kong for Christmas," and ended up by saying, "Behave yourself now," or something like that. Here is Merton over meeting the Dalai Lama and doing all these things he wanted to do, and he sent this postcard to this old man. I was in Rome for three years and I never sent Alphonse a postcard. And so I always think that was the true Merton. Very much aware of people in the community and especially the marginal people, and very willing to acknowledge their presence in just a simple show of friendship.

*Kilcourse:* That's really stunning, that on the day of his death that would be made manifest.

*Kelly:* Yes, and to this particular person.

*Kilcourse:* Beautiful.

*Kelly:* And I would say a lot of the brothers would say that. They all had a type of personal relation with him. When he had the occasion, he would be present to them as he was, as they were. He would always meet them where they were, he wasn't a person of any pretense.

*Kilcourse:* Let's talk a little bit about Cistercian life, contemporary Cistercian life and Merton's impact on that. John Griffin once said that Merton restored intellect to the Cistercians.

*Kelly:* In a sense, he certainly advocated a more serious reading, a serious study. There always was a lot of fatigue in the life. Part of it, I think, because of the way the schedule was broken up into just pieces, and part of it, too, the diet was not all that good. So there was a lot of fatigue.

There was an inclination to read pious literature that wouldn't be all that demanding. But he advocated very much reading of the Fathers and going to the sources of the Cistercian spirituality and spirituality in general. He didn't really fly a banner or something like that, but just by persistence and urging, encouraged us to do more serious work.

I would say yes, he did change a perspective or point of view in the ways of Gethsemani's life. Serious study of our tradition wasn't that common in this country; it was being done in Europe at the time. So, yes. I would say he had an influence on it.

*Kilcourse:* He also challenged the monastery to help monks cultivate their contemplative lives.

*Kelly:* He did, he was always a vociferous critic of the industrialization of Gethsemani and always opposed machines and becoming more and more industrialized. He thought we were losing our connection to the earth. And this was typical of the contradictions in Merton. I remember when he had to go to the doctor or something in the days when I was his assistant, he'd say, "Now, I gotta go to the doctor today. You get the Caterpillar up to the hermitage and clean up around there." And I'd say, "Yeah, but that's a machine." "Well, I'm not going to be there. It's okay." And so, we always teased him about this contradiction.

*Kilcourse:* We never forget that Merton's own teacher Dan Walsh was an important source for teachings and insights here, too.

*Kelly:* Yes, in the early 1960s he came and lived here in the monastery for the most part. He and Merton got together on a regular basis and discussed philosophy. I think he, Dan, was a good catalyst who pushed Merton on or helped him become aware or showed him paths of awareness that were going on in the larger intellectual world at the time. At the same time, Dan taught some of us philosophy and generally was available to the other brothers. He taught some philosophical courses to the community, not making great demands on them, but just introducing them to the ways of philosophy and Dan's own particular brand of philosophy and Duns Scotus.

*Kilcourse:* Merton never really traveled a great deal. I know he went to Collegeville back in 1956, but he never really traveled to the other monasteries. Yet is it fair to say that his influence would be felt in formation programs, certainly in Cistercian circles as well as others?

*Kelly:* I would say yes, but that's not something I've studied. I think there was an influence just because he wrote so much. On a couple of occasions, they had meetings here of novice masters and abbots, and he was always a part of those meetings in some sense or other and was always very generous whenever people would write him from one of the other communities to respond very fully. Certainly, I would say he did influence them to some extent. There was a great admiration of him.

*Kilcourse:* The abbey here at Gethsemani has exercised a considerable impact on Cistercian life when monks from this house have been selected as abbots at the other monasteries. Merton taught and helped in the formation of many of these who are now abbots, yourself included. How would you assess his influence in this regard?

*Kelly:* I'd say it's obvious in some sense that the people whom he trained would have a respect for the intellectual side of the spiritual journey, would have a respect for persons. That would be what in many ways I think epitomizes Merton's formation: that he always respected the person and wanted the person to find the roots of his monastic vocation within his spiritual life and not be just modeling principles from other people.

I suppose also his willingness to look at the whole breadth of other spiritual disciplines, the whole culture, the traditional culture. These would be elements that were always part of his teaching. So those of us who were trained by him would not feel these were alien or would not feel these other influences as detrimental to the spiritual development. I think there's been a positive influence. I would say that when I first came to Gethsemani, what we picked up as a spirituality would have had a very strong emphasis on doing a lot of *things*, pious acts, extra penance, obviously fulfilling the obligations. It was just *doing* a lot. He would not encourage this, although he was always very disciplined and always very respectful of the structures. Rather, he would speak of it in other terms. He would remind us that we weren't just doing such things because they were penitential or doing these things because they curbed our self-will or something. He would speak of it more in terms of freedom. You did these things in order to become free from those other elements in your life that held you back or that confused you, or whatever it is. He subtly put a different emphasis on a lot of monastic practices, which made them much more

realizable, or much more positive than just something done as an exercise. They were really for growth and for knowing yourself.

*Kilcourse:* And so now we have new abbots who are spiritual masters in this tradition.

*Kelly:* Well, I don't think we've reflected on it that way, but I guess you can claim that.

*Kilcourse:* One of Merton's more effective reforms was, at least I've heard, the arrangement of the monastic schedule here.

*Kelly:* He certainly advocated it, but really it was Fr. Flavian [Burns] who changed it. Fr. Flavian was very much a student of Fr. Louis and was trying to create these blocks of open time for us to spend some serious efforts in study and prayer. So yes, that would be something that Fr. Louis would have advocated and something that did come about.

*Kilcourse:* Just to broaden our horizon for a moment to the International Cistercians, is there any way to gauge the influence of Merton beyond these shores?

*Kelly:* Not really, except that you do find that at General Chapters Meetings of abbots in the order there are always people who ask you about him, always people who are aware of him and know something about some of his works. So obviously he has been read or has influence in some way.

*Kilcourse:* Did Merton ever evidence what you would think in retrospect to be some blind spots about some of the directions of monastic renewal that he was talking about?

*Kelly:* I would say that he and Jean LeClercq (the Benedictine from Luxembourg) both would be very enthusiastic about a lot of experiments, and especially if they had an eremitical bent; but such experiments proved in the long run not to work. I would say that perhaps I could understand their enthusiasm in the sense of trying to create, trying to find those new ways to give expression of the monastic life. Perhaps a bit more discretion might have been helpful. I say this obviously influenced by my present service as an administrator.

*Kilcourse:* I was going to ask you: I've heard that discretion is supposed to be the great virtue of abbots.

*Kelly:* Obviously we think it is!

*Kilcourse:* We'll read between the lines on that! Let's move on to the community at Gethsemani. Now in two years it will be forty years since you entered the monastery. You belong in some ways to that bridge generation. As you say, you were there in the last wave of the big days. What would be the three most significant changes since the time you entered?

*Kelly:* Liturgically, the language of the liturgy. We entered in an all-Latin liturgy, and the discipline of prayer in that context is much different from the vernacular. I suppose also just the ethos of the community, we always talked about monasticism as enclosure and separation, which has an unconscious tendency to create a sort of dualistic world, a "we" against "they," and I don't want to say the "saved" against the "unsaved," but there's that underlying little temptation there. I think that is altered considerably, and I think Fr. Louis' influence helped alter it. And to be really mundane, the diet. While still vegetarian more or less, it's a bit more free, a bit more ample. They are not weighing your two ounces of bread for breakfast anymore.

*Kilcourse:* Like our old Lent.

*Kelly:* Oh, yes, we were just old Lent 365 days of the year!

*Kilcourse:* I remember Dan Walsh once talking about him and Merton disagreeing about the house and the gift shop here. Merton said people should only come out to pray, and Dan said, "Well what if they buy cheese and fruitcake and books and pray too?"

*Kelly:* That is still a cause of controversy in the monastery. There's always the group who feel a store would be an added attraction to the monastery. Again, we could make available the products we produce and also decent religious literature.

Some of the brothers who work at the "gate" say that a store is a constant request. People do come to places like this and want to buy something. So the brothers do get tired about hearing the same recurring question about why we do not sell our goods here. Obviously, we haven't a store yet, so you know which side I'm on.

*Kilcourse:* Another dimension of the abbey's life is the change about the guest house. There are no longer structured retreats at the guest house, and I think of the decision to allow women.



*Kelly:* Part of the change really came in the immediate post-Vatican II regime. Retreats did change a lot and moved to more family-oriented or husband-and-wife-oriented, and our facility just wasn't available to do it. At the same time, Fr. Flavian became abbot and was very strong on the contemplative dimension of the life and said that a monastic guest house should really just *be* and not be a retreat center, but rather offer the possibility for people to share in some sense the contemplative dimension of the life. So I think those two things working together somewhat changed, you might say, the approach.

Guests at the monastery have always been a reality. Our retreat house, in particular, goes back to the early part of the century. Abbot [Edmund] Obrecht [(+1935) who preceded Dom Frederic Dunne] really got involved with the local Knights of Columbus and organized it by parish-by-parish retreats. It was a real help for the monastery. In its most simple way, it helped just becoming somewhat known and also being a part of the local church. I think it was a very good thing that it did happen. Vatican II changes altered that somewhat, and our retreat movement did take more of the form of just being available for a more quiet type of retreat. With the renovation of the facility, since we did ask for contributions from benefactors to help us and since the question was often asked if women would be able to use the facilities, it seemed that justice demanded it. So we did it.

Our experience alternating men and women on an every other week basis has been very positive. The persons who come on retreat are here very seriously and do spend their time well sharing in the liturgy as far as they are able using the time and facility. It's booked up far in advance, and again we're grateful. It's a good example for us; to see people take time from very busy lives to come apart to a monastery is an encouragement to the monks. It helps us realize the gift we have. It helps us to enter into it more seriously.

*Kilcourse:* Let's talk about your two predecessors—Dom Flavian and Dom James. Two very different persons. In one of the earlier interviews that was done for *The Merton Annual*,<sup>3</sup> one monk described Dom James as "authoritarian, holy, and shrewd." You can recognize who probably said that. Dom James' relationship with Merton was complex to be sure. Could you comment first about your experience of

Dom James and the role that he played here—Harvard Business School, former Passionist?

*Kelly:* I think the three words sum up Dom James very well. He was complex, yet he had a very, seemingly simple, spiritual life. The passion was very much essential to his own understanding of life. And so, he understood monastic life very much as a way of sharing in the burdens that Jesus carried and sharing in his redemptive act. So the more burdens the monks carried, the more they would share in this redemptive reality for the sake of the world and the more they would be transfigured into the image of Jesus. And he preached that in season and out of season, with a little statement which added a balance, you might say. He used to always talk about doing things, "All for Jesus through Mary with a smile," which was a bit much! But the smile part of it, as corny as it sounds, was important because life here was pretty harsh. Adding that element of brightness to it, I think, and making it part of the on-going spiritual asceticism was a value or had a place. Some of his natural wisdom.

He took over the community, I think, historically at a time when they really didn't have any money. Not that Dom Frederic [Dunne] had been a bad administrator, but they'd done a couple foundations and the community really was just a subsistence farming community until the late 1940s or early 1950s. The influx of all these vocations demanded that they had to change their ways, and so the Harvard Business School man was probably very much the proper person for the time. He organized the work, which became more productive, and he was a good investor and that certainly helped the community in many ways.

In relation to Merton, I don't know. He just didn't have his perception of life, his education. He had an entirely different vision than Merton, yet he had a respect for him. I think Dom James was always torn between some sense of the ideals of a monastic life as he knew it, and some of the things where Merton was always pushing the edges. So, I think in that way it was often difficult for him to discern what to do with Merton.

He took a very hard line relative to his going out or his being available. At the time, I would certainly say he took a hard line. Looking back, he may have had an insight that was helpful because he certainly did keep Merton productive. One could imagine Merton dissipating his energy and just doing lots of things not too well, whereas

3. Matthew Kelly, "Looking Back to Merton: Memories and Impressions: An Interview," *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988) 55–76.

210 George A. Kilcourse, Jr./Abbot Timothy Kelly, O.C.S.O.

keeping him in somewhat of a direction and working in areas of spiritual formation I think, was helpful.

For years, Merton went to see him regularly. Merton was James' confessor. Merton himself had an ambivalence; certainly he had a certain respect for James. He would never allow novices to criticize the abbot. I was corrected on that on various occasions, but not in a blind way or anything, but just demanding a true respect. It was good. It was an interesting relationship. I would say that in all my time with Merton as novice master, I was never really aware of his struggles as we read of them in his books. He never really left James' office and came over and gave vent to his anger to me or any of the other novices. He certainly didn't do any of that, and I was surprised to recognize that here I was dealing with him at the same time that he was really having some traumatic experiences. But again, that was Merton. He was a very private person. I think there was a mutual respect between Dom James and Merton, also a mutual suspicion. But I think it produced a life for both of them. I think Merton really influenced James in a very real sense, too.

*Kilcourse:* So the symbolism isn't lost that they are buried next to one another in the cemetery?

*Kelly:* No, it's a study!

*Kilcourse:* Dom Flavian?

*Kelly:* He obviously was much more in Fr. Merton's intellectual understanding of things and was a real "disciple." Certainly he admired everything that Merton did and wrote, always the earlier material. Flavian has trouble with the later Merton, I think.

*Kilcourse:* Did you want to say something about that?

*Kelly:* His social materials—he said Merton just did that for friends' sake. I would disagree with him completely. I think Merton was always evolving, always moving and coming to his perceptions of social issues. I believe this was a very deep part of his own monastic vocation as I understand his vocation. I would suspect that Merton's death rites, within the first year of Fr. Flavian's time as abbot, was a real difficulty for Fr. Flavian. He did see Merton as someone who would help him to perceive how monastic life can develop at this time.

*Kilcourse:* Well, in a matter of weeks, you're going to have the twenty-third anniversary of your election as abbot.

*Kelly:* I was at a conference the other day at St. Meinrad, and this young monk got up who mentioned that he was twenty-five years old, and a monk sitting beside me said, "Just think, he was two years old when you became abbot!"

*Kilcourse:* A senior statesman!

*Kelly:* That sounds terrible!

*Kilcourse:* Peaks, valleys? Anything that you're particularly grateful for in those twenty-three years, or anything that still troubles you as a challenge?

*Kelly:* I'm grateful to have gotten through them. I can't say that I started out with some great project that I wanted to do. I'm grateful for the brethren and how much they always actually do want to live a very serious monastic life, so that in many ways it makes it simple enough to be abbot. There's always a concern of how do you continue to call people and more, yourself, to a more profound spiritual journey. And what are the images one uses, what are the ways to evoke that depth of living, a depth of reality where one does share in the passion of the Lord Jesus. I suppose that's probably one of the on-going burdens, how to find the vocabulary, how to have the vision to continue and to be called and to call others to live that life.

*Kilcourse:* I pulled a couple of things here. I wanted to read at least this one passage to you. Merton refers to you and your ordination in *A Vow of Conversation*.

*Kelly:* I don't remember it very well.

*Kilcourse:* There are two related references just to jog your memory a little bit. The first is a letter written in August 1967 to you and Brother Patrick Hart in Rome. You never got the letter because he writes back a couple weeks later to Patrick, "I forgot Fr. Timothy wasn't there." He ends the letter by talking about the church and the renovations here, and then he says, "I'm not crazy about the altar which is either Aztec or juridical. I'm not sure which but anyway, it's designed for bloody and possibly human sacrifice. All joking aside, I think there's absolutely only one hope for Gethsemani, for those of us who have some brains to hang together (hang is a badly chosen word,

it might be all too true) and trying to salvage what we all came here for by hook or by crook and to keep things going. The most Dom James can and ever will do will be to hold things together as they are and implicitly prevent any real change."<sup>4</sup>

But then he talks about the election at the end of 1967 and here's where he mentions you. "Flavian is the only candidate likely to get it." He's writing to Fr. Felix in Rome. "Flavian's the only candidate likely to get it who has a mind of his own and won't be dominated by someone else, certainly not by Dom James. Flavian's year as hermit has done him a great deal of good. He's intent on the right things." And he goes on, "And I still think Tim has no chance, but none, this round. His turn comes next."<sup>5</sup> I must find this next passage. He says wonderful things about you. Do you remember that?

*Kelly:* No, I don't. Find it, please!

*Kilcourse:* "Tomorrow Frs. Timothy and Barnabas are to be ordained priests." (This is June 11, 1965.) "I shall concelebrate with Fr. Timothy on Trinity Sunday. He has been the most competent and reliable of all my undermasters in the novitiate. Already Fr. Abbot is speaking of sending him to Rome this year and getting him ready quickly for the Norway Foundation."<sup>6</sup> I wanted you to at least hear those good words again.

Anything in particular that Merton taught you that proved especially valuable to you as abbot later?

*Kelly:* I would say the respect for persons, to encourage others—I always use the "true self" and that type of vocabulary which was an underlying theme in all his teachings—to help a person come to know really what it is that he wants to do with his life, how it is that he best can live the gospel. Merton was always encouraging novices to come really to that understanding rather than accepting a form of life because it supposedly is perfect and supposedly is very good. No, no! Finding what it is, where you can use your talents or you can be yourself most honestly is the essential. To some degree, I've endeavored to do that or hoped to do that as abbot. I've tried to have the monks and

those who come to join us to come to see whether this is really the best way they can serve the Lord and helping them to discover how they can do that in this context.

That that would be something I would attribute to his influence because I think as a younger person I was rigid and much more rigorous in my ideas of what should be and shouldn't be. I would have been more inclined to support a narrow, institutional response to most questions. I would say Merton added an element of breadth, the seeds of trying to broaden my scope of perception.

*Kilcourse:* Having listened to many of his tapes, I recall Merton occasionally mentioned a particular person who decided to leave the community. His attitude was reflected in what he would say to the novices: "Well, so-and-so's left, but, you know, we hope things go well. Let's just be really grateful for the time that they were here."

*Kelly:* Yes, he was always very supportive and encouraged people to find their way. We were talking about the spirituality earlier, and I'm reminded that there was here, very much, the axiom that you were saved while you were here, but if you got off Noah's Ark, the devil's right at the front door there waiting to attack you as soon as you walk out the door. Merton did not agree with that at all.

*Kilcourse:* Let's turn to the future of monasticism. I'm curious about your sense of experiments of monastic life in the twenty-first century. You've got Dom Bernardo as the Abbot General, that's significant, isn't it?

*Kelly:* Certainly. He's from Argentina, which creates a whole new perception of the order and its roots in the whole culture of North Europe. To have someone from Argentina, very much Argentinean, as Abbot General should alter the perception.

I would suspect that our relation to the Church, to the wider Church, is something that will possibly be more visible. We've always claimed our exemption from the bishop, which I hope we keep, but our awareness of the oneness of the Christian community will be greater. And all of us, each of us lives the vocation in a little different perspective.

I think I would say the present use of our guest house is a good example of the inner penetration and the seriousness of living a Christian life. We find support from that community, and the community hopefully gives the retreatants some sense of support. I suspect

4. August 23, 1967, to Father Timothy Kelly and Brother Patrick Hart, *The School of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990) 343-4.

5. December 28, 1967, to Father Felix Donahue, *The School of Charity*, 359.

6. June 11, 1965, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-65* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988) 189.

214 George A. Kilcourse, Jr./Abbot Timothy Kelly, O.C.S.O.

that monastic life will be made more conscious, or our type of monastic life will be more conscious of awareness.

*Kilcourse:* Two years from now will mark the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Gethsemani community. What are the community's plans for that?

*Kelly:* We're not able to create much excitement quite yet.

*Kilcourse:* None of the originals are still around?

*Kelly:* None of the originals are around! We are doing a book, a history of the one hundred fifty years. We discussed in the community whether to do a video or a book. I had contacted a very fine crew from Canada which I thought could do a very good historical video. What the abbot really wants, if he really directly pushes for it, he very rarely gets. I don't know if it was because they were Canadian or whether the community really just didn't feel video would be the best presentation. We are having this book researched and written as a tribute to the one hundred fifty years.

*Kilcourse:* I understand the author is a person who has a great feel for the monastic life, Dianne Aprile.

*Kelly:* Yes, Dianne Aprile.

*Kilcourse:* She's already done some wonderful writing about the monastery.

*Kelly:* She has. She's been working in our archives now and interviewed some of the monks and will visit the foundations and Melleray, our founding house. I think Fr. Clyde Crews is going to help her with the history, to flesh out or respond to some of her concerns.

It's something for the sake of the whole U.S. Church because, as you mentioned, we're the oldest abbey. By some strange quirk we became an abbey rather quickly, although some of the Benedictine foundations are older than we are. All those foundations began in the 1840s or thereabouts. We were founded in 1848. Some of the others are a bit older than we are, but they didn't become an abbey right away, so that's one of these little . . .

*Kilcourse:* That's your claim.

*Kelly:* Yes. We're also a minor basilica, you know. Fr. Matthew pushes for acknowledging that a bit more. I'm not one for pushing for the "great cope."

*Kilcourse:* Two or three years ago, we had a group of Bellarmine students here. You received them and spoke briefly with them and gave a very good orientation. One of the things I remember you saying, and I hope I'm quoting you right here, you commented that monks were "weaker" than people in the world and needed the structure and support of the monastery. Can you elaborate on that?

*Kelly:* I would repeat the statement again. I think we choose or we find this the way that is most congenial to who we are or how we can live the gospel. And often it is precisely because we're too dispersed in our intellectual abilities or just not disciplined enough maybe to live in a social milieu that gives constant choices to make. So we choose to take a life that has a structure in it, that gives us a direction, that frees us from a lot of other type of decisions. I think it's also maybe part of our weakness which we bear in recognizing that the monastery is the way for us. And in saying that, I'm trying to demythologize a bit; monks aren't better people or extraordinary or anything like this. We really are people who need more structure than a lot of other Christians to be faithful.

*Kilcourse:* Eugene Laverdiere, the biblical scholar, when I met him here five years ago, was telling me that his perception was that monks have two senses of time. They think on one hand in terms of centuries, and then they think of today's schedule. Next week doesn't mean anything to a monk.

*Kelly:* That's very true. Time's a funny thing around here.

*Kilcourse:* That's why the bells ring and you know you have to be in choir.

*Kelly:* The days go rapidly but the years . . .

*Kilcourse:* What about the future of Merton's legacy? Maybe one place to start would be 1963 with the beginning of the archives, the Thomas Merton collection at Bellarmine. I was always amused by the story they tell about Dom James that he was persuaded that that was a good decision in part because the monks wouldn't have to fool with these scholars but especially because women would be coming. Is there any truth to that?

*Kelly:* That's probably a quote, a real quote, and I think it was a wise decision on James' part and on Merton's part because it freed us, and rightly so, of a lot of the decisions relative to publishing and

making his works available. Because he is our brother and you're not always inclined to take your brother's things that seriously, we probably wouldn't have been the best judges on how to respect his legacy. Not only is it freeing us from a burden in that sense, but I think it also is giving the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust a better opportunity to have its effect in the wider society. So, a prudent decision. Pragmatically, a good decision, too.

*Kilcourse:* Would you like to say anything about the publication of Merton's journals?

*Kelly:* Yes, that's going to be certainly, as I understand it, the publication of everything. Every jot and tittle of his works should be finished with the publication of these journals and then the notebooks. Of course, someone may uncover a waste basket somewhere that hasn't been emptied or rifled! I think, too, that the new generation of Merton Legacy Trustees will have to work in some different direction. It won't just be getting everything in print, but it will be . . . I don't know quite what . . .

*Kilcourse:* They'll have to make decisions about, "Do we put it on CD-ROM?"

*Kelly:* That's true.

*Kilcourse:* Merton on the Internet! There's a new thought. . . .

*Kelly:* Surely, if he has any influence, he'll put static on it!

*Kilcourse:* Some people have the impression that the royalties from Merton's publications and paraphernalia support the monastery with an influx of dollars.

*Kelly:* I would say, not really. There is a steady flow. It has been constant over the last several years. For the most part, we use that type of income for charitable work. We aren't really dependent on the Merton legacy or the Merton Trust to finance the monastery in any way. I would suspect that it did help in the very early days when *The Seven Storey Mountain* came out. It was also a time of great influx into the community. There was a certain cash flow problem, and I think the royalties probably did help a lot. At this point in our history, we're grateful for it, and we try to administer it with a proper Christian perspective, but it's not essential to our survival.

*Kilcourse:* One of the more recent initiatives you've taken here was the Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture meetings in 1992, 1993, and another coming in the fall of 1996.

*Kelly:* That certainly was, I suppose, inspired in some ways from Merton, but really Fr. Francis [Kline], who is now abbot at Mepkin, is probably more the visionary in that particular perspective. It was trying to follow through Merton's thought, to find the place where monastic communities can be influenced by the serious thinking that's going on in the wider society. At the same time, those persons can become more aware of monastic life and monasticism as a place of finding wisdom. I think, due to the fact that Fr. Francis went to be abbot at Mepkin, the Center really hasn't progressed with any strong impetus. It continued to be in its original vision, but I think there is space for it someday to develop into a more living type of relationship with the community and the wider world of persons with a contemplative instinct.

*Kilcourse:* Two years ago the Dalai Lama visited. I think in many ways that this event illustrates Merton's influence because of his own profound engagement with interfaith issues. Would you describe your impressions or memory of that day the Dalai Lama visited?

*Kelly:* He was a very easy person to be with. Actually, we had met the day before. We'd had a luncheon at Berea College with their president and trustees. At that luncheon, they seated me beside the Dalai Lama, I guess so we could talk monastic stuff. It was interesting. Also interesting, I wore my habit, just to be noticed. And he right away picked it up and recognized me as being from Merton's monastery. He mentioned this recurring thing he says about Merton—that Thomas Merton taught him most about what Christianity was—which is an admirable statement from such a person.

He asked me structure-type questions about our monastic communities and compared them to his own experience of monastic life. He asked me, surprisingly, "Are your monks celibate?" I said, "Well, it's not really something I ask them each day!" But his real interest was the whole difficulty of young boys who may join a monastery as young boys and then discover that it isn't really their way of life. How we dispense them from vows was what the question really concerned. And so we talked about that, and he talked about how, yes, that they often had to let the young men go out and become fathers, with the

understanding that they would come back and take up their life again as old men. So it was an interesting interchange. And we talked about the Trinity (and I'm sure I fell into some heresy). What else did we talk about? Yes, and we talked about politics and his own situation in Tibet.

When he came here the next day, we had a simple ceremony, and he was very responsive to us. He asked that we pray at Merton's grave. After he got up from the grave, I don't remember the term he used, but he said, "I have now prayed [I guess it would be the prayers of the dead that they say in their own tradition] for Merton, and our spirits are one again!"

*Kilcourse:* We've had decades of trying to coordinate Merton activities, publications, and conferences. Now with the birth of the Thomas Merton Center Foundation, it seems to offer a lot of possibilities. Would you tell us more about that?

*Kelly:* Like yourself, I hope it will pull together a lot of divergent activities and perspectives and just sort of "unify," in the best sense of the word, our efforts.

*Kilcourse:* You've invested a lot of your own energy and influence in this.

*Kelly:* Yes, I've always wished I'd been more disciplined or more regular in my pushing in that area.

*Kilcourse:* In 1967 Merton did something very unusual. He granted an interview for *Motive* magazine.<sup>7</sup> It was very rare that he'd do that sort of thing, but he included the pungent reminder that he reserved the right to resist being turned into a myth for parochial school children. How do we keep from mythologizing Merton that way?

*Kelly:* That's the real danger; everybody's always trying to make him into some type of a myth. I wonder if his voluminous writing isn't part of his own effort to keep from becoming a myth, so that the Legacy Trust's willingness to publish everything is a good way to follow up Merton's own desire. Because, if you read it all, there's a lot for edification, but there's also a way that one recognizes a very human, in the best sense of the word, person. Perhaps that's the best service we could do for him, that his whole work be known.

7. Thomas P. McDonnell, "An Interview with Thomas Merton," *Motive* 27 (Oct. 1967) 32-41.

It's interesting how brutally honest he is in writing about his own life. I think in some sense it makes him a much more acceptable person or model because one can find in him a lot of one's own reality—I wouldn't say struggles, but his own difficulties, something to relate to and something to find hope for. If this man could hold together such divergent and disparate views and bring them together, bring them to some type of resolution, then we too are hopeful for spiritual integration.

*Kilcourse:* You get a wide array of visitors and Merton visitors here at the guest house. You get the kind of spiritually-wounded people who are searching and who come to pilgrimages to his grave. How does the community here deal with this phenomenon?

*Kelly:* I think, for the most part, unless you're involved in the guest retreat house, you really don't encounter them. So the community isn't that aware of how many people are coming and going who are interested in Merton. So it really hasn't infringed in that way on us.

*Kilcourse:* Some of us have written that the essence of Merton the monk still eludes the biographers and commentators. How do you see that dimension in Merton studies?

*Kelly:* It would take someone with a lot of ability and a lot of patience to go through many of the works he read as an early monk. Someone would need to find those passages that he indicated in some way and so do a lot of work within the sources that influenced his own thinking. I think that though he wrote so much, he himself was still a very private person. No one really knew him. That may be a bit too dramatic, but he was a very, very private person. The depth of his own spiritual journey or what really were the workings there, I don't think were ever explicated totally.

I think he was and we see him as a very modern person, but yet at the same time, he was very steeped in the classical culture. The classical Latin church culture was something he always held very dear. A lot of Vatican II's changes were difficult for him, or he made light of them. So, I think there was in him this very profoundly classical Christian who held dearly to very traditional values in Church life, in Church expression. He saw them as life-giving. Certainly, he was always trying to find new ways, too. And I think that's what we're very much aware of, his pushing the boundaries all the time, but we don't

know where the anchor was. How to find that would be interesting. Who could?

*Kilcourse:* Well put, well put. I like that. What's the most important thing to remember about the Thomas Merton you knew?

*Kelly:* I suppose the great honesty always with himself and with others. Not honesty in the sense of being arrogant about it, or being demanding of the truth, or that he had the truth. But very honest about where he was or what he understood, what he believed. Yes, an honesty and directness. That would be what came to mind.