

'Truly Seeking God ... in Christ': An Interview about Thomas Merton with Chrysogonus Waddell, OCSO

*Conducted by Victor A. Kramer,
edited by George A. Kilcourse, Jr*

The following interview was recorded on 23 July 1980 and has heretofore remained unpublished. Fr Chrysogonus Waddell has been a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani since 1950. Fr Chrysogonus lived with Merton in community for 18 years, especially collaborating with Fr Louis on questions of musicology and liturgy. Fr Chrysogonus is a distinguished musicologist and scholar. He is editor of Liturgy O.C.S.O.

In the wake of the publication of Merton's journals, this interview seemed especially relevant to current discussions about Merton's life at the Abbey, his personality and his temperament. We offer it as a reflective memory by one of Fr Louis's fellow artists in the monastic community.

Kramer: I'll ask first, what exactly was your association with Thomas Merton?

Waddell: I came to the monastery in 1950, and first of all during the two years in my novitiate, he simply gave conferences to the novices and the young professed about once a week. Then he was my Father Master for about three years; and then after that it was a far more distant relationship. I saw him occasionally when we had discussions about technical matters touching on the liturgy or such topics; and from time to time I would go to him with special problems—not what you would call a close relationship.

And then there was a complex relationship. He was just absolutely wonderful all the time, almost always without fail. But, I, more or less, represented the Liturgy for him. There were all kinds of dynamics in the relationship here, because I would walk into the room,

'Liturgy Personified', which would create a problem for him, I think. But that never intruded itself in our relationship. As I say, he just had a genius for spiritual direction, for being able to take an objective stance, being able to help a person discern the will of God in a very objective way without getting all that personally or emotionally involved. I repeat, he was just tops.

*Actually I don't think anyone here in the monastery was all that particularly close to him, at least among those who have stayed. (He was a 'private' person in most of his community contact, and didn't invite much by way of personal intimacy.) I think there were some to whom he felt more sympathetic, people like Ernesto Cardenal or Fr John of the Cross, who you would almost think got sometimes emotionally dependent. But, in general, I think he was a man who was tremendously solitary, and he could show various aspects of himself having to do with people according to the circumstances. I think you would be a little bit puzzled if there was anyone in the Community who would say that they had an especially close relationship, apart, maybe, from Dom James or someone who really had pretty immediate, direct contact with him over a long period of time. This is why I do get a little irritated when I read articles by people like Gerald Groves who get these 'insights' into Thomas Merton ... like 'My Ten Years with Thomas Merton', the title of an article Groves wrote for the *The Critic*¹ not long after he left the community.*

Kramer: Fr Louis was interested in questions about the liturgy.

Waddell: Tremendously!

*Kramer: That book *Seasons of Celebration* has major components in it about liturgical questions and so on.*

Waddell: He was one of the greatest. Now when it came to celebrating the liturgy, I think he was tremendously partial (in the sense of one-sided or incomplete). He never had very much by way of a real theological foundation that was deeply personal to him. When it came to interiorizing the text and really celebrating the liturgy in depth, I don't think there is anyone to compare with Fr Louis.

Yet, he had all kinds of hangups when it came to the liturgy in certain areas. I know when I first came here, Dom James already was very much concerned with improving the quality of Gregorian chant. So we had Community practices quite frequently and Fr Louis used

1. 'Fourteen Years with Thomas Merton', *Critic* 21 (April-May 1963), pp. 29-32.

to get quite upset at that. And then the way he had to analyze things: Any bishop didn't know anything about prayer, and professional liturgists didn't know anything about real prayer; and so he had very clear-cut categories.

He was very much concerned, I think, at a certain level of thinking of liturgy—in terms of a series of *exterior* actions and *exterior* exercises and so forth—and reducing it to something that is very inadequate. But I think when he actually came to *experience* it, it not only provided him with tremendous material on the interior life but it also provided a matrix in which he theologized, and thought and contemplated. And you know yourself how in his books, these liturgical texts, biblical texts, are all the time at the heart of it.

Kramer: Do you think the monastery, during the earliest years when Fr Louis was here, was different in terms of how the liturgy was part of the life?

Waddell: Yes, in several different respects. First of all, it was enormously more ample than it is now. When I first came, they had the Office of Our Lady everyday, the Office of the Dead every day, plus the solemn Canonical Office. And we had a heavy work schedule. There was very, very, little time. So, for several years before that, I think Fr Louis was much concerned about reducing (you might say) the quantity of liturgical prayer, for the sake of what he thought should be more serious prayer—to get the Office over quickly, and then you would have more time for your serious prayer in solitude. I can understand that absolutely perfectly. And, so, that is an important factor. Gradually it was realized—I forget what the dates were... 1956, something like that—when the Little Office of Our Lady was dropped, the Office of the Dead was reduced to just once a month. So we did have a little bit more air in which to breathe.

But at that time everything was in Latin and Gregorian chant. Now there was no one who loved to chant, and the Latin, more than Fr Louis. And I think that development paradoxical. I suppose you know his fine takeoff on Rahner's study of the Christian Diaspora?² It's been a long time since I read Father Louis's article but, as I remember, he more or less argued that the time is going to come when we were going to have real monks in an urban setting, maybe over a tavern or a beer garden or something. But you have to be careful not to throw out the really important things, like the chant, the

Latin, the traditional texts—Latin Gregorian chant. And so he had passionate love for the liturgy, especially for the interiorization of the liturgy. For him, *that* was the almost essential item.

That nevertheless raised enormous problems for a lot of people in the Community. Newcomers, upon experiencing difficulties in achieving the goal of 'contemplative prayer', would feel frustrated in their efforts to push the right button so as to produce the desired effect—instant contemplation. Or, again, the monk who *did* experience a kind of spiritual 'high' or peak experience would try to prolong it by some kind of unrealistic psychological effort. When this didn't work, the tendency was to blame it on the liturgy. And I think when it came to Fr Louis, throughout his whole life, there was an intellectual dichotomy. I don't think that was ever resolved in a really significant way. But I think at the level of experience, it was quite, quite the opposite. His actual experience was positive. He always celebrated the Office in Latin. I remember when I told him, a year or two before his death, that Prime was no longer obligatory in the Order, so we didn't have to say Prime unless he wanted to, and he said, 'Chrysogonus, Prime is a problem for you cenobites, not for us hermits'. And so he always prayed his Office. Sometimes when he was outside the monastery, other monks were a little broader in interpretation of the obligation to the Office, and were a little taken aback: Fr Louis, the *avante garde*, appearing in an activist life, but still hauling out his Breviary in order to say Vespers at awkward times of day. So, he was absolutely great when it came to the Liturgy.

You can see it in the early days, for example, some of his class notes. He was giving a course on St Paul, so he started speaking about Dom Odo Casel, the great liturgist of Maria Laach who was really one of the great founders of a certain school of theology that was of tremendous importance for liturgical renewal. So Fr Louis had never read Dom Odo Casel in the original German. He knew German, but it wasn't his language. He felt impatient with it because it just didn't come all that spontaneously. Well, at any rate, he had read nothing but articles *about* Dom Odo. He started in by giving a very positive appreciation of Dom Odo, and then towards the end of his notes, he tore this poor man to pieces for absolutely ridiculous, odd reasons because Dom Odo was the official 'liturgist'. Therefore he has Dom Odo patronizing the thesis that Christian sacraments depend directly on your Greek mystery religions, so then Fr Louis speaks on the tauroloium, the baptism of blood, under slaughtered ox or bulls, and all that sort of nonsense, and has Dom Odo depending on all of this business for his exposition of Christian liturgy. Well, he could do

2. See Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), pp. 93-120.

really stupid things like that when it came to liturgy.

Take, for example, his relationship with Jacques and Raissa Maritain. I think they influenced him very much with their very poor book *Liturgy and Contemplation*, which has wonderful things in it, but they were writing about liturgy in a very delimited way. They began with a totally false presentation of a liturgy with respect to contemplation. Are you familiar with the book? Well, so you know how for the Maritains contemplation equals an act of infused *charity*, a theological virtue; liturgy equals an act of the *moral* virtue of justice. The highest, most immediate contact with God, liturgy, is defined in terms of worship which is the function of the moral virtue of justice—for a completely different level or category which has as its object just giving each what is his or her due. For liturgy then is concerned with giving God what is his due, meaning worship. So you can't compare liturgy, no matter how exalted it is, with contemplation. That's absolutely ridiculous because liturgy, objectively, means faith and hope and charity, meaning the whole mystery of Christ. I mean, it's all mixed, it's off on the wrong premise to begin with, and there's something tragic about that book. And Fr Louis, I think, would never, never, never be able to disassociate himself from a treatment like that because of its prime emphasis on the contemplative aspect of our interior vision of the liturgy (which is absolutely essential).

And I really think in this particular area, Fr Louis when he was most spontaneous, would write most beautifully about the liturgy. I know he gave some conferences to the novices on the liturgy based on some class notes that I had brought back from Rome. And he'd always say the right thing; but I don't think that was central in his own personal life, although I think he was the greatest I know for celebrating the liturgy. And he needed a formal liturgy, a structured liturgy. He would freeze if he were put in a spot in the Liturgy where he would have to be 'liturgical'. I think it was a bit psychological at times. Everyone knows how he fainted once in chanting the Gospel, and the Cantor was never able to put him down to sing a lesson by himself, or to do anything by himself in the liturgy. He always had to be with a group or with one other person. And so he did have, I think, psychological hang-ups there.

Kramer: This was true throughout all these years?

Waddell: Oh, from the time he was a deacon. When I would make the appointments for the various Offices on feastdays, I could put him down for a responsory because the part of the responsory he would have to sing was always sung with another person. But you could

never put him down for anything where he would be the only one who was singing or doing anything at a particular time. And, I think that was—well, he always thought people were looking at him. (People did tend to try to catch a glimpse of the famous Thomas Merton.) But he could also be enormously spontaneous. I remember his telling me about some home Masses he celebrated in Louisville, towards the end of his life; how he was in the home of a black friend on one occasion and he just improvised a long blessing at the end of the Mass—'the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac' and so forth—and one of the little girls in the family got the giggles and so her father gave her a swat, and Fr Louis was just absolutely in hysterics practically. In our own monastic context he'd freeze, so to speak, at the idea of being asked to be spontaneous and uninhibited in his style of celebration.

He also had an unwillingness to take part in anything highly structured by way of Chapter Room series of conferences. For example, a series of conferences on ecclesiology in the various Fathers and theologians was given. He was assigned St Ignatius of Antioch. He disliked the idea of a formal series of 12 conferences on a set theme, but his own contribution was a quite wonderful one.

And he had all kinds of other hang-ups, too. For example, he never allowed a dialogue Mass in the novitiate. He thought that was contrary to the Cistercian tradition. He was irritated at the idea of homilies at Mass, and he felt that was contrary to the Cistercian tradition. We had always had our sermons in the Chapter Room. So, generally, he would be very defensive beforehand on questions of change in that area, and then he would come around. Although I don't think he ever came around with regard to the question of a dialogue Mass and I do not know what would have happened if he lived another three or four years. He was very much opposed, I think, personally, to change to the vernacular for the Community liturgy. He always had this very strong personal position. Fr Louis was predisposed to assume that in questions touching on things such as liturgical renewal, the rebuilding of the church, the election of an abbot, etc., the Community would make poor decisions based on superficial motives poorly reasoned. But then he actually was extremely pleased, I think, with some of the concrete results. So he could shift his position, I think, in certain questions. I know that when the Cantor suggested to him that he pray the Office in English he really hit the roof.

Kramer: He didn't like that very much?

Waddell: No! No! I pray the Office in Latin myself, and so I appreciate Fr Louis.

Kramer: What you're saying is very valuable. I was just wondering how some of the other monks might have reacted to Fr Louis's rather conservative way of thinking?

Waddell: I think he was a great example of a person who really sums up something at an important period. I mean, it's just as important to realize that he was not only, you might say, looking forward, but he had his roots in the old tradition which is very positive, and which he loved very much, and was a real formative influence. St Bernard has a wonderful passage in one of his sermons on the Song of Songs prayer: He's speaking about the church, the *Ecclesia*—'*occulata ante et retro*'—she has eyes that look forward and backward, and she can't move forward into her eschatological fulfillment unless she knows where she comes from, where the roots are. Fr Louis was very much like that. People like Johann Sebastian Bach. He didn't do anything specifically new, but he summed up just what was creative in preceding tradition and opened the way for new development. Seems to me Fr Louis is a person who was very much along those lines. So to minimize his roots in tradition, I think, would to some extent be disastrous. He encouraged that in some ways. I don't think he was all that 'honest' or open all the time.

He had such a deep sympathy for people that he could agree with them in so many different areas and disagree at real depth in other areas.

Kramer: Perhaps maybe even mislead?

Waddell: Yes! For example, people like the Berrigans. Mother Luke [Tobin], have you talked with her?

Kramer: No... no.

Waddell: She felt she knew Fr Louis very well.³ She did to a certain extent, and she used to come over here quite frequently, and he had a lot of contact with the nuns, her congregation, and made tapes for them about renewal and all that sort of thing. But she felt that Fr Louis was 100 per cent behind the Berrigan brothers. He loved them both but he was very shocked when Dan came here and celebrated Mass in what was then the lay brothers' chapel. There was a very

3. See 'Growing into Responsibility: An Interview [by Dewey Weiss Kramer and edited by Victor A. Kramer]', *TMA* 2 (1989), pp. 43-56.

great Baptist pacifist here at the time—I forget his name, a good man, one of the leaders of the non-violence movement—so Fr Dan gave him communion. Fr Louis was shocked. He would, with all of his ecumenical openness and his love for this man, approve some acts of public protest. But that [giving him communion] really shocked him. And I think what Dan did, Fr Louis just absolutely abhorred but he might just make a passing comment or say something in private, but when it came to something public, then he would make some kind of vague qualification. Like, 'I might not be able to go along with you all the way, but nevertheless your basic intuition or your basic intentions are in the direction of truth'.

Well, take Joan Baez, for example, when she paid a visit here and Fr Louis invited me up to the hermitage—this is the year before he died [1967]. I think it had been an enormously difficult year. He was tremendously bitter and extremely unjust in many things he said.

Kramer: You mean he was frustrated.

Waddell: Oh, tremendously! It was the first time in his life he was able to have everything he wanted, and everything was going sour for him, and he was tremendously bitter. And he was coming out with all kinds of extremes, really untrue statements. They were discussing her Institute for Non-Violence. But she was the most beautiful person, extremely naive in some ways and asking sincere questions, kind of stupid questions at times, and he would make remarks about Joan, such as, 'You have the real monasticism there in California'. Well, I think that has to be qualified a little bit. Her problem was keeping the young people off drugs, or what to do about the unwanted babies that were being born, and that's not exactly ideal monasticism. But at any rate, he had a beautiful relationship with her. So she would say something that he obviously couldn't morally agree with, but he would simply skirt around that and then come out with some area in which they could really make music together, so to speak. A few weeks later, she got herself arrested with a certain amount of difficulty. I think she was in the hoosgow for her protesting. I always had admired the woman. I had a real love for her, a real admiration for her truth, and in many different areas. But Fr Louis made some nasty comments about, 'Poor Joan. She felt she was the high priestess of this particular movement'. Something completely contrary to what he would probably state in public. I think it was part of his reaction and I think it's important.

Often in his writing and in his public statements, I think, a lot of the stuff had to be put into the context to really get a more rounded

picture. He was all the time talking about renewal and the need for making major changes and so forth. Are you familiar with his private journals?

Kramer: Well, many of those private journals are not available.

Waddell: I don't know what the conditions are. I thought some people had access to them at Bellarmine.

Kramer: Well, a good number of them are simply closed until Michael Mott will be done.

Waddell: Well, practically every other page he's lamenting about the passing of the good old days. At one and the same time, a need for a radical renewal, a real nostalgia that's almost in conflict with many things in the past. So, very, very, very complex!

Kramer: Let me ask you a question about Fr Louis's appreciation for music. I know there's a long poem which he wrote early for Paul Hindemith. Would you like to say a little bit about that?

Waddell: In fact one of the first things that happened when I became a young junior (we called them Scholastics, at that time), was his asking me something about my musical background. He asked me if I had any music by Paul Hindemith. And it just so happened—although we had very little in our music library at that time, by way of organ music—I did have the three organ sonatas of Paul Hindemith. And so we went to church and I played two sections of these three organ sonatas, and he told me Hindemith had proposed a collaboration and setting something to music. So he started what was really a relatively modest poem, about a page or a page and a half—I really forget the theme. I know there's something about the *Sternkreis*, the constellations and the galaxies. Paul Hindemith visited here one Holy Thursday, with his wife. (I think her name was Elizabeth, and she's a Catholic.) Fr Louis told me of their satisfaction about the liturgy and what a wonderful fellow Hindemith was. Fr Louis was worried about maybe the violence of some of the images. Hindemith would say, 'Ah, if that's violence!' And then he was describing violence that he had set to music, and things about people being slaughtered. Fr Louis enjoyed him tremendously. And then I hear what happened; the poem got longer and longer, and ended in this morality play. I don't know what the final story was, how the collaboration terminated. But I was really quite disappointed that Hindemith finally didn't go ahead and set something of his to music. You might know much more about it. You have had access to the correspondence, maybe?

Kramer: Well, I'm aware of some of the things you're talking about, but I think that probably developed into an oratorio which remained in manuscript, and then that was converted and finally became the morality play *The Tower of Babel*, and so you could probably work through three versions.

Waddell: Hindemith himself never set it to music. Now I understand there was a broadcast performance of that with incidental music—at Catholic University, was it?

Kramer: I don't know if there's a tape of that.

Waddell: I really must ask Brother Matt Scott. He's now an oblate in the Community. At that time he was living in the guest house and he had a radio. I think he had heard of the broadcast. Of course I was deeply interested in that. I had already *granted* the fact that he was a genius. At that time he sent us some recordings and we had no music library to speak of. What music recordings our Abbot allowed us to have were Gregorian chant recordings and that was quite a novelty at that time. So Fr Louis had a more or less private collection, and he played a couple of Hindemith's works for the Juniors or the Scholastics, mainly 'The Four Temperaments'. So he had a wonderful time with that. And then Hindemith would send him other music from time to time. One of Fr Louis's favorite recordings was Landowski's recording of the Goldberg variations. He wasn't all that knowledgeable from the technical standpoint, but a person who could really listen and react at a very deep level, really interiorize. I think he had a marvelous instinctive appreciation for things like Gregorian Chant. He sometimes enjoyed things that were a little bit on the outward edge of reality. He had an uncle who liked Kansas City jazz, and he himself once played Kansas City jazz. So he had sentimental associations with that. I remember once I had gotten a recording of Strauss's 'Electra' and he asked to borrow it, and I pretended to be shocked: 'You? That decadent music?!' Then he would really think I was serious for a moment, and he blushed, 'Well, my uncle used to like it'. But he liked—although he came out with blasts about organ music. Nevertheless, he could be very appreciative about a lot of the music on the organ.

At that time we had about ten or fifteen organists and it was just awful. It was often like beer hall music, absolutely lewd, especially if you had it at Christmas time. As soon as I was made choir master I tried to phase it out, the organ playing of Christmas carols during the Christmas midnight Mass, and I tried to get Fr Louis's support, and I

got a direct command from the Abbot to return to the old tradition. I remember once when I was crying on Fr Louis's shoulder about that. A former brother Fr Francis de Sales played at midnight Mass and it was absolutely ghastly; and Fr Louis said that he had never been raped before, but surely it must be an experience like that. It was awful! Just the poorest type accompaniment, which went completely *au contraire* to the genius of Gregorian chant. So the organ was only used for pontifical Masses. He would be the first one to be happy about it. We only used the organ for pontifical Masses at that time. At that time Masses for him summed up everything that was most evil about monastic liturgy. I mean to say that Fr Louis hated an excess of artificial ritual and medieval-style overblown ceremonies. Still, he loved the same ritual in its simple, austere, classical forms.

Kramer: Today in the monastery, do you have a pretty good music library of recordings?

Waddell: Oh, it's very uneven. We had an enormous amount of junk, but a lot of really good music, too.

Kramer: But someone could listen to music on a fairly regular basis?

Waddell: We have about five or six different sets with earphones, and then we have a special room for listening to music. I once got Fr Louis a new machine which was a stereo player. He thought that that meant he was no longer able to play any of his most loved monaural recordings on the new machine. Instead of asking me an intelligent question about it, or making some kind of objection, he didn't say anything. It was only by accident two weeks later, I realized that he thought he had been given something which he really didn't want or shouldn't have had. So I explained the situation, and he could still play his monaural recordings.

Kramer: He wasn't very mechanical.

Waddell: No. I remember once he was playing a recording—I think it was the Goldberg variations to the novices—and Brother Killian who was in charge of everything electronic walked into the room and Fr Louis had all the adjustments completely the opposite of what was supposed to be. That never phased him the least bit! He wasn't sensitive to that aspect. He heard the voice line, or he heard the substance of the music. But just the *sheer* sound, the tone quality, the mere acoustical quality of it just didn't make that much of an impression on him. And a lot of people I know who are electronic experts hear nothing but the pure physical sound of it.

Kramer: I wanted to ask a question about his physical appearance. Could you say a few words about what you remember about his face, and about how he carried himself?

Waddell: I suppose, you know, so much has been said about that already. But he was a tremendously changeable person. He reflected a great deal into the way he comported himself. I think many of the brethren thought he was very excitable. I remember one of them used the term 'French babbler' which is a technical expression. But at times he would, like myself, wave his arms around, and use his whole body. At other times, he could quite consciously just be physically totally recollected. I think it took an effort of will. If, for example, the Abbot came over to speak with the novices then Fr Louis, in the Abbot's presence, would simply fade into the background. It was a little bit unnatural because I think most of the time it was more normal for him in a given situation not to dominate it but to be at the center, and maybe bring out the best of other people participating. But with an authority figure, he would quite consciously just withdraw. And you see him, for example, in photographs occasionally taken of the community celebrating the liturgy. You'll find Fr Louis there in the deepest recollection. It's just something almost—something metaphysical. And so I think that was part of his technique. I know he used to practice yoga during one particular period and then he had difficulty with his back and sort of turned to Zen. So, I think that was quite serious. And I think he was worried about putting on too much weight towards the end of his life. I remember once he remarked to me that he hoped it wasn't compulsive eating. It was more than just a joke.

Kramer: Well, he was very systematic and he was very aware of doing things in blocks of time, and making sure that everything would develop, so there were different patterns for different times. Do you have any recollection of how he actually went about his writing?

Waddell: Well, I remember once I got him a little bit irritated. He was telling me about how he went about his writing in the afternoon. He would go off for a couple of hours to St Ann's field, and sit under what used to be a little sort of shed with a bell. It's no longer there. Or he'd sit on the ground, and toward the end of the afternoon what he had written would come to about ten pages of paper. And then I made some kind of vague comment about maybe it would be good to go over the material more carefully and the immediate response was, 'But I'm a very careful writer!' He took it as a real criticism, and I

suppose it was. I really hadn't meant it. I was not in any position to criticize Fr Louis as a writer. Although I guess I felt sometimes it would maybe be better to have sat on a few ideas a bit longer and work out things a little more carefully. So, I think he was a tremendously intuitive person and usually the first draft was splendid and really would pass muster. He really didn't have to do that much rewriting all the time. But I think he might have felt a little bit guilty about that, at times. And so I got the impression he really thought of himself as a very, very careful writer. I think actually a lot of the time he spent in quiet prayer, in solitude, actually part of that was just for his thinking of life, organizing ideas, getting involved with his subject.

Kramer: You think he felt guilty about writing?

Waddell: I have to be very, very careful. Who really knows what goes on in Fr Louis's mind? I think anything you can say about Fr Louis would be true to a certain extent. Or anything you could say would not be absolutely false to a certain extent. So, I think it's going to differ. He was embarrassed by *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and I heard the monks make terrible remarks about that. And towards the end of his life when he wrote an evaluation of his works, if I remember right—you'd remember better than I—he put *The Seven Storey Mountain* among those at the very highest. Maybe he meant so far as what is important. And I know I had to answer I don't know how many letters from irate Anglicans when they took exception to what Fr Louis had said about the intercommunion or about the presentation of religion with respect to society or...

Kramer: You mean letters that came later?

Waddell: That's right! And so Fr Louis was very conscious of the fact that he might have prevented disparity in some areas, or that he had exaggerated. He disliked his books like *The Ascent to Truth*. Now I found that tremendously helpful.

Kramer: It's interesting.

Waddell: Yes, it's interesting. I think it's an important book, too. And so some books, I think, he kind of tossed off, and some of his material that came out of his journals... you know, that's a different background from what went into a book like *The Ascent to Truth* or his essay on contemplation and poetry.⁴ I guess it appeared in one of his

4. 'Poetry and the Contemplative Life', *Commonweal* 46 (4 July 1947), pp. 280-86.

early selections of poems, and then he wrote a 'retraction'⁵ of it years later. I think probably both of those essays are tremendously important. I wouldn't say that the second absolutely cancels out the first. I think maybe something of the first really always remained. I think there were those areas that just weren't resolved in Fr Louis's lifetime. So, I used to get a little irritated at some of his 'anti-poems' and I thought he could be just a little glib. I remember making once a remark that he didn't like too much. He was speaking with a group of the Community about his 'anti-poems' and reading out loud; he began by saying that this isn't supposed to 'mean' anything. You're not supposed to look for any meaning in it! And then he started reading these 'anti-poems' which I find are tremendously exciting; and then he started asking the question, 'What did you get out of it?' And they got quite irritated. Some of the brethren obviously answered 'I haven't gotten anything out of it'. And then I asked the question, 'Were we supposed to get something out of it?'

So, I think he could write things carefully, and I think he could write things really light, facilely and at the same time without that much organization. I wouldn't want to compare him in this area with someone like Bach. During the last ten years of Bach's life everything he wrote was a masterpiece. But he only wrote when he had some commission that he had to carry out. And so actually writing for him didn't do anything to deepen the musical experience. He didn't have to do this. He didn't have to write it on paper. And I think with Fr Louis he had such a facility that there were certain things he wrote with great ease and very spontaneously which were just absolutely beautiful, practically perfect. And so I don't think he should have to work and slave over the direction of that type of material. And, then also I know he was almost all the time correcting his poetry. He has marks or annotations; I found a volume in the library which I gave to Brother Patrick for, I guess, the comprehensive edition of all of his poems; and at the very end of his life he was still going over some of his earlier work.

Kramer: Was this some of his first...?

Waddell: I forget — *A Man in the Divided Sea!*

Kramer: Do you think that Fr Louis's contact outside the monastery was a help?

5. *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1959), pp. 107-35.

Waddell: Oh, sure. I don't think there's any question about that. I think it was a unique vocation. I think he needed the Community, and I think he needed the absolute solitude, and I think he needed outside contacts.

Kramer: Do you think that towards the end of his life he was getting a little bit impatient with maybe too much contact? Like you mentioned, talking about Joan Baez ...

Waddell: Oh, he was all the time impatient, the most impatient person that I think I ever knew! I think that was an essential component in his personality. And there are different levels of impatience. Now, once again, I hate anything that resembles psychoanalyzing. I think there's something indecent about someone sitting back and going into someone else's deeply personal experiences. So sometimes he was impatient, and impatient in a very stupid, superficial, childish-like way; and impatient about the really important things, a real longing for coming of truth of a real order of charity.

Kramer: Do you feel that towards the end of his life he was trying to do too much?

Waddell: I don't think it was too much. I think he was the kind of person who was at his best when he was doing a lot of things that seemed apparently incompatible with the way he had analyzed his own vocation at an earlier stage. I remember he was all the time making statements in which he was very defensive about anyone trying to categorize him. So he didn't claim to be a hermit, monk, you know, in a certain sense. And he didn't claim to be anything. He just had his own personal unique vocation. So, I'm sure if he had gone to Sri Lanka or someplace and set up a little laura with Father Flavian, 15 different projects would have been in the offing.

Kramer: Well, would you say it's in this way he really made contributions to develop monasticism ... because he was always dreaming all these projects?

Waddell: I don't think so. I could not qualify that very much because I guess I really don't believe all that much in individual charismatic people being responsible for a significant new shift. I think Fr Louis is a person who incarnates a certain tendency that is already operative. I remember in Fr Louis Lekai's book, *The Cistercians*—a fairly recent book about the Cistercian Order—when he came to speak about the Trappists and in the final chapter in his original draft he spoke about the dramatic conversion of Thomas Merton and how this attracted so

much attention. But I think for Fr Louis it constituted a little-known Trappist monastery in the knobs of Kentucky, and then there's a deluge of vocations which followed this dramatic conversion of Fr Louis. OK. Who had heard of Fr Louis? And it was quite a few years before *The Seven Storey Mountain* came out. Already the Community was bursting at the seams. Charismatic people like Fr Louis synthesize or crystallize ideals which are already present in some inchoate way. I don't think Fr Louis created or inaugurated anything, but I do think he crystallized and expressed ideals and experiences and aspirations in a way no one else had done in the milieu influenced by him. So, I think when it comes to monastic renewal it's not one thing—that Fr Louis is all that original. When it comes to the Peace Movement, he was never what you call a pioneer. He would always point to three or four people who definitely preceded him. But I think when he articulates it, that he is a person, maybe, who sums up in his own experience and his own writings something very significant. He wasn't the first hermit, for heaven's sake. He was participating in a movement that's kind of endemic in monastic life and it hadn't been, I think, for some time.

Kramer: Do you think this is why so many different kinds of leaders are attracted to Merton?

Waddell: I think he is a man for all seasons, and a man for a lot of people and all kinds of people. Sometimes he used to feel a certain hesitation. I hadn't had any contact with this ... is it Monica ...?

Kramer: Furlong, yes. Her book is done now.⁶

Waddell: Now I understand there are a few difficulties about it. She had turned Dom James into a great villain? Fr Louis's main villain was Fr Louis. And then again, he always integrated something within a deeper experience and it wasn't a question of his leaving one thing for another thing, but I think his maybe reaching out and integrating something within that may be deeper. My own impression is that it wasn't a question of 'leaving behind' but of integrating his past in a new, more vital and broader synthesis. More a question of integration than of rejection. So, I really think that towards the end of his life he had more or less given up the seriousness of monastic renewal in spite of the fact he talked about it a lot. He made statements that we shouldn't talk about contemplation, but of course he was still talking

6. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

about it. But I think he felt he was writing for people outside a specifically monastic context, and I think he was thinking more that if you're really going to have real contemplatives, it's going to be outside purely defined structures.

Kramer: Do you think that was the direction in which he was going?

Waddell: Well, I think he was really writing very much for people who weren't specifically Christian, and so it was a question of presenting things that mean the most to him in categories that would be an area where they could understand each other. So, when he's talking about contemplation and spiritual liberation and freedom, that is exactly the point, but I think the deepest reality for him was the mystery of Christ. Christ was the center of Fr Louis's experience, even when he couldn't or wouldn't be explicit about this (often because of the persons to whom he was addressing himself). I think he thought it was something of a rupture, or an area of difficulty between the truth and those to whom he was addressing. And I think also there is a real humble streak there, not a streak of pride, but a streak of real humility. In his better moments he was really serious about wanting to learn from other people and so that he would maybe avoid areas where there would be fundamental differences, and was really trying to elicit what the other person could share with him that would mean a real communion. So, I think a lot of his more recent writings in a certain sense then are contemplative, but I would prefer reading them as if I'm *not* too concerned with the real Fr Louis. I myself always wanted to read them against the background, the dimension of his specifically Christian experience, and orientation. That may be confusing.

Kramer: I understand what you're saying. I really think, if I'm understanding you correctly, you're talking about this core in his life, and therefore in his writing as well, which is that mystery which can never really be fully verbalized.

Waddell: He couldn't do it. He did it differently at different times. I think he was a compulsive writer and a compulsive thinker and he had insomnia, you know the type of person who was all the time—just wheels were going around. That can be an unbearable type of experience. He was tensed all the time and he would come out and would write thoughts, deeper insights, and I think that must have been an occasion of tremendous suffering for him. But I think he was much better as Master of the Scholastics than as Master of the Novices because I think the first two years he was Master of the Novices, he

gave excellent spiritual conferences about rules, regulations and monastic history and so forth. After two or three years, he couldn't stand repeating himself, he got bored. Well, he had to go into questions that were tremendously interesting, but questions which, for newcomers, were a little more on the marginal side. Fr Louis was at his best with young monks who already had the 'basics'.

Kramer: Do you think he really thought very much about an audience, a particular audience, when he was writing poems or when he was writing journals? Do you think he was thinking in terms of books which were geared to particular audiences?

Waddell: Oh, sure! I don't think there was much doubt about it. But Fr Louis is much more virtuous than I think a lot of people realize, but I think precisely because he had to really struggle against a lot of very negative tendencies. And I think one of the most serious of them was his exhibitionism. I think from the time when he was a youngster, he could have come on as the greatest exhibitionist. I remember when I spent the summer in France. Once I went by his old hometown, Saint Antonin, near Montauban, I had a little three-dollar camera, and I thought I would take a couple of photographs of the little home his father had built. So I visited there and did identify myself; and actually I didn't take the photographs, the local parish priest did. The place is owned now by a retired vineyard grower from Bordeaux, and he's a wonderful old man. So, he brought us into the house and showed us around and showed how things had been changed from the time Fr Louis had been there, and he showed us the fireplace and on this big fireplace, very beautiful, you see scratched the initial 'T.M.' The little, little punk, I don't know how old he was—he had to put in his initials!

And I know once Fr Louis himself gave a kind of insight about himself. Once he was speaking about a type of person, the old maid: she would go through a ritual of locking up at night very carefully because she was afraid of being attacked, and obviously what she wanted most of all was to be raped. And so she goes through this kind of Freudian routine. Fr Louis would tackle it like that, all the time be defensive about this invasion of privacy. I think he sometimes wanted his privacy to be invaded, and at the same time, I think, he really honestly, when he recognized it, did what he could to suppress it. And sometimes I was a little taken aback.

I feel ashamed of saying that a year before he died, and he set up the Merton Trust, and he was telling me about it and said, 'You know, what would happen if I were to die suddenly? And what would

happen if all of these manuscripts I...?' I didn't say anything but I kind of thought, 'It could be you're a monk, you're supposed to be detached from all this. So what?' So I didn't feel it was exactly very important that he set up the Trust, but he certainly had an enormous amount of foresight, and prophetic vision. You know, for myself, with my puny way, I'm resigned about things, it's just that you die suddenly! And throw the stuff into the wastepaper basket and that's that! I think I was just a little taken aback that he felt that everything he said and everything he wrote was significant.

Kramer: He was always very aware of this because if we go back to those earliest years, what was he doing? He was writing and putting it all in envelopes and sending it off to Sister Thérèse and Sister Thérèse has all this material. And the same day, literally, the day before he came here in December of 1941, he stuffed a lot of things into envelopes and sent it to Bob Lax and Mark Van Doren: 'Hold on to this. It might be valuable.'

Waddell: I don't think it was really a double life but I think his real need was to feel sat on, and to feel a little bit persecuted. He wasn't comfortable, I think, with being just accepted. He needed desperately to be a real prophet, and a prophet just can't be understood. So I think when people understood him he was afraid of being understood by the Establishment. Then he would react desperately against that. I don't think he could negotiate a thing if he felt all that perfectly accepted by the Community.

Kramer: Part of it would be then he would have to, in one part of his mind, imagine that he was persecuted.

Waddell: He never had to be dishonest because he's complex enough. And in this situation complex enough, he could always have what the philosophers called '*fundamentum in re*'—a foundation in fact. But most of the real antagonisms were completely trivial. I think from time to time he himself realized that. Like between Fr Raymond and himself. I mean, if you know Fr Raymond, you have to love him; but he generally showed his love by beating people over the head, coming out with pontifical statements or calling someone a heretic. He did that to me. He did that to everybody.

Kramer: Did Fr Louis and Fr Raymond have a lot of tension?

Waddell: Oh, all the time! It was absolutely embarrassing. Every time Fr Raymond would get up to give a sermon it was usually geared to some precise situation in the monastery and he would have a stream

of young monks coming to Fr Louis: 'He can't be right! He can't be right!' And then, Fr Louis getting up and giving conferences on *epektasis*, the concept of going on even in the Trinity, deeper into God. The more you know God, the more you can love him; the more you love God, the more you can know; and never coming to an end, an infinite journey into time. But it was difficult to reconcile with St Thomas, or later Scholastic theology. So there was Fr Louis, getting up and speaking about this with great passion, and showing with the help of some quotations, of even some Cistercian Father, that this was in the monastic tradition. Next month, Fr Raymond getting up and saying this is radical ... that's Eastern, that's not Catholic. Absolutely at loggerheads about spiritual stuff. But basically, Fr Raymond had so much love, and I think that included Fr Louis. But I think this is part of the difficulty between Dom James and Fr Louis. He just couldn't endure, you know, not having difficulty or not feeling rejected. And there were a lot of people who were very stupid about the material, and were extremely unjust and people inside the monastery and outside the monastery. I think he had a kind of compulsive need for ... I'm sorry. Maybe that's ...

Kramer: No, that's valuable, I think.

Waddell: Could I say one thing about the journals and *The Inner Experience*?⁷ It's kind of typical of Fr Louis. Twenty-five years before anyone can see them, etc. I found out the next day after he was dead. But part of the picture, I think, was that he didn't mean to create mystery, but he felt that was the prudent thing to do with *The Inner Experience*. My goodness, I think there's nothing illicit there. He had the compulsion, I think, maybe to read more into it. He left it with directions that it's not to be published till 25 years after his death. This suggests he felt it was too explosive or problematic for present publication. Actually, *The Inner Experience* is pretty run-of-the-mill material. Nothing new. Nothing controversial, nothing 'dangerous' or problematic. Still, Fr Louis had to overdramatize its 'explosive' character. It's almost as though he wanted to be considered somewhat dangerous or radical.

Also, with his private journal, he would experience things, definitely as a poet, and so he would portray things not all the time exactly as they happened with that much historical veracity. He wasn't dishonest, but giving more of his subjective response to

7. This was published in serial form in eight parts, *Cistercian Studies* 18–19 (1983–84).

concrete situations. So I would hear a bulldozer and get irritated. But when *he* heard a bulldozer outside the window of the Scriptorium, for him that was the whole of industrialism that was being accepted by the monastery, all of the anti-contemplative element, all the betrayal of our monastic ideals. He obviously experienced it in different ways than I did. That was the way he did many things, so he would get mad and brood over something and handle the situation perfectly when it came to personal relationships. But then he would go and write about it. And I think people reading his journals now ... I don't know if they can understand the historical context and Fr Louis and exactly what was involved. They'll never be able to understand it! And I'm positive that Fr Louis gave Bob Lax and Ed Rice and I don't know how many other people excellent material for this monstrous portrait of Dom James. And I'm sure as soon as you open up his private journal you're going to find page after page of what a monster Dom James is, and that just so happens to be ridiculous. I mean so completely unbalanced.

Kramer: I think that's a really important point, to be able to see the writing as something within a context which is changed by the metaphor.

Waddell: I remember once when I went over to Rome he had written a letter (maybe a half a year before I had gone to Rome for my studies) to a group of young monks at Monte Cistello—the Order's Generalate, monks who had been interested in the eremitical life. This was before he became a hermit himself. And so I forget what question they had been asking him, but he was in a rather bad mood when he answered. This was before I went to Rome ... I think he was writing on Easter Monday. Well, that's when we had introduced an innovation in our Holy Thursday liturgy. We followed the new Holy Week rubrics which allowed the communion antiphon to be repeated, with verses sung by the cantor, during the whole communion rite. (The standard practice till then had involved only the chanting of the communion antiphon a single time.) And Fr Louis was just absolutely fit to be tied, apparently; he didn't say anything in public about it, but he reacted very strongly. Now we're having music during the whole of the communion! And once again: "This is opposed to the *contemplative* dimension of the monastic liturgy!" And so in this letter he wrote in response to questions about the eremitical life and contemplative simplified communities and so forth, he has this absolutely outrageous paragraph in which he describes this enormity that had been perpetrated on his person. He divides the Community into nitwits

who are singing their head off, who knew nothing about contemplation; and the neurotic individuals who feel forced to submit themselves to this humiliation and go along with it, and feel very, very unhappy about it; and then those who are opposed to the government, and stalwartly maintain their integrity. That's the way he experienced that. And as far as I know it has practically nothing to do with the concrete situation. So I think he used to treat everything that way.

I remember once he was making his thanksgiving after communion in a little storage room in the rear of the old Sacristy, and the Sacristan just opened the door to look for something and he turned on the lights while Fr Louis was there, and flipped off the lights and left. But that afternoon we got a conference in the juniorate about the type of monastic personality who goes around snooping into other people's lives, and trying to turn the lights on their interior lives. I knew exactly—I was in the Sacristy at the time—what triggered that off. But I also know old Fr Cletus. He just had to get something from the room and he didn't realize Fr Louis was back there. So, all the time, Fr Louis was experiencing things in a poetic, symbolic way and I think his response was just marvelous. I think the thing that he says very often as a result of that type of experience is meaningful, but I would never reconstruct the historic situation on the basis of the way Fr Louis described it!

Kramer: When he made a remark about his anti-poems not really being about something you should look for meaning in, and then in effect starting, looking for meaning, he clearly knew what he was about, didn't he?

Waddell: Oh, sure! And all of them are filled with meaning.

Kramer: Or do you think he was disappointed with his brothers who wouldn't take the time?

Waddell: Oh, yes and no. With a situation like that, he was hoping that there would be some kind of a positive response. And then, when there wasn't, he, I know, would say to himself, 'What do you expect from a bunch of footdraggers like this?' And yet at the same time he loved everyone individually. There is no doubt about that. And he loved the Community as a whole.

Kramer: Did he ever say anything to you about their reception of his poetry? The kinds of readers he had?

Waddell: He never talked about his poetry. I really think he had some doubts about himself as a poet. Now, frankly, I did miss something in

his later writings that I shouldn't expect to find there but I do find and I love very much in the earlier writings, and that's a real spirit of praise, a kind of a lyric naivete, that I think is absolutely beautiful. So he gets more sophisticated toward the end of his life and also more bitter, and a lot more cynical, and a lot of understanding too, and tremendous suffering. And I wouldn't expect—it would be wrong—that he would maintain maybe some of the things that I loved so much in his early period. But I'm thinking towards the end of his life, in connection with his interest in people like Bob Dylan, and the times when Joan Baez came here. It was so funny. I very seldom came down here to the gatehouse. But this was an invitation, and Fr Louis was just going through this Bob Dylan kick. All of us had the impression at that time that Joanie and Bob Dylan were just as close as they could possibly be. And I didn't realize—and neither did Fr Louis—that they were really at each other's throats at that particular period. So I walked into the room, and he had just been going through this song and dance about Dylan, being creative, and what a genius he was. And Joan just laughed at him. She said, 'I don't think so at all!'

What Joan Baez was saying was that if you really look at so many of Dylan's protest songs, the attitudes he himself adopts are basically unjust, violent, anti-human—as in 'God's on our Side'. So we started talking a little about his poetry, and I had just played one of her recordings of one of Dylan's lyrics for the Community at a chant practice, I think, the evening before. So, then she asked me what it was. I said, 'The Ballad of Hattie Carroll'; and she said, yes, it was definitely one of his greatest lyrics. But then she went on to show that in his poetry and his own position he was basically anti-humanitarian. So she had a shrewd insight into maybe the drawbacks of a lot of Dylan's thinking. Fr Louis tended to take everything hook, line and sinker at that particular period. So, I think his book *The Geography of Lograire* is the type of poetic or symbolic expression that was more congenial. And I think really the anti-poems, too. But I think they're extremely uneven myself. And some of them were just simply superficial.

Kramer: They don't reflect the monastic life like his early poems. The earliest poems, maybe the first three books, really do reflect his enthusiasm about his life of praise and always being in a kind of an awe about it. As he became more aware of the world, or of that responsibility toward the world, then the poems change and it's almost like he's trying to do two things at once.

Waddell: I think you're referring to a real consciousness at the beginning, but I'm not too sure that it was more than an intellectual con-

struct. And I think he began seeing a lot of his superficiality about that sort of thing in the monastery. Actually those in a monastery have a tremendous, tremendous consciousness of the worldwide situations, and we were all the time caring about suffering and deprivation, and offering up prayer and 'sufferings' for this or that specific intention, all that sort of thing. And Fr Louis was always talking about the contribution of contemplative prayer to the life of this era, and that one second of contemplative prayer does more for the world than a great deal of 'action'. And I think that's all true. But I think he got somewhat disillusioned by the fact that a lot of people used to say this in a different, superficial way; or that Dom James would come out with this high, pure contemplation line; and then maybe a lot of the brethren weren't all living that deeply. So he would react. He thinks it's kind of a superficial approach.

I think Communism had a major influence in his life, in his earlier stage, a lot more than I think a lot of people realize. And all we would hear about Communism was the evils of atheistic Communism, or Chapter talks by people who would come out from the Iron Curtain, and all these awful things, but who said nothing ever happened behind the Bamboo Curtain or the Iron Curtain except what was cruel and awful. He detested this kind of oversimplification, but I think he was extremely naive in a lot of political judgment. That was just my impression, when he talked about Mao and China and so forth. You couldn't possibly go back to the old situation or glorify Chiang Kai-shek, or all that awful period. But at the same time you could be a little bit more balanced sometimes in your evaluation of current situations in China or Russia. But then he could always kind of see the bright spots of Russia and would think of things over here in the States as essentially negative.

He always had the genius for sarcasm and I think this is another area, like his tendency toward exhibitionism, where it required tremendous effort to keep that in check, and he could just be devastating. And I've seen him in so many situations where he refrained from making remarks that would absolutely kill a person. I remember once, he was speaking about the type of theological discussion that happened in our own Chapter Room where you'd have someone like Fr Raymond. And he'll present this position to the adversaries, and obviously it's an *adversary*; and he takes his opponent at a point where the adversary is the weakest; and then he'll exaggerate that point, and then he'll demolish the argument on the basis of that weakest point. So there's no possible way to have a real discussion. So, Fr Louis, then, I think, rather often would do that

thing. He'd take some little, trivial, minor point and blow it up and then address himself to that particular aspect, and then think he proved something of significance. But I think most of the time he avoided doing that. But he didn't succeed all the time. I've tried to suggest the wrong way to go about discussion of controversial questions according to Fr Louis.

Kramer: I think I might ask you just one more question and then I think we should stop. I don't know if there's an answer to this kind of question. If you had to make a comment about what you think is really the core of what Fr Louis contributed as a monk and as a writer, what do you feel is really most important about what he did as a monk?

Waddell: Oh, I think it's more important that he was a good monk. And I think I feel very strongly that as he once described what a monk is: 'A monk is a man who truly seeks God.' According to the Holy Rule, the Novice Master has to look at a candidate and ask '*Si revera quaerit Deum*'. And Fr Louis, I remember, just before he became Novice Master, had a couple of us who were helping him move his books to the other side of the monastery. He paused at the end of the afternoon and said, 'This is the last time I will ever be speaking to you as your Father Master, so what's the most important thing I have to say?' He said that the monk is the man who truly seeks God, and the emphasis has to be on the word 'truly' because you just can't seek God. A lot of people are doing that in a kind of funny way. You have to seek God *truly*, there where he has revealed himself most perfectly—in Christ. And I think Fr Louis was all the time seeking God *truly*. He said at that time—I never will forget it—that the moment you think you've found God all that perfectly, in that moment you've really stopped seeking God, and you've lost him.

I think Fr Louis was all the time *truly* seeking God. I think towards the end of his life he could have made some very, very serious mistakes. But I think of that as final purification. And, in a certain sense, you make a mess of things and then it's only God who can put everything together. And I think that's exactly what kind of happened. Nothing, in the final analysis, nothing worked out all that well. Yes, he had a sympathetic Abbot now, traveling any way he wanted; ideal conditions, he could do anything he wanted and it all turned to dust. And I think it should have turned to dust. I think that's what happens in the life of most of us until only God suffices. And, I guess, I feel really strongly that that was really what happened to Fr Louis. And I can't say I'm happy, you know, to say it, but I think those last two

years when he really was miserable was the final purification. I don't think he was in control of things any more, and God only knows to what extent He was responsible or whether there were different factors. I just know he was in a situation, and I think he felt lost.

And so for me, he's the one who was really, truly seeking God. And I think that this is really what most people really recognize in him.

Kramer: Yes, that's why they're attracted to him.

Waddell: And I think that was true from the beginning. And on the one hand, like I say, I don't like to keep talking about Fr Louis in a way because it's like an invasion of his privacy, and yet at the same time you have to because the most important thing about him is himself! And I remember once when I came as a postulant, the Guest-master was speaking to a group of retreatants, and he spoke about how one of the retreatants was speaking about Fr Louis's writings, and he asked 'Did Thomas Merton really experience what he's talking about?' And old Fr Francis said, 'He couldn't write the way he does if he hadn't experienced it'. And I think that this is what Fr Louis was, a man of experience. That's what attracts a lot of people who love him, or makes a lot of people hate him. *Some* people, they feel that this is so foreign to them or that they can't share in this, and they feel threatened by such thoughts.