

'A Journey into Wholeness': An Interview about Thomas Merton with Myriam Dardenne at Redwoods Monastery

*Conducted by Christine M. Bochen
with Victor A. Kramer
Edited by Christine M. Bochen*

Myriam Dardenne and Thomas Merton first met at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1962 when Sister Myriam and a small group of sisters visited there. They were on their way to California to found a new Cistercian monastery at Redwoods. Six years later, Sister Myriam and Merton met twice at Redwoods: first, in May 1968, while Merton was traveling in California and later, in October, as he was on his way to Asia. In this interview, Sister Myriam recalls their meetings, shares her impressions and memories of Merton, and reflects on his legacy.

Born in Belgium in 1920, Myriam Dardenne entered the Abbey of Nazareth at Brecht on 28 May 1953. In 1960, she became Abbess of the community at Nazareth and, in 1962, was dispatched to northern California to found Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey. Presently, she divides her time between living in California and Belgium. In 1998, Sister Myriam was one of five women who participated in a panel discussion at Bellarmine University, entitled Women Who Knew Merton, moderated by Christine M. Bochen. In 2001, Myriam Dardenne was a plenary speaker at the Seventh General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY.

Christine M. Bochen and Victor A. Kramer conducted this interview by telephone on 28 September 2000.

Bochen: We are grateful to you for your willingness to talk with us about Thomas Merton and to share what you remember about him

and how, in retrospect, you view your encounter with him. But we are also interested in you. May we begin this interview by asking you to tell us about yourself as a way of introducing yourself to us and to our readers?

Dardenne: I always find that the most difficult question to answer. What can one say about oneself?

Bochen: Perhaps you should start at the beginning. Where you were born?

Dardenne: I was born in a small village in the Belgian Lorraine in 1920. So I am 80 years old. There was a moment when I was 26 or 27, when the God of the books, the God of religion, the God of the catechism became the God of my life. And, at that point, it seemed that I needed to find, or to create, time and space to be with that Reality. I tried to do so while I was teaching French in a school that would correspond to a college in this country. For about three years, I tried to find time and to create space to be with that Reality which was so important in my life. But, with my job and my social commitments, it was difficult to do. Maybe I would see it differently today but, in the end, it seemed that a monastery was the place where I could pray and connect to God and where I could just be.

Kramer: How long were you teaching before you decided to go to a monastery?

Dardenne: I quit teaching at 32. My brother who was living in Africa, in what was then the Belgian Congo, was so upset to learn that I was entering a monastery that he asked me to spend my last vacation with his family in Africa. And so I did. I had checked with my future abbess and she said, 'Oh yes, you should do that.' I went to Africa and while I was there my brother and his wife lost a five-month old baby to cerebral malaria. They had another son, a three-year old. They couldn't return to Europe and they were fearing for his life. So they asked if I would spend the whole winter at the North Sea in Belgium with that little boy. I did. Instead of entering the monastery in 1952, I entered in May 1953 after my brother and sister-in-law were able to return to Belgium. As it turned out, my immediate preparation for the monastic life was to live in a cottage at the North Sea with a little boy.

Bochen: How did you decide to enter a Cistercian monastery?

Dardenne: There was a Cistercian monastery, the Monastery of Orval, about 4 to 6 kilometers from my home in the Belgian Lorraine. When I came home on vacation I would go to mass there on Sunday and I was very struck by the prayerful atmosphere, the beauty of the place. Orval had been destroyed during the French Revolution but it was restored in the 1930s. The restoration of the Abbey was modeled after the Abbey of Fountenay. Orval is a monumental type of Abbey, very beautiful—although I certainly wouldn't build a structure from the Middle Ages today. My contact with Orval was certainly influential in my choosing and asking to enter a Cistercian monastery. I should explain that my mother tongue is French and I entered a Flemish-speaking monastery on the north side of my country. In my zeal, I wanted to live a hidden life, like the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth prior to his public life. And also, I wanted to be sure I wouldn't be elected to leadership!

Bochen: It didn't work out that way, did it?

Dardenne: No.

Kramer: Your plan was to go to a Flemish-speaking monastery where you would be totally secluded and as separated from the world as possible.

Dardenne: No. I would have been secluded and separated from the world in a French-speaking abbey as well. I had learned Flemish at school, but I wasn't really speaking it fluently yet and so I thought that I would be able just to hide and be silent in the common 'crowd'.

Kramer: Yes, I understand.

Bochen: As you look back on your early days in the monastery, what were the experiences that prepared you to be the founding abbess of Redwoods?

Dardenne: Well, I think maybe I can approach the answer to that question on two levels. In my adolescence from the age of 14 to 19, I had pretty good training in Gregorian Chant with L'abbé Camille Jacquemain who had studied at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. In the monastery, at that time, the whole Office was still sung in Latin, and

as soon as I became a temporary professed, the Abbess asked me to give Gregorian chant lessons to the community. So my hidden corner in the community was a little bit ...

Bochen: Exposed?

Dardenne: Exposed, yes. Then I became the lead chantress for the prioress's choir and when Sister Gabriel, who was the first chantress for the abbess's choir died, suddenly, in 1959 at 29, I had to replace her and become the first chantress. So again, I was a little more 'exposed' I suppose. But otherwise, I didn't have a job in the community that was preparing me for becoming Abbess at all. I was the librarian but I didn't have much time to really *be* the librarian except during my spare time. Otherwise I was painting, not pictures but window frames and doors, and I was cleaning the iron work in the bell towers and the pigs' pen, etc. I liked manual labor. I must say that, in my monastic philosophy, this sort of hard work helped me to be in solidarity with the workers of the world. For it seemed that, in a monastery, the fact that you did not choose your work, is really a form of poverty. The poor don't have the resources that make choosing their work possible. Day in and day out they have to accept what they can find. We were not speaking at the time; we were using sign language. I suppose that in that there was a sense of solidarity with my sisters too.

Bochen: You entered the monastery in 1953. Seven years later, in February 1960, you were elected Abbess and, in October 1962, you went to Redwoods.

Dardenne: Yes, I entered Nazareth on 25 May 1953 and was postulated as abbess on 4 February 1960. I was installed on 29 February. It was leap year! Nazareth was founded by Soleilmont, a French-speaking Abbey, where Flemish-speaking women were entering because there was no existing Flemish-speaking Abbey. So the Flemish members of Soleilmont founded Nazareth, in Brecht, close to Antwerp. Nazareth grew very quickly. They began that foundation in 1950 with 13 women and, when I entered in May 1953, we were already 26. When I was elected Abbess, we were 64 in number. Prior to my election, there was already discussion of beginning a foundation in mission country. Dom Gabriel Sortais, who was the Abbot General at the time, advocated very much for foundations from European houses in mission countries. And I think that Mother Agnes Swevers, the foundress of the Abbey of Nazareth, who came from Soleilmont, already had been

approached about a foundation in Formosa but would have preferred to found a Cistercian house in Zaire, which was then the Belgian Congo. Westmalle, the house of our Father Immediate, was planning a Cistercian foundation in the Belgian Congo. They already had the land and some buildings prepared. They had already sent some trunks.

When I became Abbess, the Nazareth community agreed to ask Dom Edward Wellens to investigate the possibility of some property not too far from them in the Belgian Congo. But soon afterward the political situation deteriorated. The black population was fighting for independence. There were rebellions. On a personal note, I must say that one of my nephews was taken hostage along with 38 missionaries, men and women, and he was tortured and killed. Only one missionary, a German priest, escaped. He was wounded and hid in a field until he was found by the American paratroopers who came the next day. While all of that was happening, we had written to Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Abbot General, telling him of our desire to found a house in the Congo and that Dom Edward was exploring the possibility. At the time, Dom Gabriel Sortais was visiting the American Cistercian monasteries and he had been at Vina in California with Dom Eusebius Wagner, the Abbot of Vina at the time. Dom Gabriel visited the property on which Redwoods Monastery is now built. Bob Usher, the owner, who was a convert to Catholicism, had given the property for a foundation by Cistercian nuns. When Dom Gabriel heard this, he wrote to me and said, 'the political situation is so bad in Africa, why don't you come to California?' Well, we weren't quite expecting that! Mother Angela Norton, who was the abbess of Wrentham at the time, was not free to come to California because the Abbot of Spencer, Dom Edmund, was kind of pushing her, almost obliging her, to found a house in Argentina. I loved my community of Nazareth! I loved the place, its deep Flemish orientation, but in the end, in agreement with the Abbot General, moved to California. I will not deny that the appeal of new beginnings, nevertheless, was present in my heart. So, in a nutshell we finally came to California.

Bochen: And how large was the first group that came to Redwoods?

Dardenne: At first, there were four of us. By June 1963, there were 13 as the law prescribed, although I knew it was too many for a European house to begin an American Cistercian house.

On 31 October 1962, Halloween day, four of us pitched our tents in Whitethorn on a property called 'Green Pastures' by its former owner, Bob Usher. The clearings breathed in the midst of what is left of the

Redwoods forest. The place is solitary: the land felt to us like the end of the world, one of the last frontiers of the West. It nests three miles away, as the crow flies, from the rim of the Pacific Ocean, neighbored on the west side by Hawaii, Japan, China. The isolation, the solitude were real. We were far from what we learned in grammar school back in Belgium: '*les grand lacs*', the Great Lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario—which captivated our imagination as children. We were far from the black world of the South, far from the Mississippi River, very far indeed from Europe. The 'global village' paradigm has not liberated our small minds yet. What we most connected with, in our wilderness, was the primitive Citeaux.

Bochen: Tell us how you and your three sisters came to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Dardenne: Well, Dom Gabriel Sortais had made it very clear that we were Europeans and that American monasticism was slightly different than the monasticism of European houses. I remember him giving a conference at Nazareth and speaking about Wrentham and telling us that all the foundresses had returned to Ireland. The clothing and habits of life were different in Ireland than in America, I suppose. I was conscious that it was important that we not just be parachuted under the Redwoods in California, but that we stop at different places along the way to get in touch with how monasticism was lived in American houses.

Kramer: Where did you first go in the United States?

Dardenne: Cecilia, Placida, Veronique and I had come across the Atlantic on the *Rotterdam* in October. We left Holland on 9 October and arrived in New York on 16 October. We stayed for a few days in New York with the Sisters of Heverlee who showed us the important sights in New York. Then we flew... probably to Washington, DC, and went to Berryville for a visit. The Abbot General had told us that we should visit Berryville because it was the 'mystical garden' of monasticism in America. Monks at Berryville were publishing *Monastic Studies*. Brendan Collins and Dom Hugh McKiernan, who was the Abbot at the time, were very much involved in spreading and studying monasticism—not only intellectually but also experientially. So we stopped in Berryville. From Berryville, we went to Wrentham. All the groups who came to the United States visited Wrentham because, at that time, it

was the only house of American women. From Wrentham, it was obvious that we would go to St Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, which is only about an hour away. We flew from Boston to Gethsemani. When we came to Louisville Dom James Fox was waiting for us at the airport and I had no inkling at the moment that this was Thomas Merton's monastery.

Bochen: Had you read any of Merton's writings by this time? When did you first read Merton?

Dardenne: It was during the winter of 1951–52, the winter before I entered Nazareth. The priest, with whom I was talking about my vocation, asked me if I had read Merton. Well, I hadn't. So he gave to me a French translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, entitled *Le Nuit Privée D'Etoiles – The Night Without Stars*. I read the book but I didn't finish it.

Bochen: Did you ever finish *The Seven Storey Mountain*?

Dardenne: Yes, I read it several times since then.

Bochen: What happened when you arrived at Gethsemani?

Dardenne: The day after we arrived we had a noon meal with Dom James and a monk who was called Father Louis. I had no inkling that Father Louis was Thomas Merton. During the meal—we were eating excellent Kentucky fried chicken—this monk was pretty silent. As we were ending the meal, Dom James whispered in my ear 'Mother Myriam, Father Louis is Thomas Merton'.

Bochen: Were you surprised?

Dardenne: Well, yes and no, because, at the time, I had only read, in French, *The Waters of Siloe* and *Seeds of Contemplation*. That was all.

Bochen: What were your first impressions of Fr Louis that day in 1962?

Dardenne: I remember looking at the man as I wrestled with my chicken: shy, very shy, so far, hardly talking; he could be a taxicab driver, I thought. A taxicab driver? Had I ever met one with such blue,

clear, bashful, twinkling, humorous, piercing, deeply beautiful eyes?
No. Never.

Bochen: You said he was quiet.

Dardenne: Well...

Bochen: Not for long?

Dardenne: Not for long! Our English was quite terrible. But, after the meal, we went outdoors and spent the whole afternoon with Tom and it was very different. He showed us the Kentucky neighboring hills, a huge silo, part of the farming operation, the farm, 'des lieux dits'. I do not remember that we saw the Zen garden. The five of us spent the whole afternoon together, outside the enclosure walls.

Bochen: Did you speak in French?

Dardenne: Partly, but my three sisters were Flemish: one spoke French almost fluently but the others did not. When Tom and I were in conversation, there was a mixture of French and English. And so the conversation began, with most of the questions coming from his side.

Kramer: And what was he asking you about?

Dardenne: He knew of the Flemish mystics. He knew that we were coming from the Low Countries and he wanted to know, just as the two of you did today, how come we were coming to California. We told him about our attempt to found a house in Africa and how it happened that we were coming to California. He asked us if we had any specific plans for the foundation and I said no, except two. One was that we wanted to be smaller than Nazareth. I was aware that being abbess in a home of 64 women was not a feasible job, either for the sisters or for the abbess. And so we wanted to be smaller. And also, Nazareth had been built with Westmalle's money and it's a beautiful structure, but I felt that the building should be poor and much simpler. It was just these two things I had in mind.

Tom warned us discretely about the things to do and to avoid in a beginning foundation, especially not to give over to over activity! *We had to be free.* Buildings? Modest, simple. He promised to send us some Shaker magazines (which he did) showing the type of honest crafted

furniture that would fit in a monastic house. He also said that he would help us in any way he could. He had given conferences to the novices at Gethsemani; he would send us copies. He would send us literature, pertinent magazines. He did. It was as if he was investing himself in that Far West house founded by Flemish women. It was, how shall I say it, a very constructive conversation.

Talking to you today, after having read a little more lately of the journals, it strikes me that in a way, he may have been projecting some of his own dream of a small monastery when he was giving us advice—not advice, he was not the kind to give advice—when he was expressing his ideas about what the simple Cistercian monastery should be.

Bochen: As you think back on that afternoon, did you leave with a sense of having met someone with whom you wanted to have contact in the future?

Dardenne: Yes, he offered that, you know, repeatedly. The connection which I personally experienced with him at Gethsemani was not so much with the writer as with the monk. Depths of perception, rooted in a God-given interiority, animated his being. Who was I given to meet? A companion monk, a man of God on the road; intelligent, witty, knowledgeable; a Cistercian monk, open to the best of tradition, to the questions of his time, to a breathing space for freedom! 'Be yourselves in the freedom of God' was the message I carried with me to the West.

I really regret very much that I wrote so little [to Merton]. But, in a new foundation, there was so much to do. He had even warned so much against over-activity. So I didn't write that much but, in difficult moments, when difficult decisions had to be made, I would call him on the phone. I must say that Dom James was very willing about that, not that I called often, you know. And I didn't call about administrative stuff but about spiritual matters. I even called Tom when he was in the hermitage. Those telephone conversations were rather rare, but they were very helpful.

Bochen: I remember reading letters in which Merton talked about how the monastery at Redwoods could support itself. He mentioned that you were making vestments. And, at one point, he suggested that your community learn how to make stained glass windows.

Dardenne: Really? I don't remember that.

Bochen: How did the community at Redwoods support itself?

Dardenne: Well, at first, we had a weaving shop and a very good one. The sisters were even exhibiting the vestments they made at the National Liturgical Conference. But that work wasn't sufficient to make a living. By accident, we began to bake whole-wheat organic hosts.

Bochen: Whole wheat? That sounds very California!

Dardenne: We were selling the hosts not only to Catholics, but to Protestant denominations as well.

Bochen: I remember reading Merton saying that he would arrange to order vestments from Redwoods for Gethsemani. Did he ever do that?

Dardenne: I don't remember that either. But anyway, after a number of years, we let the vestment business die out, although the big loom is still here. And we were selling whole-wheat hosts and have been doing so since.

Bochen: What is your status in the community at the moment?

Dardenne: I am a member of Redwoods Monastery even if I do not live here all the time.

Bochen: Do you find Merton's writings relevant to your monastic life today?

Dardenne: Reading Tom's journals is very helpful for me today. Although we communicated relatively little and I don't have Tom's gift-*edness*—I don't have his gifts as a writer—but on the question of monastic outlook, I feel we have much in common.

Kramer: Now when you say that your feeling about the monastic outlook is similar to Merton's what do you mean?

Dardenne: What do I mean?

Kramer: Yes, what do you mean in terms of how that affects the daily life of a monastery?

Dardenne: Take liturgy for example. We both had a deep appreciation

of it, Eucharist and Liturgical Hours, though we showed our appreciation differently. Merton, during his monastic life as a choir-monk, expressed his reflection/meditative contemplation of liturgy in poetry, personal prayer, poetic prose, as in 'Hagia Sophia', for example. He did not feel the need to relate to the Sacred Liturgy through words, images, symbols, music which would speak more appropriately and simply to the depths and experience of contemporary men and women.

At Redwoods, after Vatican II, we were beginning to use dialogical Eucharistic prayers (Canons), instead of having the celebrant, day after day, carry alone all the words for us, while we were listening passively. We were creating rituals involving more participation of the assembly. Merton liked that, though he said he was not a liturgist.

Liturgy, strictly speaking, is the work and worship of a participative community, even if only two or three persons are present. When Merton, a choir monk, as mentioned earlier, moved into a more radical solitude, he continued to pray the liturgical hours alone. His daily Mass and praying the Office were not a routine discipline only; they articulated a prayer which acted upon him as a container—a grounding, stabilizing religious framework, providing boundaries for his multifaceted spirit and imagination. The liturgical cycle from one Advent to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter; from Easter to Pentecost to the Assumption of Mary, the Feast of All Saints and on to the next Advent—probably even more so when he prayed the Office alone—kept him rooted in his Catholicism. One can surmise that it gave him a sense of 'Kairos', of the Now-Living Spirit present to and in our chronological time!

[Did Merton and I have] A similar outlook? A community of persons, living in communion with each other, did not mean being molded by a systematic external obedience only. The question was: did obedience to an external monastic system necessarily lead you into a deepening and expansion of human and religious consciousness? How to respect both the reflective and creative freedom of individual persons and images of God and what the books said you had to do to be a monk? There was also a 'flight from the world' and world issues which seemed unhealthy. Benedict in the Rule recommended that a monk be alien to the ways of the world. How are we to interpret such a saying? And so forth.

Kramer: Yes. So the individual has to be recognized...

Dardenne: Yes.

Kramer: And the individual has to find how to fit into the monastery...

Dardenne: Yes. Yes.

Kramer: And not in a completely predictable and conventional way? Is that what you're saying?

Dardenne: Yes.

Kramer: And you feel that Merton...

Dardenne: Well, I feel with Merton that a way of living in a monastic community which supports personhood, religious monastic consciousness, relatedness of the members to each other and the connection of the community to the world is still to be risked in new ways—at least in the West.

Kramer: Yes.

Kramer: Are there other materials in Merton's journals that you feel have helped you to understand changes in the religious life? Do you feel that Merton's journals provide insight into contemporary religious life?

Dardenne: Yes. Certainly. But you asked me also what his influence is on contemporary monasticism.

Kramer: Right. Right. That would be another way to ask the question.

Dardenne: I am sure individual monks are interested in Merton and read Merton. I am certain Merton's books are available on the shelves of most monastic libraries. But whether Merton is offered as a monastic author to be studied and explored to novitiates or communities? Has this been done? Are there elements in what Merton is saying in the journals that would really help to deepen a monastic way?

Kramer: So you feel that there are many elements in the journals which would be of great help if they were explored because Merton was aware of this tension between the individual and the conventional.

Dardenne: Exactly. At the panel, *Women Who Knew Merton*, I referred

to *The Seven Storey Mountain* where Merton wrote in the first paragraph of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 'Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own egocentricity in the image of the world into which I was born'.¹ To me this is a synthesis of Merton's thought...the stunning trajectory, the stunning journey into freedom for Merton. When you read *The Seven Storey Mountain* you can see and feel and understand how the convert is splitting world and God, in a way, in his theological approach. But the beauty of Merton's path is that gradually, and certainly tangibly in volume four of the journals, which I am reading now, Victor, you already see that he takes that turn to reconcile world *and* God within himself and also in relationship to what is. And that's what I feel strongly today about monasticism too.

Kramer: That's very excellently said. I think that does take us right back to certain ideas that Merton expressed especially towards the end of his life. This need for interaction. Now I wonder if you would like to talk about other books by Merton, which you think, remain of significance? Do you want to say anything about other books by Merton?

Dardenne: Victor, this is my limitation. Up to the publication of the journals, I read relatively little of Merton. When he came to Redwoods in 1968, I said to him apologetically, 'I have read very little of your writing'. He said, 'Don't bother about that'. You know how he was. So when you ask me that question I have to say that I have read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. I have read the journal, *Sign of Jonas*, *Original Child Bomb*, quite a few of his conferences (which he had been sending us), and quite a bit of his poetry which I like very much.

Kramer: But that's a considerable amount.

Dardenne: I want to get into his literary essays. Of the journals, I read only, so far, about one third of journal one. I read journal two, journal three. I am beginning part three of journal four. I read journal six and seven and this is the primary source material that I like to stay with. And, you know I am a slow reader. You can't read the journals, at least I can't, as a tool of research. Yes, I can use the journals for research but

1. Quoting from memory, Sister Myriam used the word 'egocentricity'. Merton uses the word 'selfishness'. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1948), p. 3.

on the condition, that they are for me some kind of *lectio divina*. I can't read much of it each day. It's just too deep and too humbling. From a Jungian point of view, Merton, as a matter of fact, is facing his shadow every day. And so that, if you were speaking, Christine and Victor, of a renewed monasticism, Merton's path is a journey into wholeness which is different than a journey into perfection. Am I making sense?

Kramer: Yes. Yes.

Bochen: I'm really grateful to hear your reflections on how to go about reading the journals. You know that, as editors of the journals, both Victor and I lived with each of our volumes for a long time and to go back now and to read them slowly and meditatively, as you suggest, can be an enriching experience. I am grateful for your insight. Let's return to 1968 for a moment. What do you remember of Merton's visit to Redwoods in May 1968? Did Merton share with you his impressions of the landscape of the area around Redwoods? In his journal, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, he is so enthused about the place. Was that enthusiasm as deep as it appears to be in his journal?

Dardenne: The rugged emptiness and stark beauty of the Pacific Coast around Whitehorn, the mysterious silent sacredness of the Coast Redwoods, the simple wonder and solitariness of the California desert, enchanted him. Merton was perpetually searching, dreaming of a solitary spot where nothing and no one would disturb him for long periods of time.

I think he would have come back. I don't know if it is in the *Asian Journal* that he says that all the bulldozers out there would be busy again, but the place that he loved is now Senkyone Wilderness Park. It's really a preserve. There won't be any development. The park is for families and visitors.

Bochen: When Merton was preparing for his first visit to Redwoods in May 1968, he noted that he wanted to talk about the modern religious consciousness.

Dardenne: Yes.

Bochen: And he said he wanted to do that against the background of Zen and Sufism, and twelfth-century Cistercianism and so forth. Did he speak about the theme of modern religious consciousness?

Dardenne: Yes. Tom would speak to us daily of consciousness: modern consciousness; religious, monastic consciousness. We had agreed beforehand that this would be the central topic of his conferences and of the community questions. From the Christian side: how our own consciousness would be enriched by being exposed to other types of consciousness in other religious and philosophical traditions. How or what in us resonated with what we were hearing? Were other paths like Hinduism—Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga, Buddhism—Tibetan and Zen, Sufism so foreign that they would not awaken in us the 'love of learning and the desire for God in our Christian context'—as Jean Leclercq put it?

Bochen: It seems that these themes were very much indications of what was on his mind.

Bochen: During the conferences that Merton gave at Gethsemani in December 1967 and May 1968, he appeared very aware that he was talking to a group of women. In May, he spoke, among other things, about the feminine mystique. What do you remember about Merton's conferences at Redwoods?

Dardenne: He did use material in his conference on the feminine mystique, on women's mystique. This conference has been published, at least partly, in *Springs of Contemplation*.² His introduction to that conference is quite good. At Redwoods, he began by speaking about alienation. He used that word quite a bit and it was a subject, I think, that was very present to his mind, to his spirit. Speaking of alienation, he observes that women in the church have been really alienated. Just as the negro has been oppressed by the white culture, so women have been oppressed by the church and by society. Then he moved to the right of women to be full individuals like anyone else. He felt that monks and nuns should come together and talk to each other, even though there was no blueprint for this. We had to start from where we are. I found it quite interesting because by 1968, he had a love relationship with 'M'. Christine, you edited the journal in which he writes about that relationship. After having met him in 1962 and then again in 1968, it is evident to me now that, after his relationship with 'M', something had been liberated in his relationship to women but not fully yet! I make jokes about that but...

2. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation, A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (ed. Jane Marie Richardson; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992).

Bochen: Do you want to share the jokes?

Dardenne: Well, when we drove to San Francisco International in May 1968, I was on my way to a reunion of abbesses at Citeaux in France and I and my sister Katryn were still wearing traditional Cistercian habits, outside of the cloister. At the monastery, we wore simpler clothes. Our neighbor Al Groth, a layman who was a plumber, drove with us. Along the way to San Francisco, we stopped at the Hofbrau Haus. The two men wanted a beer but they didn't even invite us to go with them to that café to have a beer with them. And stupid me, I wasn't free enough to say, 'Well, we would like a beer too'. At that moment, I said to myself: 'Tom, you are not yet fully liberated in your relationship to women'.

Bochen: So Merton had a way to go in his own liberation?

Kramer: And do you have other stories like that?

Dardenne: Let's see. Many of the funny stories are on the tapes, of course. When he was talking in 1968, Merton's style was very conversational and the laughter is so loud that sometimes you can't hear the words. Well, I don't know if this is humorous or not. You will judge that. In October 1968, when he was on his way to Asia, you know that he stopped here too?

Bochen: Yes.

Dardenne: Before leaving he showed me an French army jacket that he had bought, I presume, in a surplus army store in San Francisco and he said to me, 'Do you think I could wear this jacket when I travel to India?' The jacket was a little funny – with all those gold buttons – and I said, 'Well, you do what you want, but, if I were you, I wouldn't wear it'. I was telling Jonathan Montaldo that the jacket is still here in a dresser. I don't feel that we should keep anything of Merton's if the Thomas Merton Center would like to have it.

Bochen: So Merton took your advice?

Dardenne: Yes, yes, the jacket is still here!

Bochen: You were with Merton in May 1968 and then again in October of 1968. Did he seem different to you when you think back to what you observed about him during the two visits?

Dardenne: Well, yes. This is a very pedestrian detail, perhaps. When he came in May 1968, he had a baggy costume: pants and jacket and French beret. It was obvious that he was wearing traveling clothes that he had received from the Gethsemani wardrobe keeper. What redeemed the silhouette was the smiling face, the face of a French Basque Picasso. When he came in October, he was wearing a sweater and pants, like a plain civilian.

Kramer: So there was some planning as to what he wore?

Dardenne: Yes, he was wearing lay clothes. He had simple lay clothes in his luggage to travel to Asia. He asked me if I thought he also should have taken his monastic habit. I felt he should have, at least to meet with the Dalai Lama. There wasn't time to get a package from Gethsemani. So he borrowed Brother Serlo's monastic tunic and our chaplain, Roger DeGanck's scapular and leather belt. I think that his exchange, on the plain, common, human level, was much freer in October than it had been in May. That was clear. What else can I say? He was more familiar with the place, of course. He had agreed to come, on the condition that he would have one day completely to himself at the Ocean. As the crow flies, Redwoods is three miles from the ocean but by the road—it's a winding road—the ocean is seven or eight miles away.

Bochen: What were the last words you said to each other?

Dardenne: Well, the Vietnam War was going on at that time and the political situation was ticklish. I said to him, 'Well, Tom, you are leaving us, you know. And who knows what will happen in this country.' And he said, 'Well you don't ever know what will happen to me in Asia'. There was no inkling...but as I read volume four of the journals, I see that he had some pretty...

Kramer: Pretty strong premonitions...

Dardenne: I think so, yes. There are strong statements about his premonition of dying. It's just so uncanny. Is it in volume three that he had a dream—at the end of 1957 or 1958—about coming to the West Coast and founding a monastery there? I was so stunned, you know. Here he was—10 years later. That's the mystery of consciousness with images which arise unbidden from the unconscious!

Bochen: I have a letter before me that Merton wrote to you on 22 July 1968. In it, he says, 'The Asian trip is shaping up famously however, with India on the top of the rest. I don't expect to travel much in India but I may meet some very interesting and helpful people—even a chance I may meet the Dalai Lama, which might mean an entrée to a lot of interesting monastic centers... I'm beginning to think that my big trouble will be getting back from Asia at all!!!'³ Merton's enthusiasm is evident. But his last remark sounds uncanny—in retrospect. He says that he hopes to be back by February. He was hoping to spend Lent of 1969 at Redwoods. Am I correct?

Dardenne: Yes.

Bochen: What was your last contact with Merton?

Dardenne: His last communication to me was a postcard from Asia. He had been at artist Jamini Roy's workshop with Amiya Chakravarty; Amiya told us that Merton was staring and staring at an icon of the Christ, painted by Jamini Roy. And Amiya asked, 'Do you like it?' and Merton said, 'Yes'. 'Would you like it for Gethsemani?' 'No, I would like it for Redwoods but I have no money'. And Amiya said, 'Well, I'll take care of that'. So Merton wrote to tell me that we would receive an icon of the Christ which was painted by an orthodox Hindu and which looked like a Coptic icon of the fourth century. And I was waiting and waiting, after his death, hoping to receive the icon in the mail. Nothing came. However, in 1972, I received a phone call from Amiya Chakravarty saying, 'I promised Merton that I would come and pay homage to your place and bring an icon of the Christ that he wanted your monastery to have'.

Bochen: A moving story!

Dardenne: And so the icon came here with Amiya Chakravarty in April 1972.

Kramer: That's fascinating.

3. Thomas Merton to Myriam Dardenne, dated 22 July 1968. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 391.

Dardenne: Yes.

Bochen: I had read that note and was going to ask you if you received the icon. May we move back in time, for a moment, to his death? Do you recall how you learned of Merton's death? How did the news get to you?

Dardenne: I have in front of me what I wrote about that. I was in bed with severe pneumonia and there was an epidemic of 'flu in California and so, when the sisters heard the news of Merton's death, they called the doctor to ask if they could tell me and were told they would have to wait until the fever abated. So they waited. I was living in a small old trailer at the time. Fr Roger, our chaplain, was the one who told me the news. This is what I wrote about hearing the news:

Which day is it? '13, 14 December?' I feel somewhat better. A knock at the door. Roger, our chaplain, enters and sits at my bedside. After the 'How are you?' he says, 'Father Flavian called for you'.

'You know what for?'

'Well, it's about Merton.'

'Yes, Merton? He's still in Asia isn't he?'

'Yes. Tom had been sick in Asia.'

'Well, yes, sick, so am I. How sick?'

'Very sick.'

Roger looks at me. I look at him. I read sadness and concern on his face and then it is as if I awake from sleep and I suddenly know.

'He's not dead, he's alive, is he?'

I am in denial. Yes, Tom is dead. At first I do not ask how or where or when. I feel rent asunder. Egotistically, I remember that we did not even say goodbye to each other when he left for San Francisco and Asia. Damn cloister!

'Fr Flavian – what did he say?'

'He'll call back. They already had a memorial service at Gethsemani.'

Here, also, I feel cheated for it is so hard to believe. Katryn comes in. She knows that I know. We cry. The three of us, sharing the loss of a friend.

Bochen and Kramer: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that memory.

Dardenne: But who would know that, as we enter this new millenium, his presence—I call that a presence, would be as real and challenging, I think, today, as it was then, yet in another mode.

Kramer: If you compared Merton to other religious figures of the twentieth century, what might you say? Would you want to say anything about how his rank or role or position is to be placed in the twentieth century? Do you wish to talk about that?

Dardenne: I have reflected some on that question. Merton, as a person, was a man who opened doors.

Kramer: Yes, that's nicely said.

Dardenne: I like also his own approach to himself in the fourth volume of the journals, Victor.

Kramer: Yes.

Dardenne: I sense, subjectively perhaps, that Merton when centering on and in his journal always approached the task at hand, as a student/monk, a learner going to his spiritual father in the Desert. Well, not quite. I imagine that in Merton's particular situation, the journal mirrored what he confided and debated, more like a mother would do: his mother and the great Mother, the archetypal Feminine, mirroring for him an affectionate, true, even severe challenge, a challenge he had lost when he was six years old. In his journals, Merton was free to expose things as they were, what the ancient Egyptian Fathers and Mothers called the '*logismoi*', 'the thoughts of the heart'. Called or not called, God was always present. The journals were a garden where the flowers of Merton's creative thinking were maturing into fruit. What appeared to be rotten, by the mercy of God, became compost.

Bochen: So Merton's journaling was truly a spiritual practice.

Dardenne: I would share also a statement by Elizabeth O'Connor. I don't have her book because it's out of print, but the title of that book was *Our Many Selves*. I had participated in a seminar on that topic. 'I am one within myself, but I have many faces.' I think that is so true of Merton. He was one within himself but he had many faces. You know? I like also to use the expression of Panikkar in *Blessed Simplicity, the Humanum*. I think that there was an extraordinary manifestation of the *Humanum* present in Merton's being and in his life. He had an incredible array of giftedness. He could be, like when he talked with our neighbor, Al Groth, a common man. Al commented afterwards, that, during the trip to San Francisco, he and Merton could talk like two

simple laymen neighbors. But, when they were in San Francisco at dinner in an Italian restaurant, with Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Bookstore, and Ferlinghetti and Merton began talking, the conversation took a very different tangent, a different orientation. Al Groth added later that Merton was so simple and 'we had such good conversation during the whole trip but once he was there, he was speaking at a level I could no longer follow'. Merton showed all those different facets.

Kramer: Right. That's nicely said.

Dardenne: About religious figures of significance at the twentieth century—to whom shall we compare Merton? We can't in a way. What came first to mind to me was the Dalai Lama, but I cannot say that Merton has the social 'rank' of the Dalai Lama. Certainly not. But Merton is also—and this is my own personal opinion—a spiritual and political teacher who has not sufficiently been tapped yet. I think he's a lama, a great lama. I cannot compare him to Dan Berrigan, although there are common points in their search for peace. Jim Forest? I could compare him, maybe, to Thich Nhat Hanh? And liberation theologians were not yet, if my memory is correct, on the forefront as they were in the 1970s, but Merton was on that track too.

Kramer: You spoke earlier about Merton's conference on the feminine mystique. Do you think that Merton has had significant things to write or say about the feminine? Would you like to pursue that particular question?

Bochen: And when we talked about doing this interview, you made a distinction that you believed was very important between 'Merton and the feminine' and 'Merton and women'. Perhaps you might begin by explaining that distinction to us?

Dardenne: When we speak of Merton's relationship to women, we speak of his relationship to actual persons existing in the historical realm, persons with whom he has correspondence, like Rosemary Rueher, the theologian; Naomi Burton Stone, his literary agent; Mary Luke Tobin, his friend. When we speak of the feminine, we are speaking of something else. Let me turn to C.G. Jung, the depth-psychologist, and James Hillman, the main protagonist of archetypal psychology today. Both start from the biological fact that, in a man, the minority of female genes determines psychologically the female counterpart of the mascu-

line psyche. Hillman would, in the simplest way, describe the feminine or 'anima' as referring to 'the contrasexual, less conscious aspect of the psyche of men'.⁴ In Jung, you find over and over that anima is spoken of and presented in two main ways. One, anima is a man's feminine side projected onto women. We certainly find that in Merton's relationship to 'M'. His own soul was projected on 'M'. I think it happens each time we fall in love. Two, strictly speaking, anima is also a function within the man's psyche, opening to him his unconscious depths towards integration. What the man projects on woman, basically, is his own feminine side. Is that clear?

Kramer: Yes. Yes.

Dardenne: I have here a quote from Jung: 'The anima can be defined as the image or archetype or deposit of all the experiences of man with woman.'⁵ To me, Merton's relationship with 'M', judged by church and the monastic institution, is one thing. Spiritually and psychologically, it is another. His relationship with 'M' might have been a step toward the integration of his feminine side. I think that Merton, initially wounded in the mother-child relationship, longed, unconsciously at first, with more awareness later, for the 'inner *conjunctio*': the integration of the deep feminine within himself. This was an intimate facet of his quest for God. That he erred in his relationships with women, in his pre-monastic years, is a fact. He had to come to the conclusion that sex was not the answer; neither were intellectual pursuits, even the arts, though a good deal of his soul shines through his writings and poetry. Even his authentic and profound devotion to Mary, Sophia, and women saints would not accomplish for him the 'miracle' of a person's wholeness. Merton was blessed with contacts with women through readings, correspondence and personal encounters. It seems however, that in his case, the love relationship, shared with a specific woman, ushered him into a new initiation toward further psycho-spiritual-religious integration of his total personality.

Kramer: Right.

4. James Hillman, *ANIMA: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1985), p. 5.

5. Quoted by Hillman, *ANIMA*, p. 5. See C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, XIII (ed. H. Read, M. Fordham and G. Adler; R.F.C. Hull; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 40.

Dardenne: If he had left the monastery and gotten married, that would have been a disaster, I think. But that he fell in love was a grace in his life.

Kramer: Yes. Yes. I understand.

Bochen: Thank you. We are very grateful to you Myriam.

Kramer: Well, you have done several things. You have acted as a kind of spiritual counselor for us and you've given us much to think about.

Dardenne: Excuse my poor...my poor way of expressing...

Bochen: There is nothing to excuse. You have been eloquent and you have spoken from your heart and shared with us your spirit.

Dardenne: Thank you to both of you. We certainly have a common interest in Merton and more than that I think.