

'The Best Retreat I Ever Made': Merton and the Contemplative Prioresses*

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Abstract

This article is a summary of a retreat given at Gethsemani by Merton in December 1967 to a group of contemplative prioresses. The context of the retreat was Merton's relationship with 'M' and his correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether. The general subject of the retreat was the renewal of religious life. Special attention was given to vocation, forms of commitment and prayer, and to the social issues of the day. Merton encouraged the women to be autonomous and prophetic. He found with them true Christian community and confirmation of his own Christian monastic vocation.

Keywords contemplative prioresses, women/feminist, retreat

On 7 December 1967, after spending three days with a group of prioresses of contemplative religious communities who had been invited to Gethsemani, Merton recorded in his journal, 'These four days have been very moving and I feel completely renewed by them: the best retreat I ever made in my life'.¹ Even granting Merton's penchant for hyperbole, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to this encounter and to the wonderful account of it (and of a similar meeting in May 1968) in *The Springs of Contemplation*.² If one wishes to have

* This essay is offered in gratitude for all the Women Religious who have brought such joy to me and to so many.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967-68; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 21.

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

some sense of Merton's mature understanding of the feminine, what better ground to cover than that he shared with his sisters in religious life just one year before his death? I suspect the scholarly community has largely overlooked this material because it was 'just about nuns'. And therein is a serious oversight, for the content of the first 'best retreat' (with which this essay deals) assures us of Merton's continued monastic conviction and that of the second (which I do not treat here) deals directly with his understanding of 'The Feminine Mystique'.³

In the authorized biography of Merton by Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, this meeting on 4-7 December, 1967 is passed over in a paragraph. Mott notes that Merton celebrated 'the joy he felt after a three-day conference of fifteen contemplative nuns. He wrote in his journal of their quality, alertness, and authenticity...his feeling of a sense of community with the group foreshadowed the delight he was to take...in the Trappistine Community of Our Lady of the Redwoods in California.'⁴ Mott remarks on the absence of false piety at the meeting and its 'unstuffy moments', but cannot attend to the substance of the discussions because the tapes made at that time were unavailable to him.

In what follows I shall set the context of the 4-7 December 1967 encounter, comment on the contents of the conversations and then draw some conclusions both on Merton and women and Merton and the monastic way.

The Context

The intellectual and emotional context for Merton's first meeting with the contemplative prioresses is threefold: his prior correspondence with Woman Religious; his relationship with 'M'; and his exchange of letters with Rosemary Radford Ruether.⁵

Merton has never been out of touch with the joys and struggles of women in religious life. From the early 1950s he corresponded regularly with women in a variety of religious communities. Something of the tenor of that correspondence can be seen in *Witness to Freedom: The*

3. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, pp. 161-76.

4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 502.

5. Through this essay I have used Patricia A. Burton's *Merton Vade Mecum: A Road Map for Readers* (November, 1998) to help me locate materials and check the chronology of Merton's writing. I am most appreciative for this important, and user-friendly, resource.

Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis.⁶ William Shannon, editor of that volume, has devoted chapter four to 'Religious Life' and provided a series of letters spanning the years from 1952 to 1967. Most of the letters Shannon presents are to religious women and most of them are Merton's responses to questions about religious life. In the letters, which treat their recipients as equals and evince no patronizing masculine superiority, Merton is sensitive to the joys and struggles of religious life and gives advice from his own perspective as a monastic.

For example, writing 'To a Carmelite Nun' on 20 January 1967 Merton notes with regret that inappropriate people are giving advice to contemplatives. The 'people' are priests who are not themselves monastics. 'It is most unfortunate', Merton writes, 'that men who have no experience whatever of our problems and our way of life presume on scant information to advise us to turn everything upside down'.⁷ Note that Merton both associates himself with the contemplative nun ('our problems and our way of life') and is critical of men (clerics) who do not share it. 'Drat those retreat masters anyway', he quips, 'They are a pest'.⁸ This is but one example, albeit a very clear one, of Merton's stance vis-à-vis religious women: he is in sympathy with their life because he shares it; he is wary of priests outside the life who would presume to offer advice about it.

Prior to the December meeting in 1967 Merton had addressed a number of letters to women religious and, specifically, women contemplatives. On 31 May 1967 he wrote to 'Mother O' 'as regards the question of enclosure for contemplative nuns' urging keeping the spirit of enclosure but not necessarily 'grilles and other medieval showpieces'.⁹ He spoke of contemplatives sharing their lives and ideals with others. He encouraged Mother Angela Collins and reminded her that many contemplative communities 'have been deliberately encouraged to stay on a kind of kindergarten level'.¹⁰ In 'a sort of round robin reply to all the various letters' received from a Benedictine community Merton asserted 'we...must be strong to defend our freedom against every wind of doctrine and the fashions of people who run in all directions...we have our own way to go, a way of freedom and hiddenness

6. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

7. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 196.

8. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 197.

9. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 333.

10. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 335.

and non-production, and we need to appreciate the peculiar joys and hazards of life in the desert, the paradise-wilderness, the loneliness and love which is our own special way'.¹¹ Even before the retreat of December 1967 Merton was thinking with contemplative women about the issues his life and their lives shared.

The second context of Merton's 'best retreat', is certainly the fact that it occurs about a year after his relationship with 'M'. In March, 1966 while in the hospital in Louisville for back surgery Merton met a student nurse with whom he fell in love and was involved in a brief but very intense relationship. The effect of that relationship on Merton is amply documented in his journals at the time,¹² is beautifully preserved in the short collection, *Eighteen Poems*,¹³ verses written for 'M',¹⁴ and has been analyzed in the Mott biography.¹⁵ I need not rehearse the particulars of that relationship here, but I do want to point out that, as context for the 'best retreat', the issue was very much relationship, the relationship of person to person and person to world.

A 'Midsummer Diary for M' which Merton wrote in June, 1966 makes it perfectly clear that the core concerns which their relationship raised for him were those of solitude and love. He notes that the solitary 'is available to everyone in a certain kind of way'; he continues that way is 'availability in love, in compassion, in understanding'.¹⁶ His relationship with 'M' gave Merton experiential understanding of the fact that 'there is no wall between ourselves and others'.¹⁷ Openness, is in fact, why he is and must be a solitary.

I am here for one thing: to be open, to be not 'closed in'...to be open to God's will and freedom, to His love which comes to save me from all in myself that resists Him and says no to Him. This I must do...because the whole world of lost people needs this opening by which salvation can get into it through me.¹⁸

11. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 347 (my italics).

12. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

13. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985). I continue to be grateful to William Shannon for the generous gift he made me of a copy of this volume.

14. For a discussion of the poems see my essay 'Human Love and the Love of God in *Eighteen Poems*', in *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet* (Paul Pearson et al. eds.; Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998), pp. 68-79 and reprinted in *Monos* 12.2 (Jan.-Feb. 2000), pp. 1-6.

15. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 433-54.

16. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 312.

17. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 324.

18. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 345.

Certainly the experience of loving and being deeply loved by a woman gave Merton new insights into the 'feminine'. But more importantly, his relationship with 'M' allowed Merton to understand deeply and to articulate the absolute necessity of his life as a solitary, not only for himself, but for the world in which he lived. This becomes a theme in his talks to the prioresses in retreat, that the contemplative life is a life of freedom for others. He was unable to convince Rosemary Radford Ruether of this fact.

Finally, then, the letters Merton exchanged from August 1966 to February 1968 with the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether are part of the context of the 'best retreat'. Her negative response to monastic life is in sharp contrast to the deep appreciation for it that he shares with the contemplative prioresses. The correspondence was initiated by Merton in response to Ruether's article in *Continuum*, 'Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchly World'.¹⁹ On 12 August 1966 Ruether responded to Merton's letter, and the two wrote sporadically until February, 1968. The subject of most of the letters is issues then contemporary in the church. While the two shared ideas about the need for engagement of the church in the world and society, they differed about how that engagement should be carried out. Specifically, Ruether challenged Merton's monastic vocation and especially his call to be a hermit. Basically she believed that 'Withdrawal and solitude is not a life vocation; it is part of a larger rhythm of life'.²⁰ The letters of February and March, 1967 focus on monasticism in the larger arena of church and world. Merton is very much 'pro', and Ruether very much 'anti' the monastic life. The exchange is spirited. Merton worries about being 'insolent';²¹ Ruether suggests he is 'bloody defensive' and challenges him to 'come down off your high horse a minute and listen to me'.²² Merton responds, 'I am sorry for being such a creep, but it is true that you did make me feel very defensive'.²³ And so the exchange goes.

Reading these letters I am struck by their energy and their 'no holds barred' approach. As Monica Furlong noted in her biography of Mer-

19. Rosemary R. Ruether, 'Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchly World', *Continuum* 4.1 (1966) pp. 50-62.

20. Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (ed. Mary Tardiff; New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 20.

21. Merton and Ruether, *At Home in the World*, p. 46.

22. Merton and Ruether, *At Home in the World*, p. 47.

23. Merton and Ruether, *At Home in the World*, p. 50.

ton, Ruether 'was his intellectual equal' and challenged many of Merton's 'easier assumptions and also confronted him on the questions of his reasons for staying at Gethsemani with a directness that none of his friends attempted'.²⁴ I agree with Christine Bochen's assessment of the exchange: 'though Merton was open to Ruether, willing to learn from her, receptive to the challenges inherent in her critique of monasticism, respectful of her engagement and commitment, he was adamant in his conviction that the monastic life—for all its struggles and ambiguities—was nevertheless the place for him'.²⁵ The issues Merton explored with Ruether are issues that arise again, although in a very different mode of discourse with the contemplative prioresses. This exchange of letters marked another example of Merton's engagement with women (a woman) and monasticism around the time of the 'best retreat' to which I now turn.

The Conversation

Writing to 'Mother O' on 31 May 1967 Merton noted

I would say also that contemplative nuns need a certain amount of *useful* contact...to talk with others sharing the same ideals and the same problems, to perhaps attend conferences (at least Superiors, novice mistresses, etc.) and to learn more of what needs to be known today. This can be done without real danger to the spirit of enclosure.²⁶

Along with Sr Elaine M. Bane (a contemplative Franciscan with whom he had been in correspondence since 1962) who apparently issued the invitations and, with the help of the Sisters of Loretto, who did the leg work for the event (which Merton called 'really her party'²⁷), in December, 1967 Merton provided such an occasion for about a dozen contemplative prioresses. Writing on 8 November 1967 to his good friend Sr Mary Luke Tobin, Superior of the Sisters of Loretto, Merton reported that he had received permission for them to occupy Gethsemani's Ladies' Guest House. He invited Sr Mary Luke to join the group noting

I do not intend to do a lot of formal lecturing but only make a few informal points at each session, to get a discussion rolling. There will be morning and afternoon sessions on Dec. 5 and 6, and a morning session

24. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 297-98.

25. Merton and Ruether, *At Home in the World*, p. 105.

26. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 334.

27. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 354.

on the 7th. On the 4th they want to get together among themselves and get acquainted and I will go up to meet them in the afternoon. I'll let you know later about these times. Probably something like 8: 30 to 11 a.m. and 1: 30 to 3: 30 p.m...²⁸

Writing again on 2 December, 1967 Merton thanks Sr Luke for the assistance her community is offering the meeting and says 'Cooperation around here is slightly cool. I am not sure whether the atmosphere is for or against, but there has been a slight amount of sobbing and foot-dragging and remarks about, "Of course, you can do this only ONCE you know" Well, we'll worry about that some other time...' ²⁹ Writing 2 December 1967 to Mother Angela Collins of the Savannah Carmel, whom he had hoped might attend the gathering, Merton solicits prayers for the meeting, promises 'I'll try to inculcate respect for those who want solitary lives and silence, and not get everyone lined up in the active parade...' and notes he 'will take this as an occasion to plan another meeting here'.³⁰

Merton conferred with Sr Elaine in preparing for the informal meeting. Together they had decided on points for discussion. Merton had proposed 'two enigmatic questions for the Sisters to think over' as they prepared for the meeting: 'Suppose that tomorrow all religious communities were dissolved by law and you had to go elsewhere: what would you do? Would the life you took on be very different from your present life or would it be essentially the same? (In other words, would it make a difference?)... Why?'³¹

Before examining the substance of the conferences Merton and prioresses shared, a brief digression on the transcripts, beautifully edited by Sr Jane Marie Richardson, SL,³² and published as *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, is in order. Before the meeting, on 13 November 1967 Merton was already concerned about 'the technical business point about the tapes' and referred Sr Elaine to the 'Trust'.³³ The letter suggests that, from the outset, there had been discussion of disseminating the results of the conferences. After the meeting, on 21 December 1967, he writes Sr Elaine '...I really think we ought to keep the tapes of our conferences to ourselves... I don't think

28. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 351.

29. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 353.

30. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 354.

31. Merton, *The School of Charity*, pp. 352-53.

32. For more on the history of the transcripts, and on the meetings themselves, see the Kilcourse interview with Sr Jane Marie in *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000), pp. 127-43.

33. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 353.

it would mean so much to others and besides I think it would be much smarter to keep the whole thing more confidential. I am very much afraid that someone who might not understand or get the context of it all might denounce us to some official and get the whole thing stopped.³⁴

Fortunately, the Women Religious, themselves, understood that Merton underestimated the interest in and importance of these conferences. Writing in the Introduction to *The Springs of Contemplation* Sr Mary Luke Tobin notes

...a few years ago, I secured a complete set of the tapes from Sister Elaine Bane, the Allegheny Franciscan sister present at the meetings, who herself provided much of the impetus for these gatherings. Then I asked Sister Cecily Jones, SL, to type up a transcript from these tapes. Every word! No small task, but absolutely essential to the whole project. Arline Newton, a Merton scholar, also had a hand in typing the tapes.

Then I asked Sr Jane Marie Richardson, SL, who went with me to some of the conferences, to do the final editing. She accomplished this task with clarity and skill, and with great faithfulness to the text.³⁵

The transcript of Merton's talks to the prioresses which have been so lovingly preserved and edited suggest that the informality for which Merton hoped did, in fact, occur and that the subject matter which he and Sr Elaine suggested proved to be focal. What follows are my summaries of the remarks Merton made 'to get a discussion rolling' in the seven conferences:

1. 'Presence, Silence, Communication' discusses silence in relationship, stressing that 'silence is a form of presence'.³⁶
2. 'Changing Forms of Contemplative Commitment' opens with the question Merton has posed for the sisters to ponder and continues with a series of responses by Merton to questions posed by the prioresses. Merton focuses on the liberty which is 'the basic truth of our vocation' ('We have been called to seek God in freedom and to respond to God freely'³⁷) and on taking 'advantage of what is possible within the present situation'.³⁸
3. 'Responsibility in a Community of Love' is another series of questions and answers revolving around two central themes:

34. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 357.

35. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, pp. xi-xii.

36. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 10.

37. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 25.

38. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 28.

women's religious communities taking responsibility for themselves and the relationship between prayer and purity of heart.

4. 'Vocation: "The Time When You Were Called"' begins with a long and rather disconnected reflection by Merton on an unnamed work of science fiction set in the year 2000³⁹, but moves toward a discussion of vocation as 'essentially open-ended...a creative possibility, leading to things we never suspected'.⁴⁰ That being the case, contemplative religious life is necessarily free, prophetic and open to change.
5. 'Contemporary Prophetic Choices' picks up the theme of the prophetic life from the previous discussion as Merton and the Sisters discuss a list of 'radicals' in the period (Dan Berrigan, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr) and the ways in which their own lives are to be prophetic.
6. 'Respect for Each Person, Diversity in Each Community', like the third session, is a discussion of practical issues that arise in contemplative communities. Religious maturity is defined in terms of self-forgetfulness ('if people are more or less self-forgetful, they are probably in the right place'⁴¹), which picks up the theme of purity of heart from session three ("True purity of heart means not being concerned with yourself, not even being aware of yourself'.⁴²) Merton and the Sisters agree on the need for contemplatives to be psychologically mature, and Merton closes the session with an enigmatic quip 'You have to remember that men are jealous of women... I think one of the problems of the American male today is that he is terrified of women. He constantly has to hit women over the head to prove he's boss.'⁴³
7. 'Union with God', the last session, followed by Mass at the Hermitage on 7 December deals with 'the afterlife of the person, who is free, who is God already, who is one with God from the beginning'⁴⁴ and with love and spiritual friendship.

39. Although I cannot be sure, from Merton's description of the book I think it might be Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1969) which certainly had a cult following in the late-1960s and 1970s.

40. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 68.

41. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 94.

42. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 47.

43. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 108.

44. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 115.

Pace Rosemary Radford Ruether, in reading this material I am struck by the profound engagement of these cloistered contemplatives with the real problems (both personal and social) of the 1960s. They evince an authentic struggle to discern how to be engaged with these problems while remaining true to a contemplative vocation. The thinking and discussion on this matter revolves around the ideas of presence, liberty, autonomy and prophetic presence.

It seems to be the consensus of the conversations that one gift that contemplatives offer is the gift of presence. Merton opened the first session, 'an important key word is *presence*. We want to be present to each other and then trust what happens... Presence is what counts. It's important to realize that the Church itself is presence, and so is contemplative life. Community is presence, not an institution.'⁴⁵ In the discussion 'Responsibility in a Community of Love' the same note is struck: '...God is calling us to be always available'.⁴⁶ The 'long emptiness' of contemplative life allows the contemplative to be present to the world and to others in a special way precisely because the life is one of liberty. Merton stresses throughout the talks that contemplatives 'have to maintain our own liberty'.⁴⁷ He reminds the sisters that Cassian described purity of heart as 'a state in which you are more or less interiorly free, not bound to any particular project or particular work. You have the ordinary human concerns, but you're not tied to them'.⁴⁸ The contemplative life at its best provides an 'atmosphere of emptiness and disposability, of being totally at the disposition of God. "I am free. Do with me what you want."⁴⁹ Because contemplatives can be free both interiorly and in the life they lead, they can offer a quality of detached presence to others.

In order to maintain that freedom, though, autonomy is absolutely necessary. 'We must not', Merton asserts, 'allow ourselves to be dictated to by people who have no concept of what our life is about... We've got no business being like anybody else. We're ourselves.'⁵⁰ Merton is insightful in stressing that, particularly for contemplative women, autonomy involves taking responsibility for themselves and their communities. He encourages them along this path asserting there are plenty of smart sisters 'who certainly have better judgment about their own situations than someone outside'. 'I think they [nuns]

45. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 3.

46. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 46.

47. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 74.

48. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 47.

49. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 48.

50. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 74.

have to be encouraged to go ahead and make judgments.⁵¹ Without ever directly attacking the church's hierarchy, throughout these discussions Merton urges the contemplative prioresses to claim their God-given authority and autonomy; he takes a prophetic stance vis-à-vis Women Religious.

This, in my view, is the fourth consensus of the conversations, that contemplatives are to be a prophetic presence in society. This does not mean that they must be in exterior ways counter cultural. The call to 'difference' is more profound than that. Their way of living is prophetic 'not in the sense of sudden illumination as to what is going to happen at some future moment, but in the sense that we are so one with the Holy Spirit that we are already going in the direction the Spirit is going'.⁵² 'We become prophetic', Merton explains, 'when we live in such a way that our life is an experience of the infallible fidelity of God'.⁵³ What does this mean in practical terms? It means confronting the power structures of the world. 'The prophetic struggle with the world is the struggle of the Cross against worldly power'.⁵⁴ Merton reminds the prioresses that 'the Church, *is*, in fact, a worldly power'.⁵⁵ Contemplatives within the church (what I would call the 'loyal opposition'!) must resist being corrupted by that power. Their lives and witness are to 'another way' both for those *within* the Church and for those in larger society.

It is little wonder that, writing on 7 December 1967, Merton reflects,

The last four or five days have been quite fantastic: among the most unusual in my life. I hardly know how to write about them. There should be a whole new key—and a kind of joy unusual in this journal...*I have to change the superficial ideas and judgements I have made about the contemplative religious life, the contemplative orders...* I am completely confident in the contemplative orders once again.⁵⁶

Two days later Merton remembers poignantly the sister's departure. 'Coming back—the small footprints of my nuns still in the mud of the road by the sheep barn. I remember their happiness...'⁵⁷ 'I remember the Sisters leaving on Thursday—one car after the other and finally the green station wagon from New Orleans roaring off with Sister Kathleen

51. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 38.

52. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 49.

53. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 73.

54. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 81.

55. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 81.

56. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 20-21 (my italics).

57. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 21.

at the wheel. Last I saw of her she was barreling down the middle of the highway.'⁵⁸

The meeting was so invigorating and fruitful for Merton that already during the course of it he was planning for another. He wrote to Mother Angela Collins on 5 December 1967, 'I...will take this as an occasion to plan another meeting here...'⁵⁹ Writing to her again on 25 December 1967 he notes, '...I have been thinking of planning...a small meeting with three or four Carmelites...and a couple of Benedictines...let's make it after Easter...make it a three-day job. So if you want to, you can start planning...'⁶⁰ The second 'contemplative summit' did take place at the end of May, 1968 after Merton returned from a trip West which included time with the Trappistine community at Our Lady of the Redwoods in California, a visit which was also powerful for him and about which he wrote with energy and enthusiasm.⁶¹ Would it be stretching the facts to say that his meetings with groups of contemplative Women Religious gave Merton back his 'lease on contemplative life?'

The Conclusion

The first thing to be noted about Merton's first meeting with the contemplative prioresses is the depth of his own response to the experience. He called it 'a wonderful thing', 'indescribably beautiful', 'very moving';⁶² '...it was wonderful to have them here, and to have such a perfect mutual understanding, such an atmosphere of unity and sense of realistic purpose...'⁶³ Merton was impressed by the 'obvious *quality*' of the sisters whom he experienced as 'completely simple, honest, authentic people. I have never before had such a sense of community with any group...'⁶⁴ Merton thought they were a group with 'our own revolution...well under way',⁶⁵ that their life was 'fundamentally one of the soundest and most healthy things in the Church, and I am sure

58. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 22.

59. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 354.

60. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 358.

61. See Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1984) and *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 89-113.

62. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 20-21.

63. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 22.

64. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 20.

65. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 20.

has all kinds of promise. It was a great help to me to see and experience this.'⁶⁶

In my view the 'help' these Women Religious offered to Merton occurred on two levels. First, they provided him with an authentic experience of community with like-minded women after the traumatic and difficult relationship with 'M' and in the midst of an abrasive correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether. Personally and profoundly, Merton experienced these women as his sisters. And that was emotionally satisfying.⁶⁷ Second, coming into contact with *persons* as deeply concerned about and sincerely engaged in monastic, contemplative life as he himself was both overcame a lingering sense of isolation he had in the life and reminded him of its intrinsic value both to the Church and the world (and this in the context of a correspondence which challenged both). As he said 'I am completely confident in the contemplative orders once again';⁶⁸ 'for once possibilities were not only hopeful but even realized, to some extent!'⁶⁹ Merton's retreat with the contemplative prioresses reaffirmed his faith in the validity of the life they had all chosen.

Second, in this context of the quiet, interior life of the family of monastics Merton was able not only to receive sustenance from women, but to encourage their own growth and development. As noted above, the planning for the meeting was shared, not devised by Merton and imposed on the Sisters. In an interview with George Kilcourse, Sr Jane Marie Richardson, SL, noted that 'the fact that Merton would give so much time to women religious was actually a unique and privileged phenomenon, a mark of openness'.⁷⁰ Sr Jane Marie affirms that there was a 'real sense of being untied in God's presence'.⁷¹ Sr Mary Luke Tobin reflected that 'Merton believed in the faith reality lived by contemplative women. He realized that their vocations demanded new maturity within a patriarchal system.'⁷² He

66. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 21.

67. For more on this matter see my article '“I Never Had a Sister”: Merton's Friendships with Women', *The Merton Seasonal* 17.1 (1992), pp. 4-8. Most the articles in this number deal with Merton and the feminine.

68. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 21.

69. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 22.

70. George Kilcourse, Jr, and Paul Stokell (eds.), 'Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom: An Interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL', *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000), p. 137.

71. Kilcourse and Stockell, 'Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom', p. 137.

72. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. ix.

encouraged them 'stand on your own two feet', and 'proceed to live your life as you think you must'.⁷³ In short, Merton saw, and treated, these women as his equals and, in the words of Sr Jane Marie, he encouraged them 'to trust in the Spirit that was among us, to be willing to risk the old-time securities, to take hold of our lives as intelligent and capable women'.⁷⁴

Related to encouraging the Sisters to claim their authority and autonomy, and thereby to enter fully into the spirit of Vatican II, Merton suggested to them a principle of discernment in change which, it seems to me, is applicable to everyone who is trying to live fully and authentically as a Christian: choose for life. "How do I know which is the better choice?" If you are choosing for life, for a living entity, it's a better choice. If you're choosing for a dead, rigid thing, it's a worse choice... We have to choose life, always.⁷⁵ The choice for life is a choice for charity, indeed, for love. 'Real charity is involved here. It's a choice between the union of charity with people who are alive and growing and a legalistic union with those who want to hold things back.'⁷⁶ To choose for life, in short, is to live out the liberty and prophetic vocation that is at the heart of contemplative, and Christian, life.

Finally, the encounter of December, 1967 was a conference about monastic life. It reflects on the level of the heart themes which are found in more cerebral form in the collection of Merton's essays on monastic life, *The Monastic Journey*,⁷⁷ and in other later writings. In 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life' which was in response to a request of Pope Paul VI for a 'message of contemplatives to the world'⁷⁸ and written on 21 August 1967, Merton had said 'we [contemplatives] exist solely for this, to be the place He has chosen for His presence, His manifestation, His epiphany'.⁷⁹ 'The message of hope the contemplative offers...is... That whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.'⁸⁰

73. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, pp. x-xi.

74. Kilcourse and Stockell, 'Life Through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom,' p. 139.

75. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 126.

76. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 126.

77. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Kansas City: Sheed Andrews & McMeel, 1977).

78. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 184.

79. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 172.

80. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 173.

In one way or another, these seven conferences with contemplative prioresses are all reminders that what contemplatives have to offer the world is the authentic pursuit of their own vocation, their presence to others, indeed, their love. 'We need the conviction that we can't do better than to love someone in a simple, non-productive sort of way.'⁸¹ 'It's love that gets us beyond religiosity.'⁸² If it is to be about anything, the contemplative life must be about love...and silence.

There is a ground of silence, Merton reflected, 'which is always there. Our job as contemplatives is to be in contact with that ground and to communicate from that level... We have to keep silence alive for the people, as well as for ourselves – because no one else is doing it.'⁸³ Ironically, in a world of beats and hippies Merton understood that the most radical alternative life style was that of women who appeared to be the most traditional, contemplative, often cloistered, women religious. What Merton and the Sisters shared was what each had known all along, ironically, that what is most radical, is most hidden and most available, the still, small voice. Little wonder Merton declared this was 'the best retreat I ever made in my life'.⁸⁴

81. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 102.

82. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 105.

83. Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 6.

84. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 21.