An Interview with Fr. Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B. February 11, 2005

*Conducted and edited by Victor A. Kramer**

I

Kramer: My idea is to talk about vocation and the religious life of the Church during the period which paralleled Merton's entry into the monastic life. Then we will try to fit the famous Fr. Louis into the mix. But that is not as important as beginning to understand your family and background and how your religious vocation fits in here.

What we want to do is to let you develop a picture of your life and vocation during the past many decades.

McDonnell: I come from a family of eight children, seven boys and one girl. I am the fourth from the oldest. We were a lower middle-class family—never really poor and certainly never well off. When I came to college, I would not have been able to go to college had I not been studying for the priesthood. My parents simply did not have the money.

Kramer: Did you go to a public school?

McDonnell: I went to a public school through high school. I did not attend a Catholic school until I came here as a freshman in college.

*These interviews (this one and the following, both conducted at the Abbey of St. John's, Collegeville, February, 2005) reveal much about the nature of religious vocation during the era of Merton's life. Along with providing new information about Merton, it is hoped that their inclusion in *The Merton Annual* will also provide insight into the nature of religious vocation in the twentieth-century and may encourage scholars to interview other persons who were Merton's contemporaries, not so much to uncover material just about Thomas Merton, but rather to document the wider life of the Church during the periods both before and after Vatican II.

While Merton is perhaps the best known religious of his era, it is also quite valuable to be reminded of the many hundreds, indeed thousands, of vocations which contributed to the development of the Church during this time of change. (V.A.K.)

Kramer: So you came to St. John's in what year?

McDonnell: 1940.

Kramer: What do you remember about St. John's in 1940?

McDonnell: It was a quite different place as you can suspect. It was very much a pre-Vatican II monastery. There were no women on the faculty. Almost all the professors were monks. The monks wore their habits more often. The students went to Mass daily. So life was less open and more ordered. St. John's was already a national center of theology and beginning to be so for the arts. It was a center of not only a liturgical movement but also a rural life movement, a farm movement.

Kramer: If you think back to your family life then coming to St. John's, did you find it a kind of surprise, a different way of life?

McDonnell: Yes, it was a different way of life. I grew up in a very small town with one thousand people. St. John's represented cosmopolitan [life]. There were possibilities and opportunities that were not available to me in Velva, North Dakota.

Kramer: So you came already with the idea in mind that you had a religious vocation.

McDonnell: Yes. I came with that idea.

Kramer: But you were not necessarily planning to be a Benedictine?

McDonnell: No, I was not. I was planning to be a diocesan priest. But my vocation came about this way: in my family at the beginning of Lent, everybody gave up something. When I was in high school—probably a sophomore or freshman—I said, "I'm not going to give up movies for Lent." Then I thought instead of giving something up, why not do something like go to Mass every day. So I started to going to Mass every day. When the end of Lent came, I kind of liked it. And so I kept on doing it. For a young man to go to Mass every day in Velva, North Dakota, was highly suspicious! So the pastor came to visit my parents. He said I had been coming to Mass every day and he thought I had a vocation to the priesthood. My parents said they wanted to talk to me first. Several days later, my parents cornered me and asked, "Is it true?" I said, "What is this? Can't a guy go to Mass without you shipping him off to seminary?" I said I did not have any intention of joining the priesthood.

But I kept thinking about it and began praying actually, praying that I receive a vocation. Then I had a rather strong calling. I was going to a public school. The Catholic Church was extremely small. We were a very small minority in a Protestant village. I decided that in order to protect my vocation, I would not go to dances. But giving up dances was a big, big sacrifice because I loved to dance. And I was pretty good too! So that kind of cut me off. Also I would not date. Perhaps if I had socialized more at that age, it would have been better for me.

But I retained my vocation and the Bishop came. This was Bishop Muench, Aloysius Muench. He became an apostolic delegate to Germany after the War and then a Cardinal. He came to my town on a confirmation tour. Pastor arranged for me to see the Bishop. He asked me about my vocation. I said I wanted to be a priest. He then asked what kind of priest. I said, "I don't know. I don't know any religious order. But I kind of suspect that is what I want to be." He said, "You go to St. John's and study for the diocese of Fargo until you make up your mind. We'll take care of your expense." So I went to St. John's, and I liked what I saw. I liked it very much. But I was torn between the Dominicans and the Benedictines. I had as my spiritual director, the Novice Master.

Kramer: Who was the Novice Master?

McDonnell: Basil Stegmann. I talked to him about the Dominicans and Benedictines and finally decided to be Dominican.

Kramer: How old were you at this point?

McDonnell: I was a junior in college.

Kramer: Did you live in the monastery?

McDonnell: No, I lived in the dormitory.

Kramer: So, no dancing?

McDonnell: No! No dancing. That was hard. But when the ducks went over in the fall, I would go duck hunting. I was a great duck hunter and enjoyed being outdoors. That was hard too to give up. So I went off to the Dominicans after my junior year.

Kramer: Was that 1942 or 1943?

McDonnell: That was 1943. I loved the Dominicans. But I got sick. I think it was from standing on a flagstone floor when it was cold.

Kramer: Which Dominican friary did you attend?

McDonnell: It was in River Forest, Chicago.

Kramer: So you were there in 1944 and 1945?

McDonnell: Yes. 1944 and 45. But I did not finish the Novitiate. I wanted to finish it. I loved the life. But I became ill and I had to go to the doctor. I decided I would not leave on my own. If they threw me out, I would go. But I was not going to leave of my own free will.

Kramer: Why did you want to be a Dominican?

McDonnell: I was interested in preaching. I loved the community life. I just wanted to stay. Finally after about seven months, the Novice Master told me they could not give me vows and I would have to leave. It broke my heart.

Kramer: So you were in Chicago, and it was 1944.

McDonnell: Pardon me. It was 1943 when I left for the Dominicans. So it was now 1944. I left the Dominicans in 1944. I had an invitation to work in a school for the deaf in the Bronx. So I went there. But first I went to St. Thomas Seminary in Denver. The only reason I went was because it was wartime, and it was not proper to be wandering around if one was not in the Army. I had gone to the draft board in my county in North Dakota. I said, "I'm home. My health is bad. I'm a priesthood student. I'm a 4-A because I'm a seminarian. But as soon as I get my health, I'm going back." I hoped that that would take care of it. But the draft board did not seem impressed. When I came home the pastor said, "Don't stay in Velva. Go to some seminary. Just get out." So I went to St. Thomas Seminary in Denver. I received my 4-A designation by mail. I went to the Rector who sent me to the Archdiocese lawyer. The lawyer said, "If you're in bad health, you won't pass the exam. So take it and we'll go from there." So I took the exam and I flunked it! Then I did not have to be in the seminary. So I went out to the Bronx to work at the school for the deaf.

Kramer: Was it a religious institution?

McDonnell: Yes. It was run by the Viatorians. I was there for about six months. The work I was doing was mostly as the night watchman. But being up all night was not a good idea for somebody trying to get back on his feet. I had a chance to go to Mount

Manresa on Staten Island, which is a Jesuit Retreat House. I worked there for about six months.

Kramer: How old were you then?

McDonnell: It was 1945. So I was about twenty-five. After working there for six months, I went home to Power, Montana. My parents had moved back to Montana. So I got on the train, which passed right through here [St. John's]. I stopped to say hello to friends here. I also saw Basil Stegmann. We talked about what happened. I told him I loved it, I really wanted to stay and that it broke my heart to leave. He said, "Why don't you apply here?" I said, "Would they take a broken-down reject?" He said to apply. So I did, and I was accepted by the monastic community at St. John's on the Feast of St. Dominic.

Kramer: During these years, were you thinking much about the Benedictine Order or the Benedictine Rule?

McDonnell: I was here, and I liked it here. That is all I knew.

II

Kramer: So your relationship to St. John's basically started over again and your vocation took a new twist.

McDonnell: Yes. It started over.

Kramer: So you started as a novice. Was the Novice Master the same person?

McDonnell: It was Basil. I had had a very, very difficult Novitiate. The reason it was difficult was because we got up at 4:10 a.m. That is early. And we did not get breakfast until about 6:30 or 7:00. That nearly killed me. I was not completely healthy, and it was just very tough. I was not sick, just a weakened state.

Kramer: So the routine still at that time at St. John's was going into the Church many times a day. So you would go for the evening hours at 4:30 or so. When was the community Mass?

McDonnell: Mass was in the mornings. It was after Sext, I think—after five of the liturgical hours.

Kramer: It really was a rigorous life because these guys were also all teaching or working.

McDonnell: Yes, it was rigorous, but I loved it. During the Novitiate, my physical strength went down.

Kramer: Did a novice at that point sleep in the dormitory with others?

McDonnell: Yes, we did. There were about twelve novices with me. That was not a hardship to me. Because I had such a difficult time—Basil really wanted me to stay and he did everything he could. I was just so exhausted.

Kramer: How long was the Novitiate?

McDonnell: One year.

Kramer: Then you made temporary vows?

McDonnell: I made vows under a special arrangement. According to our constitutions, if the community accepts me for temporary vows, then the community cannot reject me at solemn vows for health reasons. So if they accept me, they are taking a risk. Father Basil wrote out a document that said if my health is not better by the time of solemn vows, I will not hold the community to its obligations. So I said, "Where do I sign?" And I signed it gladly. When it came time for solemn vows, my health was worse. When my application came up in the Chapter, this was an issue. Basil wanted me to stay. An older monk got up in Chapter and said, "That document is immoral and uncanonical. And it has no force." So the community said, "Ok, he's in."

Kramer: Then what was your job?

McDonnell: I was still a student. I finished as a student in 1951. I was ready for ordination then. But my health continued to deteriorate. By then I was in very bad shape—having a major problem keeping up with everything. They gave me a private room. There was a bed and a chair, and that is all. I was not in the lap of luxury!

But I was ordained. I had to spend a lot of time resting. They decided to put me in a parish because they thought a parish might be easier for me. So I went for three years at Hastings. I got better, a little better. But it was desperately hard. I was having to say three Masses without any food. That was really hard.

Kramer: Were you in Hastings by yourself?

McDonnell: No. I was an assistant. After three years, I changed from Hastings to Detroit Lakes. When I got to Detroit Lakes I saw that the job would be not only beyond my physical strength, but

way beyond. But I said to myself, "Do the best you can." So I did not say anything to my superiors.

Kramer: How long were you there?

McDonnell: I was there for one year. After the year I was supposed to go to school in the summer at Notre Dame. When I got on the train to go back to Notre Dame, I collapsed in Minneapolis. I did not say anything to the monastery and stayed there for about four or five days. Then I went to Notre Dame to start classes. I lasted three or four days before I was in the hospital. But there was nothing wrong with me. I had just spent all my capital. If you spend all your capital, you have nothing to build on. So I was in the hospital for a week. I went back to classes again and only lasted about three days. Then I was back in the hospital.

My brother who was a pilot flew down and got me and brought me to Minneapolis. I rested there for a week then I told St. John's what had happened. I went back to St. John's and stayed in the infirmary for a month. Gradually, over the next thirty years I got better, but it was a struggle.

Kramer: I know what you are talking about. You just run out of energy. But your religious life has been built. You had a good foundation, and you had found a good place here. So then you had already begun your work as a religious. What about those earliest years? What was satisfying about that work?

McDonnell: I loved preaching. I liked being in the parish, but I like being here at St. John's better. I was effective as a young priest.

Kramer: When did you start having an interest in non-Catholic religions?

McDonnell: Growing up in Velva, North Dakota, I was surrounded by Protestants. Very few of my friends were Catholic. At the end of the 1950s, ecumenism was on the horizon. The Theology Department met to decide whether or not they should teach Protestant theology to our undergraduate students. I was teaching religion in the theology department. I said I was against it because we did not have enough time to teach them Catholic theology. Why should we take the little time we have and teach Protestant theology? But I lost the vote. They said, "If we're going to do this, we should have someone really trained to do it." They looked around and said, "Kilian, you're the one."

Kramer: But you voted against it.

McDonnell: Yes. I voted against it. I went to the Abbot and said, "They want me to go on for Protestant theology. I think I can get a grant for this."

Kramer: Roughly, when did you get permission to write this grant proposal?

McDonnell: It was the late 1950s. I wrote out a two-page application and sent it to ten foundations. Eight said no. Two said yes. The first that said yes was the Butler family from St. Paul. But because my health was bad, the Abbot said it was not a good idea for me to go to Europe, which is where I wanted to go to study Protestant theology. So I went to Ottawa for a year. I had a very difficult time in Ottawa because I was still not back on my feet.

Kramer: What kind of program did Ottawa have?

McDonnell: It did not have a Protestant program. It was Catholic, but it was good. I got through the year and received the Licentiate. Then I went to Europe for three or four years at various universities—Trier, Tübingen, Münster, Heidelberg and Paderborn.

Kramer: Did you have any contact with Benedictine monasteries in Europe?

McDonnell: No.

Kramer: So you went from university to university listening to lectures.

McDonnell: Yes. And I did my thesis on John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist.

Kramer: And this became a book?

McDonnell: Yes, published by Princeton University Press.

Kramer: Then you came back and had this idea about the Ecumenical Institute which has now existed for over four decades. The Butler family was in the background. What would you say about the religious life during this same period? You were studying and thinking about teaching Protestant religion at roughly the same time that Vatican II came along. So you came back here and all of the sudden the Church was a different church.

McDonnell: It was a different church. But I was part of the change. I was not exterior to it. I did not find the change difficult. I found it exhilarating. And I found my studies in Calvin exhilarating also.

III

Kramer: So all of the sudden, it was possible for a Catholic priest and professor to talk about Protestant theology. It was not forbidden. Indeed, it might even be good.

You also became editor of *Sponsa Regis*. How did that happen?

McDonnell: I became editor of *Sponsa Regis* before I went to Europe. When I was in Europe, there was another monk who was my assistant. He became the editor during that time.

Kramer: When you were editor, you had lots of manuscripts coming across your desk. And somehow you ended up with some Thomas Merton manuscripts. Then you corresponded some with Merton.

McDonnell: I corresponded with him, but my most substantial contact with him had nothing to do with *Sponsa Regis*. It had to do with a book he wrote on the Eucharist, *The Living Bread*. I was given that book to review. *The Living Bread*, from what I can remember, was unlike his other books in that it was a more formal presentation of the Eucharist—rather than the kind of reflective nature of his other writings. The formal writing Merton was not prepared to do. He was not educationally prepared.

Kramer: You are right. He wrote a book in 1951 called the *The Ascent to Truth* which was a systematic theological study using Aquinas to look at St. John of the Cross. He himself was not satisfied with that book. Then this book about the Eucharist came later, and it is the same type of book.

McDonnell: Yes. So I panned the book. Then my book review appeared in *Worship* [*Orate Fratres*] magazine. Two weeks after it appeared, Merton came to St. John's for a seminar. I was sitting alone in the refectory eating breakfast. He came down and sat right across the table facing me. This was not a meeting I wanted because of the review. I pushed the coffee and bread over and kept my head down. Finally, Fr. Louis says, "Can we talk?" I said, "Sure." So we talked. It was very nice.

We established contact. He was here for two weeks. During those days, I had other contacts with him.

At one point he asked me for a boat. So I got him a boat. One afternoon, he went out into the Bay. He was out there two or three hours and came back dripping wet. I said, "What happened?"

He said, "I was leaning over the boat looking into the water. It was so clear. I could see the fish and the seaweed. It was so blue and beautiful. I wanted to be a part of it, so I just jumped in."

Kramer: That is a great story. Did other people see him?

McDonnell: I do not think so. It was during the time he had had the confrontation or meeting with Zilboorg. He later said if I was in the area of Gethsemani, I should visit him. I said I would like to do that. He left. I then went to Ottawa. When I was at Ottawa, I asked for permission to go to Gethsemani during Christmas. I was given permission.

On the way down, I stopped at Mt. Saviour monastery in Elmira, New York. There was a Brother there who had been a novice under Merton at Gethsemani. He had left there and entered Elmira. When he heard I was going to Gethsemani, he asked if I would take a letter to Fr. Louis for him. I said, "Sure." So he wrote a letter and gave it to me. I went on my way to Gethsemani.

Kramer: This would have been around 1957 or 1958, before you went to Europe.

McDonnell: Yes. After I got to Gethsemani, Fr. Louis came to my room and we visited. I said I had the letter for him. But he did not take it. I asked if I had done something wrong. He said no, but he could not receive "secret letters." According to the rules, he was right. And he would not take it. So I asked him what he wanted me to do with it. He said I could read it out loud. So I opened it and read it.

It basically said, "Dear Fr. Louis, I thought I would drop you a note since Fr. Kilian is here and is going to Gethsemani. I want you to know how much I appreciated all you did for me while I was a novice. You really helped me find my Benedictine vocation, and I am very happy here at Elmira. I'm in my third year of theology, and I work in the garden and in the kitchen. Again, many thanks for all you did for me. Fraternally, Br. ...."

So then I still had the letter, and I asked what I should do with it. He said, "Eat it." I am sure it was in jest. At some point he took me out to his little hermitage.

Kramer: The tool shed—St. Anne's.

McDonnell: Yes. So we talked and talked. It was great. We talked about theology, ecumenism, and Europe. After some time I left

for Germany. I kept up the correspondence with him for a while but had to give it up. I was doing doctoral studies.

Kramer: Have you read much of Merton? Have you looked at the poetry?

McDonnell: I have read a little. I cannot say a lot. I have looked at the poetry. We have a collection of all his poetry, which is a mean thing to do because some of it he surely would not want published.

Kramer: Yes. It is 1,048 pages.

McDonnell: Yes! Only an enemy would do that. But some of the poetry is lovely. He really had a gift.

Kramer: The early stuff is very intense and ambitious. The later stuff is kind of oblique and purposefully anti-poetic. There is a lot of nice stuff along the way. Do you think Merton's work has lasting value?

McDonnell: Oh yes. I think it does. He is a major spiritual writer. He is here to stay for sure.

Kramer: Have you looked at the journals?

McDonnell: I have. And I have one upstairs. I enjoy it. One thing he does that is very important—and it is a weakness in Catholicism. It is not to say that it does not belong to our tradition. You can find it in our tradition. But it is not a prominent feature; that is, the personal moment in faith. That is where Merton is strong. Because we do not get it from other places, we get it there.

Kramer: That is a very good point.

McDonnell: It is one of the things I learned from the Pentecostals. That is their area of strength. The whole evangelical arena asks, "Have you received Jesus as your personal savior?" So it is that personal element which I think will give him a permanent place, together with his honesty.

Kramer: I happened to be reading *Weavings* for March-April, 2005. And I found two of your poems: "A Place to Hide: Light Off" and "A Place to Hide: Light On." My question is, what is going on in these poems?

McDonnell: Well, something is going on in those two poems. They are two states—a person who has been in the religious life for a long time and endures—light off, which is more of the permanent

state, or the usual state. You are fighting to escape from formalism. And you are trying to get back to the personal moment of faith. The only way to do that is to make faith a personal endeavor and to use the scriptures in a personal way. I can use Merton in that way also. He is very helpful that way. I do not want to talk about the "Dark Night of the Soul," but it is something like that. You are left without the slightest interest in things religious.

Kramer: Yes. And that is hard. It is very hard. I just threw these two poems into the discussion because I think Merton had to deal with the same thing. Early, Merton had certain concepts about the Church. And, early, he had certain concepts about the poems. He said himself that he did not like aspects of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but he was not going to revise it. At the same time, there is a considerable shift as he moves from the 1930s to '40s to '50s to '60s. There is something going on which has to do with his own life and spiritual life. I think that is what is really good about what he is able to do. That is what Catholics need to learn about their own spiritual life, that their own personal life can be part of that spiritual life. It seems to me that so many Catholics are back in the 1930s hoping the priest will provide them whatever they need.

McDonnell: "Light On" represents not the usual but a rare moment when God does not abandon you, and he opens the door an inch.

Kramer: To go back to Merton for a minute, why do you think some readers, some Catholics seem to be afraid of Thomas Merton? Did you hear about the new catechism that the Bishops were doing? They had a draft and a section on Merton but they pulled it because they said he would be too difficult for people to understand. They substituted Elizabeth Seton because they said they needed women. So Merton is not in this draft of the new American Catechism.

McDonnell: Mother Seton is fine, and they need a woman. But to leave Merton out shows that Bishops do not think they can handle Merton in the space allotted or they are trying to protect the poor, dumb laity.

Kramer: That is true. That is absolutely right.

McDonnell: Another reason why Merton will endure is that, unlike Mother Seton, Merton was a cosmopolitan person. He had

been immersed in the secular culture. So he comes out of that culture. He knows it well and he has this seeking of God in a contemplative context. That is very attractive. The other thing is that there is no sham. He never covers up his faults.

Kramer: Right. That is the whole purpose of the journals. This last batch of questions—Did you meet him? Did he have a sense of humor? You have already answered the questions.

We could ask many other questions regarding your work and people like yourself and Merton and Vatican II as a dividing line. A lot of people are very disappointed and frustrated with some changes in the Church. I think you can look at Vatican II and all those changes as very valuable.

I was speaking with Sr. Shaun O'Meara of St. Ben's Monastery yesterday. She was talking about how so many people are disappointed that there are not sisters to work in the schools. Well, lay people can work in the schools. It was never the sisters' job to work exclusively in schools anyway. So it is not that we are in some kind of crisis. We are in a moment of opportunity. I think the work that you have done with the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research is a perfect example of that. What is interesting is that you were given sufficient latitude in your vocation to do the work you have accomplished.