

**“A Dedication to Prayer
and a Dedication to Humanity”:
An Interview about Thomas Merton
with James Conner, OCSO**

Conducted and edited by Paul M. Pearson

Paul M. Pearson: Father James, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. Perhaps we could begin with just a little bit of your own background, how you came to hear of Gethsemani and decided to try your vocation there?

James Conner: I'm originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma. I went to a high school there run by Benedictine sisters up to the eleventh grade, and then at that time decided on coming here. I first heard about the Trappists and Gethsemani from a friend of mine in the school whose uncle had made a retreat there. Then I came across the book by Father Raymond Flanagan, *The Man Who Got Even with God*,¹ and that more or less sold me on it. So I wrote and asked to come for a retreat. This was in 1948, right at the time when Abbot Frederic Dunne² had just died. The reply from the abbey said that the abbot had just died and that they would shortly be having an election. When I got here in August they had just had their election and Dom James Fox³ had been elected. The Sunday I was here he gave his first chapter talk. The retreat house dining room had a dumb waiter that went down into the kitchen, which had a speaker from the chapter room. Father Cletus Altermatt, the guest master at that time, arranged that I could sit at the edge of the dumb waiter and listen to Dom James's first chapter talk. Afterwards I met him and he gave permission that I could come at that time if I wanted to. [**Pearson:** How old were you then?] At that time I was fifteen and had just completed my sophomore year in high school. Initially I thought I would, and then I went back home and decided to wait and graduate and then to join. But for some reason, after my junior year, I decided I wanted to come anyhow and so I came in August of 1949.

1. Fr. M. Raymond, *The Man Who Got Even with God: The Life of an American Trappist* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1941).

2. Frederic Dunne: April 25, 1874-August 4, 1948.

3. James Fox: December 10, 1896-April 17, 1987.

The community at that time had roughly one hundred and fifty monks in it. There were about forty choir novices and a similar number of lay brother novices. My novice master was Dom Gerard McGinley, who would later become the founding abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee. He was a very good and paternal type of person. However in November of that year Gethsemani made its foundation in Mepkin and Dom Anthony Chassagne, who was prior, was sent to Mepkin as the superior and Dom Gerard replaced him as prior at Gethsemani, and Father Urban Snyder then took over as novice master. He was a very different person from Dom Gerard, very Germanic in every sense of the word. He tried to be paternal, but it just wasn't in his nature. I managed to survive the first year of the novitiate and it was in the second year of the novitiate that Merton started giving some conferences to the novices. That was a tremendous relief to all of us. [Laughing.] His whole style, his whole manner, his whole presentation, and even the material he was giving us was much more beneficial for all of us.

Pearson: What were the subjects that Merton was dealing with?

Conner: Mostly just early monasticism, the desert fathers and various elements about the early monastic life. It only lasted for about six months, and Father Urban used the pretext that it was encroaching on his prerogatives as novice master and so Merton's conferences were stopped. Thankfully that was very near to the end of my novitiate. In May 1951 we had a visitation by Dom Louis le Pennuen⁴ and that was when Merton was appointed as master of students. I made profession in October of that year and then came under him at that time as one of his students.

Pearson: Had you heard or read anything of Merton's before you came?

Conner: I first heard of him when I came to my initial retreat at Gethsemani. The retreat master had mentioned that a book had just been published by one of the monks and probably mentioned the title, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I didn't read it at that time and actually never read it until after Merton's death when it was read in the refectory. My sister had gotten a copy of it before I left but I hadn't read it myself.

4. Gethsemani is a daughter house of the Abbey of Melleray in France and the Abbot of Melleray was Father Immediate to the Gethsemani Community and conducted their regular visitation.

Pearson: When Merton began teaching the novices whilst Father Urban was novice master were you aware that it was Merton who was teaching you?

Conner: Yes, by that time we knew it was Thomas Merton. When I first came I had no idea who he was in the community and the only time we were all together with the professed – there was a very strict separation between the professed and novices in those days – was mainly at chapter which took place every morning. I forget how I learned which monk was Merton but I soon learned that he was the very vivacious monk on the other side of the chapter room who seemed to love to make signed comments in a very jovial and jokey way about things that the abbot was saying in his chapter talks. Even at that time Merton came across as a very human, very down-to-earth person, very vivacious. He wasn't signing anything derogatory or putting the abbot down, it was just his joking ways. (I have no idea whether he had done this in Dom Frederic's time.)

Pearson: You became one of Merton's scholastics in October 1951 – how long was this for?

Conner: Almost five years, from 1951 to 1955. We had the option at that time that if we wanted to we could also choose the master of students as our confessor. If you chose him as confessor you got to meet with him every week, otherwise you only met with him once a month. I chose him as confessor. For me, at that time, I couldn't say he was a real lifesaver, but he was something very much akin to that. He was very much of a father, yet at the same time he was very much a brother. He didn't try to put on airs as being the master. The main thing that came across with him was the great respect that he had for each individual.

The very first time I went in for direction, after giving the blessing he said, "sit down." That was a revolutionary thing at that time, you never sat down with the abbot, the prior or the novice master, you always knelt at the side of their desk. I always sensed this was part of his real respect for each person, making sure he was dealing with them on an equal basis. That was the way he came across. He was always very intuitive and had great insight into what you were saying without needing to explain a whole lot to him.

When I was a novice the novice master followed very much the Ignatian style of meditation. Every day he would give out these

points of meditation on little sheets of paper for the next morning. Then, in the evening after supper, he would go over those points of meditation with us. We would then use them for the next morning's meditation which was, at that time, between 2:30 a.m. and 3:00 a.m., after the Mass of Our Lady, before vigils. I could never meditate or pray with them; I would read them over, envisage the scenes, but I was just not able to make something of a real prayer out of it. So one of the first times I went to Merton I told him that. I thought at the time he might be liable to say something like "You've just made profession – what did you do that for if you cannot even meditate?" He just looked at me really quietly and said, "Well, it sounds like the Spirit is working in you." It was such a freeing thing for me; it just freed me to be myself and to discover how I could find God in prayer. It didn't tie me down to something that seemed impossible. Merton left it up to me to find what suited me best. I think I just gradually discovered myself, how to pray in a way that suited me, fitted me. It's always been a very quiet type of a prayer, not very wordy, not a great deal of conversation as such. At the same time it's not where anything happens, any kind of experience as such; it's just a quiet time of being there with the Lord.

Pearson: His approach is suggestive of the move that was to come later within the Trappist Order, moving from a penitential way of life to a more contemplative one.

Conner: That was the difference between Merton and Urban. Urban was still very much tied to the old Trappist way of life. It was like when he stopped Merton giving conferences to the novices under the pretext that it was not monastic doctrine he was giving us and yet, in actual fact, it was totally monastic doctrine that he was giving us. That was the difference between the two men in their approach. The community as a whole at that time was very much tied to the old Trappist way, and changes had not yet started coming. It was when we were students with Merton, and having weekly conferences with him, that his thinking began to have more of an influence within the community as such.

Pearson: It seems extraordinary that, as such a recent convert, and also having not long completed his own monastic training, Merton felt free to take such a different approach.

Conner: Merton didn't have the strong Jansenist bent that a lot of the Trappists still had at that time. It may have been partly due

to the fact that he was just such a free spirit in every sense of the word when he lived in the world. That made it easier for him to make that shift. It did create something of a problem at that time. Father Urban wasn't really strong in reacting to Merton, except in his subtle ways of maneuvering the novices. [Pearson: Did Father Urban attend Merton's conferences?] No. That made it all the more ironic that he wasn't there to hear what Merton was actually teaching us. I think everyone felt even at the time that the main problem was the fact that the novices responded very positively to Merton's presentation, whilst they dozed through Father Urban's classes.

Father Raymond, on the other hand, was one who very vociferously reacted to Merton in his preference of advocating contemplation in contrast to the old Trappist way of life. Raymond felt that this was a real betrayal of our tradition. Unfortunately that struggle, that difference, continued pretty much throughout most of their life. In later years it got more into the area of social issues, as Merton would write against the war. Raymond was very gung ho, red-blooded, an advocate of the war, and felt that it was what America was all about, so a lot of what he wrote was in that vein. They had some rather heated discussions at times. [Pearson: How did that happen when there was so little communication between the monks at this time?] In those days it would mostly have happened through rather bombastic notes that Raymond would write to Merton and to the abbot. By the time the sixties came around – that was when the rules on not speaking relaxed more – then there was more opportunity for verbal exchanges. But even then there wasn't a whole lot of that. But I do remember one time especially. It happened that Merton had some visitors out at the gatehouse and Raymond had some visitors out there at the same time. Somehow, as they were leaving, the issue about the war came up and they got into a very heated discussion, very verbal. But that sort of thing didn't happen very often.

Pearson: As master of students how frequently did Merton give classes to the students and what subjects did he cover?

Conner: This was where his monastic orientation notes stem from. It would vary – sometimes he would speak about the Cistercian Fathers – it was not a consistent class, in the sense of a consistent line of topics. It would vary a great deal from one week to the next. After the apostolic exhortation of Pius XII on the sanctity of

priestly life⁵ Merton gave us some conferences at that time on the priesthood and the Eucharist. All of the students he was teaching, the choir religious, were preparing for ordination to the priesthood. Sometimes if there were some documents that had come out from Rome in relation to changes that were happening at that time, like when changes were made under Pope Pius XII to Holy Week and to the paschal vigil – reintroducing the vigil on the evening of Holy Saturday – he gave us a series of conferences about that, somewhat following along the lines of Jean Daniélou's book on the liturgy.⁶ But there was a great deal of variety in the topics Merton addressed.

Pearson: What other lectures, besides the ones given by Merton, were you receiving in preparation for ordination?

Conner: We had two years of philosophy and four years of theology. Father Andrew Rodutsky taught philosophy and Father Vianney Wolfer and Father Timothy Vander Vennett taught theology. At that time, when we were taking classes, we still had the strict rules of silence, so that even during the classes communication was strictly one-way; there was no opportunity for asking questions or discussion or anything like that. It was strictly following the Latin textbook of traditional doctrine. So by comparison it was a great relief to be able to sit in a conference with Merton where you could ask questions, raise issues and the like. Also the topics themselves would not be just strictly presented from the textbook. It would be something which obviously meant something to Merton and which he thought should have a meaning for us.

Pearson: Did Merton generally stay on topic?

Conner: No, he would often bring in other things as well. For example when there was somebody dying in the community, the fact that we were all younger monks and with the strict rules of silence didn't know the dying monk, he would give us something of a presentation, not really a eulogy, but his reflections on that monk. It was always very good as it made the person seem to be much more human, much more down-to-earth, than he ever seemed to be when

5. The exhortation *Menti Nostrae* was given by Pope Pius XII on September 23, 1950.

6. Most probably *Bible et Liturgie: La Théologie Biblique des Sacraments et des Fêtes d'Après les Pères de l'Eglise* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1951); ET: *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956).

he was alive. [Laughing.] He would do these regularly. Periodically, on a Sunday afternoon, he would once in a while bring in an old phonograph and play some kind of music for us. At that time we never got classical music in the refectory or elsewhere. The only classical music was at pontifical Masses when the organist would always play interludes. Merton would play recordings of various kinds of music, usually classical music, though at other times he would bring in other kinds of music – though he didn't bring in records like Bob Dylan's or music like that – he was just exposing us to other kinds of culture. Merton would usually play some of the record for a few minutes, comment on it briefly, and then go back to some other topic. [Pearson: Yes, we have a recording in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center from December 1963 when he did something similar with the novices, playing them some Shaker spirituals and then a recording of the Singing Nun.⁷]

Pearson: Were his interests in poetry evident at that time?

Conner: Not a whole lot. I certainly don't recall that he read his own poetry to us, except maybe when Father Stephen Pitra died. He has this beautiful poem – it is one of the few poems of his I can really appreciate, though that was later on.⁸ He did, for example, use a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins as the basis for a presentation on Our Lady.⁹

It was always very obvious that Merton had a very great devotion to Our Lady; in fact one of the first books he recommended to me when I came under his care was de Montfort's book on true devotion to Our Lady.¹⁰ After I had read that he then asked me if I had thought of making de Montfort's act of consecration. We talked about it and eventually decided to do that. That brought together his role as master of students and as spiritual director and confessor.

7. Recording #77.2 [December 22, 1963] from the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

8. "Elegy for a Trappist" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 631; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text. Father Stephen died in 1966.

9. Thomas Merton, "Conference Notes by Thomas Merton III: 'The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,'" *Liturgy O.C.S.O.* 25.1 (1991) 11-19; available online at: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/digi/collections/liturgy/> (accessed August 2010).

10. Louis-Marie de Montfort, *Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.

I don't remember him giving many sermons; in fact in those days we rarely had sermons except on special feasts, so I don't remember him preaching on Our Lady,¹¹ but it was obvious that he had a great devotion to her.

Pearson: Were you aware of all the writing Merton was doing at this time?

Conner: Yes, we used to get his books read to us in the refectory, much to his chagrin and embarrassment; he must have felt that he wished he wasn't there. But they always read his books when they came out, so we were all aware of them. But I don't think we were aware of exactly how much writing he was doing, particularly with his letter writing and all of that. I don't think I really became aware of that until the time when I was undermaster and he was novice master. At that time when he was master of students he still had the old vault and we never had occasion to go in there except when we went to see him for spiritual direction or on a one-to-one basis. So you didn't have a sense that he was doing a whole lot of writing in there, but when he was in the novitiate it was much more obvious.

Pearson: Was there a relationship between the books he was publishing in the first part of the fifties and his classes – did the books come out of the work he was preparing for class?

Conner: I couldn't say there was; I don't think a lot of what he was working on in his books was presented to us in his lectures at that time.

Pearson: Was Merton doing manual labor during this time when he was master of students?

Conner: Very little. Once in a while he would, but the professed didn't work as a group – they all had their own jobs. So there wasn't really any common work. Once or twice a week we would have common work in the garden and Merton would take part in that. Also when there was special work like harvesting the corn or the wheat or picking up the hay from the fields. The other work of the professed was allocated in conjunction with the abbot and the cellarer, Brother Clement Dorsey, who was very much the work boss in those days. Even the novices had various chores allocated;

11. But see "A Homily on Light and the Virgin Mary" (from 1962) in Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 158-70.

I remember starting to work for Brother Mark [Von den Benken] in the electrical department when I was still a novice.

Pearson: Towards the end of his time as master of students was one of Merton's periods of instability caused by his desire to become a hermit. Were you aware that any of this was going on?

Conner: No, he never let on to us at all about any of that. To see him in community, to deal with him as master of students, you never saw any of this. We knew he had his own gripes and his complaints about the monastery as a whole and about some of Dom James's policies. He was not openly vociferous with his bitching but at the same time he was not overly hidden about it either. So we were not aware of what was going on at that time.

Pearson: But you were aware of his interest in the solitary life?

Conner: Yes, we all knew that. It was during this time that he got St. Anne's, where he could spend some time alone in the woods. He also got permission in his final years as master of students for all the students to go outside the wall into what was the old horse pasture during the time after dinner. Dinner was at about noon at that time and we had a period of about an hour until none and the afternoon work period. Merton would go out there himself every day and he just made it known that if anyone else wanted to go out there too then they were welcome too. There wasn't a big group who took up this opportunity, maybe a half dozen or so, and we would go out to the old horse pasture and find our own corner and have some time alone. Eventually he got a little bell mounted out there, which he would ring when it was time to come back so we could get back in time for the office. That was very good; you had a sense of solitude, and a certain sense of sharing in Merton's solitude, though not in any encroaching way. Again it was another aspect of the move in the monastery towards a more contemplative way of life that Merton was pushing. Also at that time, on feast days when we had no work, he would manage to get a truck and take anyone who wanted to go, from among the students, to the big woods across the highway. At that time it was the only time we got to go across the highway. Ostensibly it was to plant trees up there, saplings he got every year from the forestry department. How many actually got planted God alone knows. We would spend some of the time planting some saplings and then for the rest of the time we'd be free to take a book and to use that time on our

own. That also accentuated the element of solitude.

The rules of silence were in force and the only time you could speak with someone else was in the presence of the abbot, the prior or the novice master. Father Urban was prior by this time and he also started taking a vehicle out to the woods once in a while with the provision that anyone could come and you could speak with one another in his presence on these trips. He was accentuating the community aspect and Merton was accentuating the solitary aspect. That didn't last very long though as there were not a whole lot of takers for Father Urban's trips. But it accentuated the struggle between the two of them. It was rather sad as Merton and Urban were right next to each other in seniority and right next to each other in choir and yet there always seemed to be some kind of friction or tension there. One time when I was cantor I asked Merton why he didn't sing out more; he had a very nice voice. He said that he found that when he sang out more Father Urban would shut up and he didn't want to antagonize Father Urban in that way. The tension wasn't really obvious or demonstrative to the community as a whole but it was present there enough that you could pick it up if you were observant. In the end Father Urban joined the Lefebvrist¹² group, though he spent his last years at the Abbey of the Genesee.¹³

Pearson: Is there anything else you would like to add concerning Merton's time as master of students?

Conner: During the early fifties we had very formal courses in theology and philosophy, but scripture was pretty much hit and miss at that time. But at one point during this time Merton gave us a course on St. Paul. To my mind it was one of the best courses that he gave, apart maybe from that one on mystical theology in the sixties. Hopefully his course on St. Paul will be published; it would make an excellent book.¹⁴

After he was made novice master he would still give presenta-

12. Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991) was one of the leading opponents to the changes brought about in the Church by the Second Vatican Council. He was excommunicated in 1988.

13. Urban Snyder died at the Abbey of the Genesee on January 25, 1995.

14. Thomas Merton, "Sanctity in the Epistles of St Paul: Scripture Course: Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1954," *Liturgy O.C.S.O.* 30.1 (1996) 3-27; 30.2 (1996) 3-23; 30.3 (1996) 15-33; 31.1 (1997) 7-25; 31.2-3 (1997) 3-19; 32.1 (1998) 51-65; available online at: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/digi/collections/liturgy/> (accessed August 2010).

tions periodically on Sunday afternoons, which would be open to anyone in the community who wanted to come. The 1962 course on mystical theology¹⁵ came about as Baldwin Skeeahan, Chrysogonus Waddell and I were all being sent to Rome in 1963 and one of the requirements for the studies there was that we had taken a course in mystical theology and we had never had one. So this course was primarily prepared for us and the novices attended as well. It was an excellent course and Merton went all out in preparation for it, doing a tremendous amount of work.

Pearson: When Merton became master of novices in 1955 you were still a student. When were you ordained?

Conner: In 1957. Then the following year after I was ordained, 1958, I was appointed as Merton's undermaster. Initially when he was made novice master he chose Father John of the Cross Wasserman as his undermaster; Merton and John of the Cross had always been very close. Then I was undermaster from 1958 until 1961, three years.

Pearson: Did you have much contact with Merton between his becoming novice master and your appointment as undermaster?

Conner: No, I had very little contact with him during those years. Also I couldn't continue with him as my confessor at that time either once he was appointed as novice master.

Pearson: When you were made undermaster was that his choice?

Conner: I am sure it was, with the abbot's approval of course.

Pearson: What were your duties as undermaster?

Conner: Primarily I was to take the novices out to work in the morning each day. He would usually come out to work himself a couple of days a week but most of his time was spent in his room with his writing. I would also give them a class once a week on the usages, different from the lectures he gave on the observances; it was more concrete and covered practical things in relation to the usages, teaching them the sign language, rubrics and things like that. Merton would always give them three conferences a week

15. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008).

of his own – he didn't attend mine and I didn't attend his, except once in a while. Sometime during the years 1955-1958 he would sometimes give conferences that were open to others, to the professed as well as the novices and I would frequently go to those. I recently saw a picture of him giving a conference and I was sitting there in the back of the room. I was surprised to see that myself.

Periodically we would meet, though generally it was fairly informal. Once in a while he would say, "come by after supper" or something like that. At that time we had what we called "summer postulants," young kids who would come in and spend the summer here with the possibility of considering whether or not they might have a vocation. I remember we had this one young kid who never seemed to manage to get up for vigils and Merton began to get suspicious of what was going on. So at one point he told me to go and check out his dormitory cell and, sure enough, I found, hidden under his pillow, a bottle of gin, more than half-finished. So I brought it down and gave it to Merton and the kid was sent home. A few days later Merton said to me "come by after supper tonight." So I came in and he had this bottle of gin sitting there with some crackers and we finished off the bottle of gin. [Laughing.] But that was exceptional. Once in a while he might get a beer, but usually I would just meet with him and we'd spend the time sharing our views of what was going on with the novices, or getting his opinion about things I might have missed. He was very good in that way.

I remember there was one day he was off on a day of recollection or something – I don't remember where he was – and we had a novice that came in after vespers and stopped me and said that he'd had this vision of Our Lady. So I said, "Yes?" Then he started talking about the number of visions he'd had, seeing Our Lady in church and in other places. So I sent him up to Dom John Eudes Bamberger and of course John Eudes shipped him out pretty quick. Then, when Merton came back that evening, I had to get together with him and fill him in on what had happened with his novice. That sort of thing didn't happen that often, though. Evidently he hadn't shared these visions with Merton. Anytime things got into something strongly psychological with the novices they would be referred to John Eudes. John Eudes had already done his psychiatric training by that time.

Dom James had a tremendous amount of trust in Merton's judgment. The novitiate was still very separate from the rest of

the community at this time so the novices' major contact was with Merton, whom they would see individually once a week, his undermaster and with the abbot, whom the novices would always see at least once a month. So ultimately it was usually Merton, in consultation with Dom James, who made the final decision whether a novice was suited to the monastic life or not. Merton would have met regularly, at least once a week, with Dom James, and Merton was also, even at that time, his confessor as well.

Pearson: What was Merton's style as novice master?

Conner: He was an excellent judge of character. I always found Merton good in this regard. He and John Eudes hit it off pretty well in their decision-making. By this time John Eudes was officially psychologically screening candidates. After I was undermaster, I was made in 1962 the vocations director and so continued to work closely with Merton and with candidates. I certainly remember a few cases where he and I had different opinions on people, and I remember one time especially I must have tried to rather staunchly defend my opinion and Merton got a little testy about it and things got a bit heated between the two of us. I remember I talked to John Eudes about that person and he remarked that I have a tendency to assert myself by throwing sand in the eyes of someone and he thought that that was what was taking place in my disagreement with Merton. The individual concerned wasn't accepted in the end. [Laughing.] But for the most part I always found Merton's judgment very good even though I'd generally met with the candidate more often than he had at that stage.

Pearson: Did your time as undermaster come to an end as you were appointed as vocations director?

Conner: I think it was partly that, and also partly the fact that there were a few other instances where we'd had run-ins or the like. I've read through his journals – when they first came out I immediately looked in the index to see where Tarcisius¹⁶ showed up – and there are a number of places in the journals where he refers to some friction or some tension between himself and his undermaster. I think it was certainly his decision at that time to replace me as undermaster. So I don't think it was just because I was promoted to vocations director. I think it was time. [Laughing.]

16. Tarcisius was Father James Conner's monastic name at this time.

Pearson: Did he share much personally with you in those years?

Conner: Yes and no, though much more than he had when I was a student. An example that comes to mind was the time when he was going through that whole crisis about Dom Gregorio and the monks in Mexico.¹⁷ He was writing to Cardinal Montini¹⁸ about the possibility of getting a dispensation to transfer. This was right during the middle of my time as undermaster and he was pretty open about it at that time with me, telling me what was going on, and he told me when he finally got the letter refusing his request. Of course, before that, when Dom James suddenly took off to go to Rome with no explanation, Merton immediately smelled a rat. He was venting himself very freely at that time; it was his way of letting off steam. Then, after Dom James came back, the abbot didn't say a word to him to let him know where he'd been or what he'd been there for, or anything like that. Then finally he got the letter from Montini telling him of the refusal. He talked about that at the time.

I always had to admire him with all of this because he would certainly bitch about Dom James and complain about his control of things and the like, but he always, in the end, showed a tremendous spirit of faith, a spirit of docility, which I always found very exemplary in the sense that he showed himself to be a real monk at those times. This never seemed to influence the relationship between the two of them; he would complain about Dom James, he would complain about his policies, about his ways of doing things, and yet at the same time he could work with him very closely. Once in a while he would complain to the novices and you can see some example of that in a recent article in *The Merton Seasonal*¹⁹ where Merton had obviously vented his spleen to the novices in a way which I was not aware of him doing. So he did that occasionally. Though I do wonder sometimes how much people remember and how much they are fabricating about Merton.

Pearson: I would imagine if he wasn't getting along with Dom James that he would never have allowed him to remain master of

17. Dom Gregorio Lemerrier was the prior of a Benedictine community at Cuernavaca in Mexico.

18. Cardinal Montini was prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and would later be elected as Pope Paul VI in 1963.

19. Randall De Trinis, "A Novice and His Master," *The Merton Seasonal* 34 4 (Winter 2009) 13-27.

novices for ten years?

Conner: Ultimately I think they could get along because Dom James was shrewd enough that he realized that Merton was having a positive influence in moving the community towards a more contemplative vent, more of a Cistercian tradition in the real sense. James appreciated that. And of course it was beginning to take place in a wider scope within the order as a whole. Ultimately they were both shrewd enough that they could both work together and use one another at the same time. It was an amazing relationship, amazing that it could be so fruitful, and it truly was.

Pearson: Yes, both Merton and Dom James were extraordinary people.

Conner: Yes, he definitely respected Merton, even artistically and the like. When they did the renovation of the church for example Merton was included among the small committee who were overseeing this.

Pearson: I know James became a hermit after he retired but I seem to recall hearing that he'd had a long attraction to the hermit life.

Conner: I've heard that myself, though he never let on. Partly because he was having to hold Merton back from his own yearnings in that regard.

Prayer itself was certainly a very strong element for Dom James. I have no idea how he prayed, I suspect it was very different from the way Merton prayed, but he was definitely a really spiritual man. I'm not sure how he used his time as a hermit; he never seemed to do any writing, except maybe letter writing, certainly not writing books or anything like that. In some senses Merton and James had a similar vent, similar thrusts or drive within them, and yet at the same time even their similar drive was in a different direction from one another.

This may just be my bias, but I see Merton as more of an authentic contemplative than I do of Dom James. And that makes me wonder how Dom James really utilized his time when he was out there in his hermitage. It's hard to say. I just see them as two very different people in that regard.

Pearson: Yes, they were certainly from quite different schools of thought yet there is that dynamic between them and respect for each other.

Conner: Yes, it was amazing the amount of respect that they had for each other even though they had so many differences. I started to say trust, but I'm not sure Merton trusted Dom James, though Dom James certainly trusted Merton. Well, but even there I don't know. [Laughing.] He certainly didn't trust Merton in later years when there was the incident with the nurse, maybe with good reason.

Pearson: Dom James seemed to encourage Merton's social writings, his dialogue with other Christians, and ultimately with other faiths.

Conner: These wouldn't have happened without the abbot's permission. James was always very open, very sympathetic and encouraged the dialogue with Protestant groups. When it got into the inter-religious things that was usually done more on a private basis, individuals who were in contact with Merton and writing to him or visiting him, rather than with visiting groups.

It's hard to know how sympathetic Dom James was to Merton's position with the social issues – I don't know. He was certainly not in Raymond's camp by any means. But on the other hand, to what extent he would have been fully in agreement with Merton, I really don't know. But I was certainly impressed how, when the edict came from the Abbot General, forbidding Merton's writings on war and peace, Dom James held off for many weeks after the edict was sent to him before he conveyed it to Merton. That in itself was extraordinary for Dom James as he was always very strong on obedience. But I think he just knew what a blow that would be for Merton and maybe too to a degree he understood what a blow it would be to the social issue itself, Merton not being able to continue writing. Dom James never expressed himself on any social issues, so there was no way of knowing for sure what his position was.

Dom James did have contact with the Kennedy family and he was a very strong advocate of Kennedy in 1960 when he was running and before he was elected. I think if there was anyone in the community who had said they were voting for Nixon instead of Kennedy Dom James would have immediately shipped them out to a foundation somewhere. (Maybe that's how Father Timothy Vander Vennett ended up in Vina, I don't know.)

So he wasn't in a sense just holding the Abbot General off, but the establishment as well. Though I don't know how much of that

came from his own personal empathy with Merton's position.

Pearson: Through 1955 to 1965 how aware were you of Merton's interest in peace and other issues, especially as you were undermaster during the time of his greatest output on these subjects.

Conner: Yes, he was very involved at that time, corresponding with Dorothy Day and writing some articles for her, and he made no effort to hide that in any way, or to lessen people's knowledge of the fact. His interests were serious. He would tell people very openly what he was doing. Once in a while he would give an article to the novices in general, or to myself, though he didn't put out much for the community, except what might come to the community through magazines and other publications. We were all very much aware of his interest and that he was heavily involved in writing about those things. I wasn't anywhere near aware of the amount of correspondence he was doing. I was very surprised when all the volumes of letters started to appear, and that's not all of them I'm sure. He made no effort to hide that or play it down or anything.

Pearson: Was there any discussion of his social writings within the community?

Conner: No. But certainly most of the community at that time would have been closer to his position than to Raymond's position. Dom James played it very cool in that regard. He wouldn't show himself for either side; he would get upset if Raymond would carry the thing too far, not just with Merton, but in general. Apart from that he never showed his hand. He was pretty astute.

Pearson: Did you get much sense of his interest in art and of his own art?

Conner: No, I was hardly aware at all of his art, even when some of the things came out. My first impression was that most of it came from his days at Columbia University. I wasn't aware of how much he actually did during his time in the monastery. But I knew of his interest in art because of his involvement with Victor Hammer, for example, when he got a crucifix from Hammer for the novitiate chapel. Merton was influential as well in getting Peter Watts to do the Stations of the Cross for the cloister and then he began commissioning other statues from Watts for the monastery. I remember in particular the one of St. Benedict which now hangs on the wall of the infirmary, but was originally for the novitiate. Then of course

there was the mahogany Madonna done by the Columbian sculptor, Jaime Andrade. The abbot gave Merton permission to commission these pieces. Dom James, with his own background, had a certain appreciation of art and realized the dearth of art around here at that time. So he was certainly sympathetic and open to the possibility of some of those things. I don't know how much he would have appreciated the Andrade Madonna, but again that was in the novitiate and the community never saw it that much. But he no doubt signed the check that paid for it.

Pearson: How aware were you of Merton's reading? When we look at the various references to books he was reading throughout his journals the range and breadth is astonishing.

Conner: Again, no, it wasn't evident. I think he was getting a lot of material on inter-library loan rather than things we actually had here. Then if he found them deeply interesting he would arrange for their purchase for the monastic library. But he certainly had a voracious appetite and aptitude for reading. The amount of reading he did, the amount of writing he did, the amount of study he did – it just amazes me what he accomplished.

Pearson: On top of his work of writing and teaching there was of course the time he spent meeting with novices and students.

Conner: Yes, and certainly the whole time that he was novice master we still had a fairly large-sized novitiate, I would guess twenty or thirty, and when he was master of students we had about thirty students at that time and he would meet with them once a month unless they had chosen him as their confessor and then they would meet weekly. As novice master he would meet with each novice on an individual basis once a week and these meetings would usually last for at least half an hour. Then, in 1964, there was the integration of the two novitiates and so Merton would then have had both the choir novices and the laybrother novices in his classes. Up until that time the laybrother novices had their own novitiate and their own novice master. Certainly, at their peak in the early fifties, there would have been as many laybrother novices as choir novices; this would have been around the time when the community got up to two hundred and seventy-five monks. At one time there were approximately eighty choir novices and eighty laybrother novices, so that more than half of the community were novices. It would have been around this time that they built a tent out in the préau to house

them all; it wasn't in use for a long period, though it was still kept up as it was good advertising. The retreat house overlooked the préau and retreatants would feel they should be donating to help build proper accommodation for all these novices! The tent was certainly still there when I came. It was through these years that most of Gethsemani's foundations were made, up until Genesee in 1955, and normally around thirty or forty monks would be sent to start these foundations.

Pearson: Are there any particular memories of Merton that you have from your time as undermaster?

Conner: One of the problems that I found as undermaster in particular was when he would decide at the last minute that he was going to come out and work with the novices, as usually I was in charge of taking the novices out to work. And once in a while, at the last minute, he would decide he was going to come and that he'd be in charge. I always felt, rightly or wrongly, that he was not always the most practically minded person and that set up a little bit of a tension sometimes, as I had to gracefully yield to him, to his seniority and to his rank. At the same time though, once he got out there and was working he wasn't a really dictatorial type of person. It was just the fact that he had his own ideas on how to do things and I felt that his ideas were not that practical.

There were two times when I had a real problem with Merton. The first concerned the renovation of the novitiate chapel. He wanted to redo the chapel, so we repainted the whole chapel and we were going to hang a reredos, and a baldacchino, at the back of the altar. So we got everything all done except for the baldacchino part. The next day was the Feast of the Assumption and Merton hoped to have it all done in time for the feast. We got as far as we could and then Merton came up and told us to leave it be, that we would finish it after the feast day. But I thought it would be great to surprise him by going ahead and finishing it before the feast day, so I got a couple of the novices to come back up to the chapel after compline. It was August, so we shut the windows in the hope that the noise from the hammering and the like wouldn't be heard. We got pretty well done with the thing and then, all of a sudden, at the last minute, who should appear at the back door of the chapel but Merton. He was furious. He was absolutely livid and said, "So I thought I told you we are not going to do this." He was very clear, in very few words, that he wanted us out of there. Then he wrote

me a note after he left which I got the next morning saying that he was so upset by the whole thing that he even refused to say Mass in the chapel that morning. In those days the novices always had their Mass after vigils in the chapel; nobody received communion at the main high Mass. So I wrote him back a note and, in a pleading way, told him that it would be very shocking to the novices if he didn't say Mass there, especially on a feast day like that, and I apologized again for my insubordination. So he yielded and he did go ahead and say Mass.²⁰ We got together afterwards and talked it out. That was the great thing with him, you could have a misunderstanding like that and he would never hold it against you; he would never hold a grudge.

The second incident concerned his desk. It was being moved and I found in it the key to his office. I let myself into his office and he came by and caught me in there. Again I was amazed at the way that he handled that. You really could expect him to take a hard interpretation of this. But not only didn't he do that but he showed a greater openness. He wrote me this beautiful note afterwards saying that he realized that what I was really looking for was some way of getting closer to him and that he realized that he tended to keep people at arm's length and that he wanted to make an effort to be closer. Though that happened in the last year that I was undermaster, so how much effect it had on the change the following year and my replacement, I really don't know. [Laughing.] I'm sure it had some influence, but still, with all of that, I was just amazed with the way that he handled it. He responded basically with real love, real brotherly affection.

So I never found him as one, even with Raymond, who would harbor harsh feelings about someone. He certainly had strong differences with Raymond, but he could say, "That's Raymond" – and that's about all you *could* say. [Pearson: There is even something of humor in their correspondence.] Yes, Raymond always called himself Rasputin, perhaps with good reason too.

Pearson: Thank you for sharing such personal stories. For people who never knew Merton these small vignettes do so much to humanize him in really the best sense of that word.

Conner: Yes, there were certainly other human traits, whether he

20. Merton's references to this event can be found in Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 212.

would drink too much or not. Certainly the community was not aware of that. Once in a while word would get back that he'd had too much to drink or something like that in town. My impression was that such incidents were rather few and far between. He was certainly not a drunk or anything like that.

Pearson: How aware were you of his many health issues?

Conner: Oh yes, everyone knew that he had colitis and stomach problems and he had to eat in the infirmary refectory for a while, and he hardly ate in the community refectory at all for the last several years before he went to the hermitage. I think everyone just sort of took that for granted. Dom James had some kind of stomach problems too and he had to have steak once a day. He would always have it in the infirmary refectory as meat could never be served in the community refectory. Everyone knew it, of course, and would joke about Dom James and his steak. Then Merton would be over there with his diet – it wasn't a steak by any means. There were certainly questions in some people's minds as to how much of this was real, and how much of it was psychological rather than physical. Probably in the final analysis there would be questions from both sides. People knew that he had a delicate stomach, but it certainly didn't seem to create a problem, or a source for pettiness or anything like that within the community.

I am sure, especially with the colitis, that there was a combination of physical and psychosomatic problems – psychosomatic problems so easily manifest themselves in issues relating to the stomach. If anything it is surprising, given the pressures that he was under, that he didn't develop a more serious stomach problem than colitis. Then there were his back problems and they were no doubt accentuated by his work in the woods and splitting logs at the hermitage. He did have a lot of physical problems. Within the community I think everyone just took it for granted – back to the hospital again! It's hard to know how much of it was real and how much was psychosomatic. I'm sure we'll never know. During his time in Asia in 1968 he seemed to be thriving except for the days at the Mim Tea Estate when he was under the weather with flu or something.

Pearson: As you mention Asia perhaps we can turn to Merton's final years now. Were you back from Rome when he became a full-time hermit in the summer of 1965?

Conner: Yes, I was in Rome from 1962 to 1964, so I was back at Gethsemani and was teaching theology to the students at that time. Then after that I was guest master and later also started working on the farm, which was unusual for a choir monk, sort of a way of asserting myself at that time – but I think that was probably after Merton's death.

But over the years I was certainly aware of him gradually spending more and more time at the hermitage; in fact it was built during the time that I was undermaster. So we all knew that he was going to be going out there and I think many of the community attended his last talk before he went out to the hermitage, even people who didn't go to his talks normally.²¹ Though, of course, it wasn't his last talk as he continued to give Sunday afternoon lectures which people were welcome to come to. I think everyone was very happy that he was finally able to move to the hermitage as he'd been wanting it for so long. Shortly after Merton became a hermit Dom Flavian Burns got permission too, and then Father Hilarion Schmock also. So we had three hermits at that time and they would all get together occasionally and have their own little hermit conventions.

It didn't seem to create any kind of a problem in the community at all. It seemed to go very smoothly at that time.

After he became a hermit he no longer served on the Abbot's Council, but he still met with Dom James as his confessor and for whatever occasions came up. But I don't know how frequently they met during those years, whether it was every week or not.

Pearson: Were you aware of his relationship with the nurse at this time?

Conner: Yes, he told me about it at one point. He didn't go into any great detail, but he acknowledged the fact that he was very emotionally involved with this nurse. I don't know to what extent anything went on, he never told me anything like that. [**Pearson:** This was after the relationship was over?] No, during. In fact he had mentioned to me about this nurse he was involved with and how he was having to watch how far the thing went and all of that. Very soon after that I happened to be doing some work up at the family guest house and we'd gone into the kitchen to get a

21. Recording #154.3 [August 20, 1965] from the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University. It was transcribed by Naomi Burton Stone and published as "A Life Free from Care" in *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970) 217-26.

drink of water and while we were in there Merton came in with some lady, and of course I had no way of knowing who she was, whether she was the same person or not. Certainly Merton was a little embarrassed about coming in with this woman not too long after having talked to me about his involvement with the nurse. In fact afterwards he made some remark to the effect that she was not the one we'd been talking about before. It turned out instead that this was the lady who came from Canada who also got Merton in trouble because they went drinking and swimming in the lake.²² I don't remember ever seeing the nurse, though Merton had told me about her before his phone calls were reported to Dom James and the relationship was ended.

It's strange, knowing him, that the thing arose the way it did. Only recently did I read the whole of his poem "*Hagia Sophia*,"²³ written in the early sixties, and the poem begins with a nurse coming into a hospital room in the early morning and waking him. It struck me how weird this was, almost a premonition. I've always said that it was a very providential occurrence for him as it seemed to give him some kind of reassurance of the fact both that he was fully lovable himself and that he could love fully in return. I think before that he'd always had a nagging doubt about this, maybe even more than a nagging doubt. So it may have been the thing that set the stage for the final reality.

Pearson: There seemed to be a very strong sense of loneliness in his early days in the hermitage.

Conner: Yes, I've heard many people say, even Dom John Eudes, that around 1966, just before this whole affair began, that Merton seemed to be going through a real crisis at that time, almost right on the verge of a real breakdown. In a sense perhaps he was just ripe for something like this to happen. There was also a lingering doubt about whether the community accepted him up there or didn't accept him – that was all part of a deeper niggling doubt as to whether he was really lovable or not, or whether he was accepted or not. But certainly if there was anyone who was accepted in the community, by at least the majority of the community, it

22. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 92, 124.

23. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); CP 363-71.

was he. There were certainly some of the brothers who would make all sorts of catty remarks about him and objections to him, mainly in response to his objections to the farm machinery, the noise and the industry and all that. Brother Clement himself, the monastery cellarer, was a strange fellow; he was as shrewd as Dom James was and for the three of them to work together was quite a triumvirate. I think he certainly respected Merton but at the same time he could make very snide remarks about him on the sly and behind his back, and I think that had some influence, especially on some of the brothers in the community. Sometimes these things would get back to Merton and he would feel that people didn't care for him or didn't accept him. But I'm convinced that that was not true for the majority of the community. Merton was a very sensitive person.

Pearson: That sensitivity is an amazing contrast to the harshness of the life he embraced at Gethsemani, especially in his early days there.

Conner: Yes it was. It was still that way when I came, but he persevered, he survived and thrived. I've personally always been convinced that he would have persevered no matter what had happened to him if he hadn't have died at that time. What he would have done, of course, God only knows. The structure of the monastic life was both a boon for him at the same time as being a curse. It safeguarded him and yet at the same time he fought against it for his whole life. Like his relationship with Dom James, he definitely needed what Dom James gave him and if he'd have had had someone like Dom Flavian from the beginning²⁴ it is hard to say what would have come of it.

Pearson: What contact did you have with Merton between 1965 and 1968?

Conner: I usually attended his Sunday afternoon conferences. But for the most part that was my only contact with Merton in those years. But by that time speaking was freer so if you saw him around the house or something like that it was possible to speak to him, so there were some opportunities for that. But overall not a whole lot of contact during those years.

When he was getting ready to leave to go to Asia I saw him

24. After the retirement of James Fox as abbot, Dom Flavian Burns was elected on January 13, 1968.

the day before and said to him, "Am I going to have a chance to see you?" And he said, "Why don't you come up this evening at five o'clock?" I said fine, but then afterwards realized that five o'clock was right before vespers and that I would miss vespers if I went up there at that time. So I didn't go. So I didn't get a chance to finally see him off in that sense. [Pearson: But you knew he was going?] Yes, I knew he was leaving, though I don't think I knew he was leaving so soon, early the next morning. He had told me some time before that he'd gotten permission for this and he was all excited about it. Though it wasn't supposed to be known in the community. Then he took off and didn't come back. Or he did come back, but in a different way.

Pearson: Do you think his death was totally accidental?

Conner: There seems to have been stories right from the beginning and I think, fundamentally, it probably was just accidental. After I'd read Douglass's book on JFK²⁵ it did revive some of the same questions that had circulated before but not to the extent that I would give serious credence to those theories of a plot. However, unfortunately, I don't think that the American government would have been beyond that at that time. Oshida,²⁶ the Dominican in Japan, was convinced that it was an assassination done by the Korean CIA. I'm convinced that neither Michael Mott nor John Howard Griffin did that much real research on this aspect. The research that they did over there was so skimpy that it really couldn't prove anything one way or the other. But, as I said, I think it was just an accident. People have often said that the amazing thing wasn't that Merton was killed in Bangkok, but that he hadn't been accidentally killed before that up in his own hermitage at Gethsemani.

Pearson: Looking back over the years are there particular lessons that you think you learned from Merton for your own monastic life?

Conner: The big thing I would say was not to take things too seriously. In a way that is almost ironic as Merton could certainly take things over-seriously at times and get very riled up. But he would get to these points, have these crises and yet, afterwards, things would work out. So, I suppose, something of that is a lesson I've learned, both from his own experience and from the experi-

25. James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

26. Vincent Shigeto Oshida, OP (1922-2003).

ences I've had in my own monastic life, both before and since that time. The other thing I appreciate from Merton is the way in which he was able to put God and prayer first – irrespective of whether he carried that out himself all the time, as resolutely as he would have proclaimed, or whether I've carried it out, as resolutely as I might have done. It still remains as something of a pivotal point which I do feel that I can attribute to him. I think the other thing I can glean from him is just the appreciation both of myself and of everybody else, the appreciation of each one simply being who we are – the realization of the way in which, just as God looked upon all creation at the end of six days and saw that it was very good, ultimately we have to be able to really look at one another and at the world as it is and see that it is very good too, even with all the quirks and everything else that is present in individuals and the whole. Again it's almost ironic to draw such a lesson from Merton as he could get so irritated about things and yet afterwards he would simmer down and still be able to say, "It is good."

Pearson: Could you say a little more about Merton as a man of prayer?

Conner: In the old church there were these huge mammoth pillars around the sanctuary and Merton always used to love to kneel there behind a pillar, and the pillars were big enough that you would be pretty much hidden from the front of the church, a secluded area in that sense. You could frequently find him there. In the days when we still had private Masses he always used to go back into what was the old sacristy where there was a series of individual altars and he would always go back there after Mass in the morning to make his thanksgiving. He was certainly very dedicated, very sedulous, and very given to his own prayer, and specifically prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Of course, this was beside his own prayer in the woods, but we didn't see much of that ourselves.

Pearson: That reminds me of the story of when Merton was challenged by a student from the Southern Baptist Seminary as to why he remained in the monastery and Merton's answer is simply, "I am here because I believe in prayer."

Conner: Yes, I really think that explains the quandaries that kept him here. There was some kind of conviction that this was where

he was to find God.

Pearson: Over forty years since his death, what would you see as Merton's legacy?

Conner: I think it is precisely that combination of his dedication to prayer and also his dedication to humanity. I think, in a way, it calls people today to strive for a melding of those two in themselves. We tend so often to go from one extreme to the other. You don't see society falling into the extreme of solitude; it's the individuals that tend that way sometimes. We seem to become so enamored either of the individual or of the collective. To my mind the real legacy of Merton is to bring the two together into one in a way in which the individual cannot be found apart from the whole and the whole cannot be found apart from the individual. Christopher Pramuk's book *Sophia*²⁷ brings together so beautifully this interrelationship between the person and the whole – how ultimately it is not a philosophical relationship but a relationship that comes about in and through Christ. Here it's expressed through Sophia. If what Pramuk was bringing out in that book could be brought out in a more wholly and more explicit way as being the legacy of Merton I think it could have a tremendous effect, developed in such a way that people in general could latch onto it. That kind of unity becomes more and more important as people's sense of their true self becomes dissipated through technology such as e-mail and the internet.

Pearson: Do you have a favorite book of Merton's?

Conner: It changes. For years my favorite book was *No Man Is an Island*, and then I liked *The New Man* very much. But I think in many respects my favorite book now is more or less *The Inner Experience*. I've always liked it and was delighted when it finally got published. I just find elements of Merton in there that are not the Merton that you see broadcast, not the big social activist or the big illuminative contemplative. *The Inner Experience* certainly has contemplative elements, in fact some of his best contemplative writings. It also includes some sections of the typical bitchy Merton, complaining about things.

Pearson: Are there areas that have been neglected in the scholar-

27. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

ship that has been done so far on Merton?

Conner: I've never considered that before. Offhand I would say no, but I have the nagging question, have people really ever grasped who the real Merton is in a more encompassing sense? All too frequently people seem to latch on to him from their own little segment of Merton. In some ways you have to say that Merton was more than that and at the same time less than that. I'd love to see in a way some kind of a real, almost what you might call, a psychological biography. At the same time I would not want to see it done by someone like Dom John Eudes, or certainly not somebody like Gregory Zilboorg. [**Pearson:** He's not around any longer to do it!] I don't know anyone around who could. What I mean is some way of being able to put a human face on Merton, to keep him alive in spite of all the writing that has been done, and is being done, about him. How that could ever be done I have no idea.

Pearson: I think often the best that we can do is to keep all the different facets of Merton in some kind of a balance without letting any of them dominate to the exclusion of others.

Conner: Yes, it's certainly gone from the extreme of people who see him solely as the contemplative to others who simply see him as a social activist and yet, while both are true, at the same time neither of them are true. Who Merton really was was something different from all of those.

I am certainly very grateful to Merton for all that he has meant to me, and been for me, and to me.

Pearson: That seems to be an appropriate point to end on. Thank you so much, Father James, for your time and for sharing so much, so personally, and in such depth.

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