

# MERTON'S CONTRIBUTIONS AS TEACHER, WRITER AND COMMUNITY MEMBER:

An Interview with  
**Flavian Burns, O.C.S.O.**

Conducted by Victor A. Kramer

Edited by Dewey Weiss Kramer

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Flavian Burns, O.C.S.O., former Abbot of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky, entered that monastery in 1951. After his ordination, he was a student of Canon Law at the Gregorian University in Rome. He served as Abbot from 1968 to 1973, and has also acted as temporary superior at other Cistercian monasteries. He lives at present in a small hermitage at Gethsemani.

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**Kramer:** What was your association with Thomas Merton?

**Burns:** It was twofold, in a sense, because I entered Gethsemani at nineteen years old, and in my first years as a monk, Fr. Louis was my teacher. He was Master of Scholastics.

**Kramer:** That was in 1951?

**Burns:** 1951, 52, 53, 54, those years. And then when he went to the Novitiate, I was somewhat out of contact with him, except for the normal

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\* This interview has been edited from a tape first made for the *Thomas Merton Oral History*. The interview was conducted at the Cistercian monastery, The Abbey of the Holy Cross, in Berryville, Virginia.

community life. But in the 1960s I became the Father Prior of the monastery and then our relationship was in a different situation. Then I was his superior, and Father Confessor for a while, and eventually his Abbot. For a year and a half we were fellow hermits, from 1966 to 1968, when I was in the hermitage. He mentioned that in some publications. So that's pretty much the association; I think we grew closer when I got out of the stage of being just one of the many students he had. He had about forty at the time. And then of course, people who had him in the Novitiate were a different group. Like Jim Finley had him in the Novitiate. So, I would say my best years with him were the last two or three years when we were more peers working together for the good of the monastery and acting together. I always treated him pretty much as my teacher even when our roles were reversed technically, let's say.

**Kramer:** Right. And during that period towards the end, you saw him very frequently, would you say?

**Burns:** The last year, yes, especially after being Abbot, I was seeing him quite a bit. He was on the Council and he was one of the main people I was going to lean on when I accepted the job of being Abbot. Of course the Lord didn't see fit to let that work out.

**Kramer:** Could you describe the monastery during the earliest years that you were there, in the early 1950s?

**Burns:** Well, I think he's described that very well in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*. It's pretty much the way life was. That's what I entered into; and there are books which describe the life — probably you could find them in one of the monastic libraries — our old Book of Usages. And if you read that Book of Usages you would see the type of thing that we had to live with, and rules that we lived by. It was very meticulously spelled out, and we followed that routine and regime. I think it would help a lot of people, you know, who are doing studies on Merton if they would read that old Book of Usages, give them a feel for the place.

**Kramer:** How would you say some of the other monks thought of Merton during the period when he was becoming well known as a writer?

**Burns:** Well, I don't think he got any special treatment, maybe a little

razing even from some. We lived a very silent life in the early years. I heard from one priest who was very close to Fr. Louis that he didn't even realize that he was a famous author until he got a job in the Guest House and had to deal with the guests. Because at the monastery, he was Fr. Louis, and there were some who didn't realize that Thomas Merton was Fr. Louis. Even if they knew of Thomas Merton. And we didn't have his books around. It took me quite a while to find out. I entered under the influence of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. So I'd say it took me a couple of months to find out who Thomas Merton was.

**Kramer:** Actually to identify him physically?

**Burns:** Because there was a big crowd there. I wasn't thinking about him anyway, and his name, as I say, in the monastery was Louis, and a lot of the times Latin names were used in the monastery for official appointments, the name was done in Latin. So Ludovicus, you know, was a little lost on me as being Thomas Merton. But, as I say, he didn't stand out, I think he was well loved in the community. But he was a type who was a boyish type in a community of pretty staid people. If he stood out at all, it would be as a certain charmer who was a little bit different from the ordinary run of people you commend to young people. I don't think he was disliked for that. But he certainly got no special attention as being a famous author—even from people like myself, you know, though I was impressed by this when I first entered. After you enter the community life, you just took him for granted as a ordinary monk. (**Kramer:** But he was . . .) He played that role. In fact it would be humorous seeing people try to figure out who is the famous author. They'd never pick him. He would be the least likely candidate to be the famous author.

**Kramer:** But there were very few monks who would actually be writing on a regular basis. There were a few others.

**Burns:** But you didn't know that from the monastery point of view. He did all the ordinary things. A lot of people had secretarial jobs in the monastery. And, so what he did during the work time, he did all the other ordinary chores the monks were doing, the outdoor work.

**Kramer:** Well, he wrote somewhere that during those years he had maybe six or eight hours per week actually to write.

**Burns:** Yes, he was amazingly fast. People can't believe what he would turn out; I can, after watching him, both read and write. Even on the typewriter, he simply was fast.

**Kramer:** Could you say something about his physical appearance? If you had to say some little bit about the way he looked, what kind of thing stands out in your mind?

**Burns:** Well, I would say that most of the time he looked very cheerful. I remember when I tried to identify the body, when it returned, and it took me a while to look at this corpse. And I said to the others, "Are you sure that that's Fr. Louis?" And they said, "Oh, yes. Look at the forehead" And when I got back, I looked at the picture I had of him by John Howard [Griffin], and I realized that what was missing was the eyes. For me, that dominated his whole face . . . the eyes, the twinkle in his eyes. So he was a very lively person, and to me very humorous, funny. But he could be equally serious. I think Matthew Kelty has described him — I like his description in the little essay he did. (**Kramer:** In *Flute Solo*?) No, in the one that Patrick Hart put out; he has the first chapter in that.<sup>1</sup> He describes him physically.

**Kramer:** Yes, he does, Could you say something else about his sense of humor. You said that he had a twinkle in his eye.

**Burns:** You know he was an artist with words both in writing and in speaking. This was true even in ordinary conversation. He was very lively in his speech. Sometimes I wasn't always happy with his sense of humor because I felt a little bit that he used it to keep you at a certain distance. A lot of people do that — especially I think the English and the Irish — people that keep you at a certain distance by humor. But for the most part, it was pleasant and enjoyable. And he couldn't sit still, you know. The monastery is rather a serious place and you have a lot of reading in public and a lot of speaking in public and there's a lot of things going on and most of the monks keep their eyes down; don't let on what's going on. He wasn't like that. He'd let on. He'd comment on everything, if it was only by eye movements, a surprised look, something like that.

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1. Matthew Kelty, "The Man." In *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), pp. 19-35.

**Kramer:** Do you think he got a little bit bored sometimes?

**Burns:** Yes. It was harder for him, I'm sure, to get through some of those things without a sort of commentary on it or contribution to it.

**Kramer:** But he was always aware, too, I'm certain, of himself and what he was doing.

**Burns:** I think it was mostly when things would tend to be too artificial and he would do something like that so as not to be artificial. Because in church, now, he would be more quiet than anyone. He could sit without restlessness or moving around.

**Kramer:** You said earlier that he was a fast worker. What do you mean, that when he actually would write something, he could write it very rapidly?

**Burns:** Even his script was [abrupt]. He didn't hesitate. Like if he typed things up, he might go over it and correct some things. Most of us, if we write a letter, we'd think about it and we'd weigh which phrase to use. I don't think he did that. He did these things like that (snaps fingers). And if he didn't like it, maybe he would throw it away, but usually he'd let things stand. And he wrote his journal notes in a ledger . . . precisely, I think, so that he couldn't be pulling pages out and throwing them away. And if he was going to correct something that he said or take it back or anything like that, well, he'd do it on the next page . . . so that the shifting opinions or thoughts would be all there. He seemed to have the honesty of doing this journal business I remember when I was a young monk asking him about the advisability of my keeping a journal. And he said, "Oh, I wouldn't do that." I said, "Well, why not?" He said, "You'd waste too much time." And I said, "Well, you keep a journal." He said, "Yeah, but I write real fast." And I think it was exactly true. I didn't appreciate it at the moment, but, on reflection, I accept it as being very accurate.

**Kramer:** So he knew he could accomplish it in a short period of time, so he felt comfortable with it. Do you think that it was in any way hard for him to be a writer and a monk?

**Burns:** Oh, yes. I don't think it was really relative to being a monk, you know, the actual physical act of writing. I think that suited him fine. But

being a published writer is certainly very complicated in the monastery. And it was one of the reasons I never accepted any kind of invitation to get into that. (**Kramer:** Did he ever talk about this?) Oh, yes. It's well documented in the journals; even in *The Sign of Jonas* it is a big struggle. Then, of course, his ambitions, the ambitions to be a published author. I read something just recently. I guess it wasn't published earlier, or was it *The Secular Journal*, something I hadn't read before he entered the monastery, sending one of his novels around different places, and he got rejected everywhere he sent it. He ends with . . . (**Kramer:** Yes, yes. It's from *The Secular Journal*. That's where it's from.) That's where I was reading it just recently. But he would say, "All these bad books get published, why can't my bad book get published?" I think that's a good example of both his ambition and his humor even at his own expense. But you can tell that in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he's talking about seeing his own stuff in print for the first time. I guess most writers go through that. But he had certainly outgrown that. But later in life, I think the problem became the reading public and then the sense of responsibility of what his words were doing — (even seeing all of us come to the monastery) — maybe many that he could tell didn't belong in a monastery, and being there, by reason of his influence. That must certainly have come across to him that he was responsible for this. Then, of course, the whole peace movement, with people like Dan Berrigan and Phil Berrigan. That was one of the things they could use on him. Well, you have this audience, people who listen to you. You have an obligation to speak because, you know, everybody doesn't have that audience, but you have it. So it puts burdens on him which don't belong on a monk. But they were his personal vocational burdens. I think they were in that sense. But it happens to different people. I find being an Abbot is a hindrance to the way I like to live the monastic life, and I have now twice been called to be an Abbot. Somebody has to be Abbot. And other people have talents or abilities or lack of them, and they make it — being a monk — different from someone who is very famous and tries to be a monk.

**Kramer:** One thing that disturbed Merton was that he was always ahead of his readers, and so he could never get away from the books he had written earlier.

**Burns:** I remember when he finally got the book *Faith and Violence* published. It took him a long time to get it out from the time he had it written and, in the meantime, the whole climate had changed in the

nonviolent community. They had moved to more violent stands, and he was telling me — I think I was Prior at the time — he said, “Oh, these people at Notre Dame. I’m getting my book out so late. All my friends are going to be mad at me when they see this ’cause it’s going to look like it’s coming out in the face of their changes in attitude.” And then, as you say, his opinions changed. But he learned to live with that. I think somewhere it’s documented about that. He wrote to somebody, and he more or less told them that you have to be willing to do what you’re doing, be happy with what you’re saying, and let it go. But he was a constantly changing person in that sense . . . and would have been if he had lived longer. (**Kramer:** So there was conflict, but it was something he was learning to accept.) I think it was inevitable. And I personally don’t feel that he did change that much. There were little things and a style, or way of saying things. Sometimes a person can be very [insensitive]. When I go back over things that I say, I realize in the face of all this women’s lib, that women would say how sexist my language is. But I’m talking to a male audience most of the time, talking about a man who does this, and a man who does that, instead of “person” which would be more suitable for a wider audience.

**Kramer:** I wonder if you could comment about Fr. Louis’ work habits, if there’s anything that stands out in your mind. We talked about how he worked rapidly and he learned to revise quickly, and he didn’t worry too much.

**Burns:** I think you have a better witness to that in Matthew Kelty because he worked with him as a secretary and he describes how he did his writing, [even] redoing it in different color inks. Someone wrote recently that Fr. Louis would leave these first draft things and let the secretaries fill it all in. I don’t think that’s true. It just doesn’t correspond to him at all. (**Kramer:** I don’t think that’s true.) And he didn’t have that much secretarial help.

**Kramer:** We know the interests Merton had on the basis of what he wrote. I wonder if there were other things in which he was interested — in terms of how he actually lived as a hermit or within in the monastery — that he didn’t write about? Do you think he wrote about most everything in which he was interested?

**Burns:** I suspect his interests are well documented. I can’t think of anything unless you have something specific in mind.

**Kramer:** I was thinking especially about the final years when he was living by himself. He really seemed to derive a lot of pleasure just from being out with the birds and the trees.

**Burns:** I think he always enjoyed that. We used to have these arguments occasionally about living the contemplative life in the city, in high rise apartments or something like that. I thought it could be done and he said he couldn't do it without the trees and the woods. One time he spent about a week or so out on the Pacific coast and I remember his response to that was it's interesting because he said that it was better. It was even better than the woods here because all you had was sand and sea and sky, not the distraction of the birds and the trees, things like that.

**Kramer:** But how long could you go on living on a beach? He also realized that people in the city need to have a contemplative way of life.

**Burns:** Yes, I think he was speaking more for himself, that he would prefer [a certain way of life]. I suppose a lot of people are like that. But, as Matthew Kely pointed out, he was very disciplined in his use of time. He wasn't a time waster. There were a lot of these things that he had preached to himself and made a big sacrifice to practice.

**Kramer:** I've heard some stories about how he would get impatient when people would come in and interrupt him at various times.

**Burns:** I think that manner was partially for others. Those people were his novices and he felt they should be living disciplined lives too. I remember one time we had a council meeting discussion when he was Fr. Master of Novices. I was Prior and there was a complaint on the part of one of the other members of the Council that he, Merton, wasn't around when the novices needed him. He answered that by saying that he saw each of the novices — and there were quite a number at that time — once a week or whatever the time period was. He didn't think it was right for him to be sitting there so they could run in to him whenever they had any little problem. He said, "We're training these people to be able to live the solitary life to some extent . . . life alone with God. We'd better find out in the first couple of years that they are here whether they can do that or not." So even if he seemed impatient, I think he was actually a very patient man. He was certainly patient with me. But I think he was not willing to accept



falsehood or people wanting to talk when there was no reason for it and things like that. He used to tease us occasionally about things that we would do, for example, in passing one another. We were supposed to be living in silence. There was a prescribed little bow that you made so you didn't act like you weren't there. But usually the American outgoing manner, or self-consciousness, which was more or less what he was telling us it was would engage us, and we would have to make some joke or passing remark. I remember one time he was telling us that we didn't really believe in silence if we felt it was necessary to do that. One should be able to pass somebody in silence. Most of his relationships with the younger monks, at least, were as a teacher, a monastic father. It was really part of his job to point these things out to us. But I think he was a very patient person actually, considering all that he had going on in himself. I read things now in his writings and I check the date and I realize what my conversations were with him on those very topics, and I'm embarrassed how out of it I was, and yet how patient he was.

**Kramer:** Do you feel that his contact with persons outside the monastery made it more difficult or less difficult for him to live his life?

**Burns:** Oh, I'm sure it made it difficult. But he didn't have too much of that until later in his career. He didn't see too many outsiders. But he was the type that, if somebody came, he would give that person everything he had, all of his time, all of his energy. Well naturally, when he returned to his quietude, he'd feel that. So, it was important for him, I think, to have a lot of physical solitude because otherwise he would just run himself out. I'm not built like that and I can handle a little more of it. (**Kramer:** He really would just give everything to whatever it was he was doing at the moment.) And so the only way you could really keep him to himself was to protect him to some extent from himself. A lot of the people who complained about the old Abbot [Dom James Fox] and all that are not being very realistic to the providence that God had in mind. And even Fr. Louis realized that if he hadn't had that he could have used himself up very easily on superficial things. And this is why, even when I was Abbot, my aim was to get him a more private place because I knew that if he had more physical solitude, he would use it well. But if he was going to be where people could get at him, he was going to respond to that.

**Kramer:** Fr. Thomas Fidelis said once that he thought one of Merton's

most important contributions was in showing other monks about a life of solitude which had in some way been forgotten. The life in many monasteries had become so active. It's a real paradox then that Merton did that by being terribly active himself in writing all these books.

**Burns:** He spent his time well. If you go over his schedules in the hermitage, for example, another writer might get up in the middle of the night and write books and things like that, but he spent his time well; [frequently] in prayer. He spent his time walking in the woods. I remember going to speak with him following the first time I myself walked in the woods with him and the group of Scholastics. He asked how I liked it. I said, "Well, it was all right but by the time we got out there and I got settled I didn't get much reading in." And he sort of looked at me with mock horror and said, "Reading? You brought a book?" The time was so scarce in those days, and we had so much that we were supposed to read and study that the thought of just going out and wasting a whole afternoon walking through the woods was something that we found a little hard to do. (**Kramer:** But he found it quite acceptable?) Yes, he did, and he urged us to do it. And there were certain times of the day when he would say you should never touch a book, before such and such a time, or this, or that. (**Kramer:** That would have been a relatively unusual attitude.) Yes. I think most people felt that they had to use their time "well." They didn't have the idea of "holy leisure" that he had. And that's been pretty nicely documented by Brother David Steindl-Rast in his little essay about God with us, and that's reminiscent of a lot of things that Merton said to us as Scholastics.

**Kramer:** If you had to pick one thing that you felt was really quite important to be remembered about Fr. Louis, is there any one remembrance that comes to mind, whether by your association with him or just about him in general?

**Burns:** I may read these things differently from other people, but I think so far he's been pretty well documented. My overwhelming impression is of a good man, a very good person, a very friendly person, very natural and spontaneous and likable. I haven't met that many people like that in my life experience. He was very un pompous. I've met people, even in this monastery, who know Thomas Merton only from the books and hearsay, and they would say that they didn't like him or I had heard that they didn't like him. Since I've been at Holy Cross Abbey near Berryville, Virginia, and talking

about him and getting to know these people, I can see that they often have a completely false image of Thomas Merton. (**Kramer:** They have superficial ideas about Merton, I mean, even some monks who maybe haven't read his writings?) I suppose a lot of it has to do with the person in question. As Our Lord says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Anyone listening is making the thing into his own image and likeness, and inevitably I suppose, they create these things. I remember the first time I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I was tremendously impressed by it and I had an interesting experience. I was working in an office building in a summer job with a lot of other young college people. We had a little group whose members were exchanging all the best sellers. That's how I came across *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I used to get the books from this black girl, and when she got them, I knew when I could expect to get them. I got it very quickly, so I knew she hadn't spent much time with it. When she gave it to me, I asked her, "How did you like it?" And she said, "It's all right, if you like that kind of thing." But it was obvious that she didn't like that kind of thing. So I read it. I was completely taken by it. And as you do with something that you're completely taken by, you give it to other people that you care about. So I gave it to my mother to read, and she didn't like him at all. She was turned off by him. So I figured, well, she's another generation, and she's kind of square and probably this is too different. So I gave it to my sister who's only a year or two different from me in age and she didn't like it either. And I said, "Well, what's wrong with it?" I could argue with her a little better than I could with my mother. And she said, "He's so egotistical . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . and everything revolves around him." So I said, "Well, it's an autobiography. You have to write about yourself." But there seemed to be very few people at that time who liked the book or were moved by it. And later I heard these same things said, even today. People criticized the book as being too this, or too that, and naturally that's the way he would seem to them. And of course, what came across to me was probably a caricature, too, in the sense that I had imagined a much less lively person, despite all the obvious things in the book. So I expected to see a much quieter monk than I encountered when I got to the monastery. (**Kramer:** Do you think other people were surprised the same way?) I don't know. I never compared notes with too many people. But when I got over this initial misconception, I was happy with what I found .

**Kramer:** When Fr. Louis was Master of Scholastics, what exactly did he do day-by-day?

**Burns:** Aside from living the ordinary monastic life, which left you about two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon for special work, I'm sure he did some writing. That was when he had the vault where he could do his writing. But he had about forty Scholastics, and he saw each of us once a week or so. So that was an awful lot. (**Kramer:** He would see you for almost half an hour or something?) At least, at least that. (**Kramer:** So that's twenty hours right there.) Yes, right there. Now that wasn't just in two-hour periods, but it took a lot of his time. And then, of course, he was preparing conferences. I'm sure he had to do a lot of reading for that to get his notes ready. His orientation notes were from those years. And then there were other meetings. He had to meet with the Abbot and the Council. There were a lot of hours in choir in those days. And occasionally he would have to do outdoor work with the monks, all-out workdays. So, again, as I say, if you take those Old Usages and his schedule . . . When you know the particular job a person had in the monastery, you know how the person had to spend his time.

**Kramer:** It's quite clear from what you've been saying that you feel your personal association with Fr. Louis was very valuable over the years.

**Burns:** Oh, yes. It was my salvation. I owe him more than I owe any other human being, I think, for what I really treasure in my life. I don't see how I could have gotten the insights into various things without his help. So, I haven't a bad thing to say about him.

**Kramer:** He must have always been able to take enough time. Fr. Thomas [Fidelis] told me a nice story about how he had written a letter to Fr. Louis about the Jesus Prayer. I don't know exactly when this was, probably early 1960s, or there about. Fr. Louis wrote him a long letter back, saying, yes, fine, but you know you're not a Russian mystic. You're an American. Fr. Thomas mentioned that letter a couple of times in the last year or so, and I think the letter was very important at that time in his life. I think there must be other examples of that, where he went ahead and talked with people or wrote to them. Can you think of any other anecdotes about Merton and how he worked, or things that he did, which might be of value for persons who might be writing about him in the future? Are there any stories you can remember that say something about his manner, or his way of working? I was thinking, for instance, about these Sunday afternoon conferences which are taped and the enthusiasm which is reflected in all of those tapes

and the fact that it's kind of unusual that a monk would be willing to commit himself to that kind of project over a long period of time. I mean, wouldn't you say that's unusual?

**Burns:** The taping was accidental to some extent. (**Kramer:** What do you mean "accidental?") I mean it wasn't part of the program that he should be taped. In fact, when I was a young Scholastic, one of the monks brought that up. We were talking about how to raise money for something or other, and one of the young monks asked jokingly, "Well, we could tape all these talks, you know, that you've given us, and we could sell them and make a lot of money." And we all just laughed, it sounded so outrageous, so ridiculous. He shook his head at the monk and said, "I don't think you've been moved by the Holy Spirit." But the origin of the taping was interesting because one of his novices, after he made profession, was put in charge of the lay brothers. The brothers had a work period in the morning when they had to go down to the kitchen and peel potatoes and things like that. They usually had readings, and the attendance wasn't very good. So he decided to ask Fr. Louis if he could tape the talks that he gave to the novices and play them for the lay brothers. It worked very nicely. The brothers had never been exposed to Fr. Louis. He had the Scholastics. That was the origin of the tapes. I don't know how they did it . . . (**Kramer:** You mean there was no machine in the room?) The microphone that he would use for speaking was the same microphone that was being taped. He wasn't conscious as I would be now of being taped. Since we had brothers and priests, we had different types of people in the monastery. The cooks cooked the meals, the others ate them, things like that. I remember him telling me that he felt that we, priests in the monastery, had an obligation to do a lot of reading and share this with the brothers who didn't have as much time for reading and study and maybe not the inclination. So, he felt it was part of his duty. When I became Abbot, he asked me if I wanted him to continue and I told him yes. By that time he was just giving Sunday talks, though. I think he saw that as his role in the community, to give those talks. I think he liked it best when the group that came were voluntary, so that he didn't have to worry about being imposed on people. (**Kramer:** Was it mostly voluntary?) Except for the novices. Of course, they had to go. But Sunday afternoons were free time. He always had a good audience. And he had enthusiasm. What's curious, if you listen to the tapes and reflect on it is that the enthusiasm is mostly him, himself. The audience was probably all just sitting there, and that's hard to sustain, that kind of enthusiasm in the face of an audience

which isn't applauding you or showing a whole lot of interest. There are some pictures. I was looking through some books here along with some brochures. I think there are some photographs in another book which show the audience he had. You can see these monks sitting at the table, looking up at someone. I think there's a group of young people sitting around the table, all looking at a speaker. You don't see the speaker in the picture.

**Kramer:** Do you think that Merton was an innovator, or do you think that he was able to synthesize things? Do you think that he was actually making contributions in terms of interpreting monasticism?

**Burns:** I think he translated the tradition into a language that this generation, or my generation at least, could understand. I thought of him as a popularizer of what had always been taught. But I also remember one time I had a visit while I was Abbot at Gethsemani from John Tracy Ellis, a historian of the Church, and I was making conversation with him. This was after Fr. Louis had died. I said that I was surprised that there were so many people doing theses on Merton. His answer was, and he's published this somewhere, "It doesn't surprise me at all because he is one of the five original thinkers of our century — at least in Catholic thinking." I didn't think to ask him who the other four were. That was news to me, but I respect John Tracy Ellis' opinion, as an outsider, as an historian of what's been going on. Later in an interview with somebody else that turned up in one of the papers, Ellis said the same thing, more or less, not about Merton, but saying just in general that there were only about five really original thinkers in our century, and he said, for example, Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton. So Teilhard was one of the five. I don't know who the other three are. But that places Merton in a kind of original company. I don't know if everybody would accept that judgment. I even have problems, you know, seeing it. But I do believe that he was original in his context. There was nobody else at Gethsemani preaching what he was preaching. There was nobody in our Order who was preaching what he was preaching.

**Kramer:** Do you think his work at Gethsemani actually caused specific changes in the way the monastery was?

**Burns:** I think he changed a whole generation's attitude toward how to live the monastic life. He changed mine completely.

**Kramer:** You mean changes in terms of more individual responsibility, each person living within a community, but not just following rules?

**Burns:** Well, to some extent it was a question of getting to the heart of the matter. It's not a good analogy perhaps — you have the Jews getting the law from Moses and their tradition is waiting for the Messiah and then you have Jesus Christ coming on the scene, and to all appearances he's upsetting the whole thing. But that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, "I haven't come to do away with these things. I come to fulfill them. But you people have missed the point." I think that was more or less what Fr. Louis was saying: "I'm not here to upset the monastic life but what is the meaning of these things?" I think that was new. I couldn't have survived if I hadn't found some meaning, or if I had survived physically, I wouldn't have been anything I'd like to be at this point. So, to me, he was a very providential man. His spiritual writings at least will survive, I think, as part of the heritage of the Church.

**Kramer:** They are surviving. I noticed recently in *Sojourners*, published in Washington, D. C., that they still offer several of Merton's books through their book club. When we had the conference in Atlanta in 1980 there was a lot of talk about passages in his book *Contemplation in a World of Action*, references to adaptation of the monastic life to the modern world, and even references to a kind of adaptation of the monastic life for people who aren't monks. I was wondering, and this would be a speculative question, what connections there are between that group, the Families of St. Benedict, who are presently living adjacent to Gethsemani and Merton's writing? I would think there must be some connection.

**Burns:** I think there's some influence, but not entirely. Their inspiration came really from a different source. They were in contact with their generation of people wanting to do something besides what society is offering. Their first contact with community living was with Protestant communal groups. I forget their names, but they're there in Pennsylvania. They lived similarly. Others wanted something like that within the Catholic forum. So I don't think they were really following Merton. They didn't read something in Merton and then go off and try to do it.

**Kramer:** Right, there are some similarities between the Families of St. Benedict and others. I already asked this question in a different way, but I'll ask it again with different language. Do you think Merton has had an effect

upon the way monks actually live day-by-day as compared to the Gethsemani he entered in 1941?

**Burns:** Yes, I think he did. I think, in fact, that he was one of the main influences. You must realize that the great influx came earlier. They always talk about pre-Vatican and post-Vatican, but we started the changes long before the Vatican Council, in the 1950s, and they were demanded by this whole new generation of people who were coming in. I'm not saying that everybody came in because of Merton's influence, but I had never heard of the Trappist monks until *The Seven Storey Mountain* was written, and I'm sure a lot of people could say the same thing. So, just by that physical thing of so many people coming into the Order and new houses being made, even if they didn't like Merton or it didn't have anything to do with him, they were still there and this new blood and these new people forced the old monks to change a lot of things. We had to adapt and I lived through all of that. I entered in 1951 and we had over 200 monks at Gethsemani. All of a sudden these fifty people in a community which had had very few Americans, as you can tell from the history, had 150 Americans coming in. I had imagined myself entering a small place with a lot of old people walking around, and I got in there and the place was crawling with youth, everybody with new ideas. So, in that sense, I do believe that he was influential, although people don't want to give him all the credit, and maybe he doesn't deserve it . . . other people had ideas, too . . . but certainly at Gethsemani, very subtly, he was the man who was behind changing attitudes. Of course he changed things. He had influence on the generation coming in, myself included, and we became the future superiors. I went to General Chapter and was influential in making changes. I wouldn't have been there if it weren't for him, and I wouldn't have had those attitudes if it hadn't been for him.

**Kramer:** Sometimes people say that Merton was easily swayed and that sometimes he would write one thing and then later he would write something else or he would contradict himself in journals, even in journals that are published and so on. The implication is that he was too impulsive or too spontaneous. Do you have any feeling about that kind of criticism?

**Burns:** For the most part I find it superficial because he was spontaneous and impulsive and in certain areas, I think, naive. He tended not to be too good a judge of people. I mean in the sense of being critical with people.



He would give them a better judgment perhaps than they deserved. But I think what they missed mostly, and I've said this before, is that he addressed himself to the people to whom he was speaking here and now, and, you know, if you're talking to a group of people who are too conservative, you will say one thing. If you're talking to a group of people who you feel are being too liberal, you'll say another thing. Now people can take those two things and say, well, he's contradicting himself. But he isn't. If you sit down and listen to what he's saying, he's still saying the same thing but to two different people. You have to say "yes" to one and "no" to the other. And if you observe him as I did, I think his best writing — and his life — was as a spiritual master. A spiritual master is speaking to people for *their* welfare. He is going to have to address them where they're at, or where they're coming from. They should do some of the things they do for Scripture and other literary sources. They study literary genres and all that, but they don't do that with Merton. They want to take statements out of context.

**Kramer:** Do you think he thought of himself as a spiritual master?

**Burns:** Yes. I think he did. Not maybe in the sense of perfection. I think he would see it more as a job. That was his job. And I remember once that a group of nuns was trying to get him to come and give some talks, and I wasn't too much in favor of it because, as he said himself very often, "There's all this talk about prayer and spirituality and everybody's talking about it. Why don't we just go and do it?" I said, "You're just going to be another one. They'll have another speaker, and then there will be just more talk. You'd do better to tell them you can't come because you've got to practice." But in the course of that conversation, I remember him saying, "Well, these people, they don't know anything about these things. I'm not saying I know a lot about it, but I know something about it." He wasn't the type who took himself too seriously, but he was honest. He was realistic to know what he knew and what he didn't.

**Kramer:** Do you think he felt the same way about his poetry, that is, that he knew a good bit about writing poetry?

**Burns:** I think he believed in his poetry a lot more than most people believe in it, maybe. I don't know what the objective judgment will be eventually, but I think he really thought of his poetry as good. This may be the better part of his writing. I can't pass judgment on poetry at all. But I've

listened to different people at different times — they don't think he was a good poet.

**Kramer:** They have not read the poetry carefully, either. People interested in Merton within Merton circles, or Catholic circles, or people in American poetry circles who also don't know anything about Merton or Catholicism — in all three instances, I think, they haven't really read the poetry.

**Burns:** I was listening to one of the published tapes recently — it's about community life — and he was talking about examples of community life. Then he mentioned his experience of solidarity with poets, how poets have this kind of sense of one another. It was like a little club, a community. And I know that that was very strong in him. It wasn't something I could share with him because I wasn't a poet, and I couldn't understand his poetry for the most part. But I know it meant a lot to him. As I say, I don't know what the final judgment on him as a poet will be, but I feel his reputation is secure as a spiritual writer. People are still reading John of the Cross and other authors like that, whereas famous authors of their own times come and go, yet there are certain basic spiritual truths that have been articulated.

**Kramer:** Would you say this is why you think most people are interested in Merton?

**Burns:** I wouldn't know about that. That's *my* interest in him. And I think people in the peace movement are more interested in some of the other things, the social things that stand for relevance to their time, and others could be more interested in the poetry or in art or something like that. We had an interesting event, if you are interested in anecdotes. It was at Fr. Louis' funeral. We had a good many of his friends there. Br. Patrick [Hart], I think, has told the story to someone. It is one of the things that impressed me, and I've been told it impressed some others there. It was how incompatible we were; we who were Merton's friends and didn't think we could very easily be on an intimate basis with one another. We had such different interests and tastes, yet he had the ability to relate to all kinds of different people. So, I don't know. I don't know what you can do with this oral history project, or if it's going to work. But it's worth a try. I personally feel, and I've told people this who haven't had the opportunity to know Merton, that I who have had the opportunity to know him personally, and on as intimate

a basis as he's been known, that he's better known through his writings. I think he reveals himself more in his writings than he did face to face. Because I think on a face to face personal level he kept a distance. He had to relate to them differently. But he was very protective, very modest; whereas in his writings, I sensed, that this man is talking from his heart. And it's all laid out there. I think that's what people pick up. Maybe that's what made him so protective. He knew himself that he was "doing it." Naturally you read something, and you're touched, and then you want to sit down and talk to the man. You feel you're going to get right on that level with him. Well, you can't. He wasn't up to doing that with complete strangers, whereas he could do it in his books. I think that's a good point to remember.