

MERTON'S VOCATION AS MONASTIC & WRITER

An Interview with
John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O.

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John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O., joined the Cistercians in 1950, having completed his medical degree in 1949. He then did residency study in psychiatry at Georgetown University in 1956-1957. He was elected abbot at the Abbey of the Genesee in 1971 and has served in that capacity since. Among his writings are translations, with an introduction and notes of *The Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer*, by Evagrius Ponticus.

Kramer: You are Dom John Eudes Bamberger. Let's begin with a question about your own religious vocation. Would you first say a few words about how you chose to become a monk?

Bamberger: Well, in 1950 I went to Gethsemani, after having considered becoming a Jesuit missionary. Because I had trained for medicine, I thought I should work in the mission field and make use of the medical knowledge that I had, but I had some knowledge of the monastic life through reading Merton and Fr. Raymond both. And that really spoke to me more deeply than a life that would be as busy as that of a medical missionary. So I had spent a good deal of time, even when I was in medical school, in prayer.

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I kept some time for prayer everyday, and just before I came to the monastery, the year before, I had gone up to Washington, D. C., where I lived a more solitary life. And so I was spending what free time I had more seriously in prayer. And it was in the course of that year as an intern that I felt convinced that I should become a priest. So, the deeper I went into that the clearer it became that the best way to follow up on that call was to become a monk rather than an active priest, a teacher, a preacher, a missionary. So that was pretty much my immediate background.

Kramer: When you entered Gethsemani, were you aware of who Thomas Merton was?

Bamberger: I had read some of his writings, but I didn't know who he was in the community. I was there for quite some time before I knew which one was Merton. I discovered that one day when we had a class and he was teaching it. That was some weeks, and maybe even a month or two, after I entered. But I do recall that he wasn't the one I would have picked out as being Merton. If you read about someone you sort of guess who it would be, but he would have been about the last one I would have guessed. There was a kind of elegance about his mind and style, I felt, and a kind of clarity and forcefulness, and so looking for someone to match that wasn't the way to identify Merton. He didn't come across that way at all as an actual presence. He was much more casual in his personal manners and his way of dress. Merton was very casual! I guess that is the right word.

Kramer: So you had to readjust your thinking a little bit? And then you began to think of this person, Father Louis, as the writer?

Bamberger: Yes, that's right. It took quite a bit of readjusting because he was very different. He was very much an artist, so that his writing is not as spontaneous as he gives the impression of being. There comes between him and its message the transformation of art, and I think that is why one would not pick him out. He conveyed pretty much what he chose to. He wasn't as much at the mercy of his spontaneity as many people think he is.

Kramer: At the monastery at this time, when you first entered, did you have the feeling that it was rather crowded?

Bamberger: I didn't. I had been in the Navy and found that, for me, it was congenial enough that I just adapted to that way. So I took Gethsemani in

stride. I heard people later on say, Wasn't that awfully crowded?" I didn't experience it, I think.

Kramer: How long were you there before you had any kind of immediate contact with Fr. Louis?

Bamberger: I think it was a matter of maybe two months, and then he began teaching a regular course to the novices. He gave his lecture in the Chapter Room, but that contact was only in class. I remember distinctly the first class. I remember where I was sitting for some reason in the Chapter Room there. Of course, there was a large number of us novices then. (**Kramer:** About how many would you say?) I think we were around seventy. (**Kramer:** So Merton wouldn't have been in a position to know everyone?) Oh, no, not the novices. But then later on, two years later, when I made vows and he was the Father Master of the Juniors then, he got to know each of us personally. Until then, it was the Novice Master we dealt with, except for his class. But the impression he made on me in class was much more like his books. Once he began speaking, then you could see the relation between him and his books, his writing, because he had a very agile mind, and a very energetic delivery, very personal, and he was quite enthusiastic. He was always enthusiastic as a speaker, almost always, and in particular when he spoke about prayer and the monastic life, he exuded energy and enthusiasm. That was the first impression he made and that pretty well stayed with me.

Kramer: Do you think that this is the way most people felt about Merton at Gethsemani? Or can you say?

Bamberger: I didn't go around asking. I think one reason that Merton was able to stay at Gethsemani so long was that he was pretty much taken for granted by most of the community. The people who, I believe, had the most feeling about him were the younger ones, my group, and the feeling there was always positive, much more, I think, than he was perhaps aware of. The feeling in the community in general about Merton was positive. (**Kramer:** They were happy to have him there?) That was the impression you got, but there wasn't much fuss made over it.

Kramer: Do you think people thought very much about him as a writer?

Bamberger: I think the younger ones did. Those who were in the monastery before his books came out. They knew he was a writer. I don't think they were impressed with that to a point where it dominated their relations or anything like that. So, that if it had, I think it would have been uncomfortable for him, because it wasn't his style, you know. He really was quite casual about it and his approach to people was quite informal. I think the community treated him pretty much that way. (**Kramer:** You don't think they were suspicious of this writer of "best sellers"?) I never got that feeling. There might have been some of that feeling around, but I didn't hear it.

Kramer: Do you think his work within the monastery as Master of Scholastics and then Novice Master was a help in his own development?

Bamberger: Oh, I think very much, yes. I think very much so. He says as much in his preface to *No Man is an Island*. I had no doubt about it. I think his teaching was very important to him and in some way it was important to his writings. He had a great need for people.

Kramer: When he was Novice Master, he did see each novice on a regular basis. Is that correct?

Bamberger: I had him as Master of Students, and yes, he saw each of us regularly and was very conscientious, very approachable. Then he taught his classes, also, and then he worked with us — physical labor, planting trees, digging up stumps. He was a very hard worker, physically, did that with as much energy as he taught. (**Kramer:** How often would you do that kind of physical work?) We did it everyday, and I couldn't say how much of that he did. I just remember doing it with him. Of course he had other duties too. He was very regular in following his horarium.

Kramer: Sometimes Merton would write about the fact that he wished he might find a different way of life, perhaps within a different order, or in some other place. Did you ever have any inkling of his feeling that he had maybe too much to do at Gethsemani?

Bamberger: I never had that feeling, no. I think that he would have found it very easy if he really wanted to do less at Gethsemani. I always felt that way. I'm quite sure that was the case. But I felt he was doing as much as he wanted to do. He used to talk to us about this desire to get away, but I don't think it had anything to do with his being busy there. I think that he had

a deep attraction for solitude, but he also had a deep need for people, and I never personally felt that he would have been right to become a hermit. It was my own feeling.

Kramer: So, would your feeling be that in those years when he was — in quotation marks — a “hermit,” he was a kind of special hermit, in that he really wasn't living completely alone?

Bamberger: Oh, no. In fact, I think in many ways he had more solitude when he was in the community. He had too many contacts with people outside after he became a hermit. (**Kramer:** And do you think that this was detrimental to him?) I think he came to think that. That's why he didn't want to come back to Gethsemani. He says that in *The Asian Journal*. And I think he was right. But, you see, a lot of that was his own doing — all of that was, I'd say — and also how busy he was at Gethsemani. He's the one, you know, who would decide how many books he would write, and all he would have to do is stop — and how many people would come to see him, and so on, and how many letters he would write, and all that sort of thing. So, I don't think that was bad, and he could handle a lot. But I never felt that it was being forced on him. I did think it wasn't quite healthy that he would have as much contact with outsiders, once he became a hermit. I didn't think that was right. I didn't feel he overdid it when he was in the community, but I think, if you make a point of going to a hermitage, it should be a little more consistent than it was. It didn't bother me, in the sense that it wasn't a problem for me, but I didn't think it was healthy. (**Kramer:** Are there any hermits living here at Genesee?) Yes. We have two. Yes, and we're very happy with them. One has been out there on the ridge alone over ten years.

Kramer: Were there many hermits within the Cistercian order before the period when Merton became one?

Bamberger: No. The Cistercians were never strong on hermits. They felt that our way of life included a good deal of solitude. The tradition of not being too open to hermits goes back to St. Bernard who was not agreeable to this. I personally am, and I think I'll always be open to that and the Gethsemani tradition, and I think Fr. Louis had a lot to do with it. So did Dom James [Fox]. That's one reason Dom James and Fr. Louis got along so well for so many years, since they both really had a deep attraction to the hermit's life. And I think that rubbed off on those of us who were formed under both of them.

Kramer: You say they got along well together. Sometimes it's assumed that it was not an easy relationship.

Bamberger: That's right. But I think that's because very few people have gone into it in detail. There were obvious frictions and Merton would not make secrets about it. He would even tell the novices if he was upset at something. He was quite open that way, whereas Dom James was much more discrete. Something can be said about both sides. But the fact is, for twenty years Dom James was his superior and Fr. Louis used to go to see him every week and talk about things. If you think of what that means, use your imagination, you can see that they had to get along. You just *can't* go on talking to someone. Now, at times, I had the same experience myself as abbot, that of people with whom I get along very well maybe for five or six years and then we go through a period where we have strong disagreement. This happened to me recently with one of the monks here. And I don't know exactly why that happened. For some reason, it happened, and if one were a writer, that's probably what most people would remember. The fact is we've worked it through pretty well, I think, and we continue to have a lot to do with one another, but it might happen again. Now, some people get up and leave when that happens, but as long as Dom James was there, it didn't happen. He could leave. Some monks did. Monks were leaving even then, but Merton stayed on and I'm sure he felt at times like leaving too. Or it would have been easier not to leave but just to have as little as possible to do with the abbot, which is easy to do with someone like Dom James. There were people like that, and he wasn't the type to hound you. (**Kramer:** But clearly Merton was willing to work with Dom James). Yes, and he would always go back and they would work it out, and Dom James always gave him positions of responsibility, like teaching and forming the young monks which is really the most responsible position in the abbey, and people have overlooked that. I think it's a more responsible position to be novice master or master of the juniors than to be prior. Because the prior just implements the abbot's policies whereas the novice master is forming people and has much more personal influence.

Kramer: Do you think Merton might have profited by a little more contact with people on the outside, though, under Dom James?

Bamberger That's an interesting question, and it's probably hard to answer that, partly because of the times. I would say, if Dom James were abbot now, he'd act differently. For the question would be, would it have

been better had Dom James been more willing to allow Merton to travel? First of all Merton had more freedom. He had more contact with the outside than probably any twenty of us put together. Let's begin with that. Then he was teaching us to live lives of solitude, something that all of us found very demanding at times. And yet, he had much more contact with the outside than any of us. That's one thing. So, that having more freedom is being less of a monk, see what I mean. People don't see it from the point of view of the monk, but he's the man who formed me to the monastic life. I realized he had a special vocation. It was never a problem for me personally. But, Dom James had to look at it that way. And then also, the other side of it was that Merton stood for something, and what he stood for was the life of solitude and prayer and contemplation, not the life of the lecture circuit. And it's very hard to start on a lecture circuit and to do it just when you want. And Dom James was very much aware of that, and he made that clear. But, you know, the whole thing, if somebody really wants to do something, how much should you keep him from doing it, when he really wants to? Well, an abbot is often in that situation and if you can't handle that, you're in the wrong job. But I can see now one would deal with it differently. I do believe that Merton's role in the church, and even for himself, was basically to live a life of separation from the world. With his personality, he wasn't the type who would go out. See, Dom James did send me out. I was one of the first to go out, and I studied in Washington, D. C., and lived there with no kind of control. He never checked up on me. That's what he could give people, that kind of freedom. But I was recalled after a while when it was found out in Rome that I was out. I was recalled, because we weren't supposed to do that, it was said.

Kramer: Are you saying that perhaps Dom James would have felt that, given Merton's personality, he just wouldn't be able to function as well on his own? He needed the discipline of the house?

Bamberger: That is what I am saying. Dom James could, on occasion, give people great freedom. He gave it to them. He sent me out to study psychiatry at a time when practically nobody else in the priesthood was, when the church was saying psychiatry wasn't a very good thing. And that's partly why I was recalled. But then the same man who told Dom James to get me back, after six months, got in touch with him again and said, "Send him out again." (**Kramer:** What years were these?) This was 1956, when I first went and it was '57 when I was recalled and '58 when I went back.

Kramer: When was that conference at St. John's College?

Bamberger: 1956. (**Kramer:** Did you attend that conference?) That's right. (**Kramer:** You and Merton went up there together?) We went together, right. (**Kramer:** Do you remember anything about that conference?) I remember it very well, because it was the first trip I made, see? And I had just been ordained a priest. That's how I remember the year so well, because I was ordained in June, 1956, and we went out a couple of months later, probably in September. I remember that very well. We went to Louisville together, and I remember on the plane, I was sitting next to Fr. Louis, who was at the window and watching the clouds. Then he began writing a poem on the way up. I saw that poem. It's in one of his notebooks — a very lovely poem, about the Elysian fields. Then the other thing that I remember distinctly is that while we were there, he got an invitation from James F. Powers, the writer, who was well known then. He wrote one of the best sellers at that time. He lived near the Abbey. He taught English, I think, at the Abbey, at St. John's, and still is writing novels. So Merton and I went together to his house for supper one night, and that was very pleasant. He and Powers were speaking about their writings, especially Powers' writings. He is a short story writer.

You know, people say that Merton was completely crushed by his meeting with [Dr. Gregory] Zilboorg, but that isn't the impression he gave to me. I'm sure he was moved by it, you know, it got to him, it bothered him some. But he was a tough character. He wasn't the wilting type. He could handle a great deal of anguish, and I think Zilboorg was quite heavy-handed.

Kramer: Yes, my impression, reading about that and hearing people comment on it, is that there was a good deal of plain bad manners in what Zilboorg had to say.

Bamberger: Well, it's a complicated business, but you would probably have to know Zilboorg to appreciate it. Zilboorg was a professional actor. He made his living while going to medical school by acting on the Russian stage in New York, as well as translating. He translated Russian plays by Andreyev, I was told. And then he acted on stage, and he acted when he wasn't on stage. That's one point. He was a striking, dramatic type person. The other thing is that, in my opinion, Zilboorg had an image of Merton that he had formed under the influence of a variety of information which had been told to him. He had just met Merton at the time, and he was wrong.

He sized up Merton as the type needing to be told off. And he felt that was the therapeutic approach. I think he was badly mistaken. That's the way I see it. So, if you presume that somebody is the type who needs to encounter a forceful figure, whose benevolent influence would be that of a sledge hammer, I think it accounts for what you call bad manners.

I wasn't present at the meeting with Zilboorg on that occasion. Only Dom James was there. Had I not been told about it later, I'd have had no idea it was so traumatic, for Merton did not appear upset, much less depressed or washed out. Thus I do not ascribe all the importance to it that one writer has ascribed.

Shortly after Dr. Zilboorg and Merton met, with Dom James present at that encounter, Zilboorg spoke with me and shared some of his views regarding the case. I discovered then that Zilboorg had been influenced in forming his opinion as to Merton's character and state of psychic health by some friends of Fr. Louis. Judging by some things that Merton had written them, they had come to the view that he really needed some therapy. Zilboorg himself had read some of Merton and seemingly had formed rather definite opinions about this famous writer who spoke so much about being a hermit. He judged this about the way most psychiatrists would who took a narrowly clinical view of things.

At the time, I had been ordained a priest about two months and had not yet done my residency in psychiatry, and I was aware that Fr. Louis had certain conflicts he was struggling with. So I took the view that maybe some therapy would prove helpful to him. At this, Zilboorg expressed his gratification that I was so open minded and he told me that he had first thought I had been sent by the abbot as a companion to Fr. Louis more or less to protect him. Then it became apparent to me that Zilboorg had asked to see me so as to check me out and see if I was going to interfere with his efforts to help Fr. Louis deal with his emotional problems in the way that Zilboorg considered to be indicated. The whole episode took on a bit of a cloak and dagger scenario, in fact. In looking back later I believe I could better understand why and how this happened.

I said earlier that Zilboorg had a dramatic personality and history. Well, this referred not only to his remarkable abilities as a speaker and teacher (which were outstanding), but also to his very appearance and manner. I believe that his character fed on drama and where drama did not exist in the events, his way of understanding and seeing things gave an assist until he found himself involved in an interesting incident, whereas in fact things had happened quite simply. The only thing the abbot told me about the trip, as I recall, was that it would be an opportunity to get some

exposure to new approaches to pastoral work. Nothing was said about Fr. Louis except that we would be going there together. I dare say that having been led to form a highly personal opinion of Fr. Louis' ambivalent attitude toward solitude, Zilboorg felt he had to do something striking to get through to this intellectualizing writer who was a publicity seeker and the only way to do that was to hit him hard emotionally.

At the time I felt favorable to having Zilboorg help Fr. Louis, for he was a highly learned and competent psychotherapist. Actually, in retrospect, it seems to me that they would have been mismatched and that, in fact, Zilboorg had too narrow a concept of the monastic life into which he felt Merton should fit. Judged by the rigid and ideal standard that the doctor was using to form his opinion of Merton and his vocation, Merton would not pass the test. But also he would never accept such a standard as valid, much less conform to it. Zilboorg was a convert to the faith and as happens at times, had too theoretical a view of monastic and contemplative life for it to be helpful in dealing with so complex a person as Fr. Louis was.

That there was some truth in what Zilboorg told Merton no doubt made it more painful to hear. But that the truth was only part of the picture and not the central part would have kept it from having the devastating effect that has been asserted to be the case. Fr. Louis was a very resilient person, and I believe there is a lot of evidence that proves he had impressive psychic strengths. He may have felt the sting of Zilboorg's sharply worded opinion, administered with rather brutal and energetic force, but I do not believe that encounter had any great importance in his further growth and development. I do not believe that the fact that Merton returns to the episode a number of times in his diary implies more than that he felt the sting and saw a certain amount of truth in what he heard then. But he also knew how to discount a good deal of it, and did not let it undermine his confidence in his vocation as a monk who loved solitude and who also liked to write. His subsequent history is there to demonstrate clearly that this is the case.

Kramer: You said a bit about Merton's physical appearance earlier. Would you want to say anything about his personality, about his sense of humor, or about the way he would have approached life?

Bamberger: My impressions of Fr. Louis were always that he was friendly, basically a friendly person who was very likable, and accessible. You know, I had a great respect for him, but I didn't show that a lot. He wouldn't have liked that in the sense that he wanted to be friendly and straight. He

didn't like anything artificial, but he was very accessible and sympathetic, so that I felt when I had a problem I wanted to talk to him about, he was most willing and interested in hearing it, and I have always felt a deep gratitude to him, because of the way he treated me. He was never hard on you when he felt that you were in need of support, and if he ever was a bit too sharp — he was with me once or twice — he always straightened it out very quickly. He would recognize very quickly he was wrong, and he would take full responsibility. So, he was most considerate, very brotherly. He was friendly, sympathetic, and I think an excellent spiritual director. I always felt he was a very serious person underneath, but I think a lot of people misread him because he was very free with humor. He was jovial. He had a wonderful sense of humor and wit, too. And, of course, he could be cutting occasionally, but usually he was fun, interesting, stimulating.

Kramer: Do you think that, as time passed, he became more, let's say, reconciled to the idea that he really was a writer and this was why his vocation was developing?

Bamberger: I have no doubt about that. He even said as much.

Kramer: During the period of the late '40s and the early '50s, was he wondering if it was even possible to be a writer?

Bamberger: I think that's very common in the monastic life, that kind of thing, whether it's writing or any form of art, even just your work. I think his struggles with such questions are the struggles that almost anybody has, if they do anything that they're very interested in and are trying at the same time to have a serious life of prayer — even more, probably, with writing and poetry, I think a little bit more. I've done enough of that to have found it more distracting, the more creative it is.

Kramer: If you had to pick one memory of Fr. Louis, what one thing sticks out in your mind?

Bamberger: Once I spoke to him about some personal struggles I was having in my vocation, and his response to that was very friendly and understanding, and obviously spontaneously so. He was always there. Toward the end of his life, on one occasion, he was having considerable difficulties with his health, and some other difficulties in his life and was actually going through a good bit of anguish, and he was talking to me with

considerable feelings of his difficulties, and all of a sudden he began to laugh. I knew he was feeling very badly, but he was able to see the funny side of it and how he himself was partly the cause of his difficulties. Before long he had himself laughing and that's very unusual. I've never seen anyone do that. (**Kramer:** Would this have been quite late in his life?) This was shortly before he died. (**Kramer:** You were at Gethsemani?) Oh, yes, I was still there, yes.

A third memory I have of him is his love for Our Blessed Mother. It came out in this talk I just referred to because, tied in with his laughing, he was able to see himself from God's point of view. Then Our Blessed Mother — he had a very simple faith in her, and apparently he had a very deep love for her. It wasn't sentimental at all, very theological and so on, but it was very real.

Kramer: That's interesting. There are some poems, early poems, that deal with this. There is not so much in the later poetry. I wonder — I don't recall any essay which would really reflect this. I can remember places in journals where he mentions the Blessed Mother.

Bamberger: Yes. He didn't write about it a lot. But I know it meant a lot to him. (**Kramer:** Do you know the poem "Hagia Sophia"?) Yes, I was just thinking about that when you were speaking. (**Kramer:** That would be a beautiful example.) Mary is a priestess and Holy Wisdom. I think she meant a great deal to him. I think all monks would have more than a little to say about Our Blessed Mother, but they don't like to talk about it.

Kramer: You would say that your own personal association with Merton was valuable?

Bamberger: Oh, yes. It was very valuable. I've always felt deep gratitude to him, and felt that he did a lot of good for me.

Kramer: Would you say Merton's relationship to others would have been similarly valuable, and therefore would you wish to speculate perhaps about his influence on other monks, other persons who have gone to other monasteries, and so on?

Bamberger: I think he had a very powerful influence on all of us there. He was appreciated in himself and for what he did for us. I think that was true not only of the young monks, but I think that was the general climate of the

community. He was much appreciated and liked there, and accepted. That's why I feel some of the things written about his relationship to his community and certain individuals there represents a great distortion. I don't think it was that way if you put it *all* together. But there were times when it would look like that. He had a very complex, a very rich emotional life, and his way was to let things come out.

Kramer: Do you think that, through his writings, he's had a similar influence on others?

Bamberger: Oh, I think he's had a powerful influence - people all over the world. I travel a lot in my work as a monk, and every place in the world I have met people who were influenced by Merton personally.

Kramer: So you would say, if one went to the 125 Cistercian monasteries worldwide, that there would be some knowledge of Merton in all those places?

Bamberger: I think so.

Kramer: And then, of course, you have a lot of other influence in Benedictine monasteries.

Bamberger: Oh, yes, and people outside of monasteries, many lay people.

Kramer: This is another question I wanted to ask. Do you have an opinion about why Merton would appeal to such a wide range of readers?

Bamberger: I think it relates to some of the points I've been making. Merton was a very warm, and basically a very sympathetic person, who had gone deeply into his own experiences, and who had been in touch with a wide range of his emotions and inner experiences that related to culture, art, and so on. He was a communicator. So that when he spoke about things, he spoke in a concrete way and you felt you were talking to somebody who wasn't just repeating something he had read. Also he spoke with warmth and conviction, and even enthusiasm, and finally with a certain sense of intimacy that you felt as you read his books. I think people still feel that way. What he said in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, if you read this book and listen attentively, maybe you'll hear the

same person whom I hear when I write it. I think that that is just what he conveyed. He took you with him into the presence of God, communing with His Spirit.

Kramer: But this is a process. It's something that's in process of change. This is part of the reason why some people feel that Merton contradicts himself in his writing, and they get uneasy with the fact that he seems to be saying something different, ten or twenty years later.

Bamberger: Right. I think there are people who are confused by Merton, or disappointed in Merton. I just don't happen to be one of them, because I feel he was very consistent in himself in the sense of that's the way life is. He was still being true with varying degrees of fidelity, but basically I think he was always true to the same principles.

Kramer: I think he was prudent when he went back and looked at *The Secular Journal*, or *My Argument with the Gestapo*, or even *The Seven Storey Mountain* and refused to change them.

Bamberger: Yes — *The Seven Storey Mountain* — he talked to me about that one day. He said, "Really it's a bad book in many ways, and people complain about it. It really needs to be rewritten, but it's not mine any more." I never felt that way. I still think it's his best book, and it always will be because it's the truest. It's got all kinds of exaggerated opinions. It's not balanced or anything, but who cares about that? It's the way it was. It's the slice of life the way he lived it. And that's what literature is, and it's the way God works with people.

Kramer: It's a bit exaggerated in some ways. (**Bamberger:** It is!) It's almost too funny, but he knew that. He knew that.

Bamberger: Yes, but that's the way he was. That's why I think so many people had false notions of him. When he said things about Dom James, he exaggerated, and they weren't true in that way, but when you knew him, they were. (**Kramer:** So what you're saying is that this is an artist who deals in metaphor.) He deals in metaphor, and also you have this particular artist with his very, very sensitive reactions, spontaneous reactions, who is convinced that in the end, if you let it all come out, the truth will be available, and those who have good will and enough sensitivity will see it. Who cares what the others think anyhow? To me, that's the way he looked at it.

Kramer: Do you have the impression that a significant number of people entered monasteries because of Merton's books?

Bamberger: I don't think they would enter because of it but I think he helped them on the way. I don't think anyone would enter just because of them. But certainly a lot of people were helped. I was helped on the way. And I see many who still are, even today, many who enter who have read Merton, and it had a lot to do with their attraction to the life.

Kramer: Do you think those who would mention Merton today would have been reading the later books, rather than the earlier ones? In other words, books like those having to do with the East, as opposed, say, to *No Man is an Island* or *Seeds of Contemplation*?

Bamberger: I don't think it slices up that way. Often the people who have read Merton have read various of his works. They might read his Eastern works which would appeal to them. But much of what's in his last works is consistent with his earliest. *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* was one of the last things he wrote before leaving Gethsemani, and it's very popular. *The Monastic Journey*, and his writings on Zen — all of those are popular.

Kramer: Do you think Merton's writing has actually had an effect on the way people do things in monasteries?

Bamberger: I think so. I think what he aimed at chiefly, when he taught us, was the right spirit: that the thing to emphasize is being personally committed to the Lord, living from the heart, being a genuine person. He felt very strongly about that. And in his relations with people, if he ever thought you were not operating that way, he would get very abrupt with you. And that was the chief thing. But then, I believe, many of the changes in our order favor that, and were made specifically with that in mind, with facilitating a more personal involvement. (**Kramer:** But most of this was simply in process already with Vatican II, and with certain attitudes.) His writings antedate Vatican II quite a bit, you know, like *The New Man* and *No Man is an Island*, and so on. His writings already were inculcating this. When he taught a Scripture course back in 1952 and '53, he was stressing essentially these points: resurrection, freedom, personal engagement with the Risen Lord, and so on. And I felt that was the essence of his message. That also got into Vatican II. He was just ahead of it, that's all. We do emphasize those kinds of things. I do believe a lot of things we do today

that tend to involve people much more in the process are similar — like when you're an abbot, instead of just telling the community what they're going to do, you tell them: "I gather a serious number of people are interested in this problem. Let's talk about it, study it."

Kramer: Department chairpersons in universities could learn a lot from what's going on in monasteries. I wonder — can you think of anything else that you feel should be added to this?

Bamberger: Just maybe one or two things that come to mind. One is that Merton was a very good community man. I think that's important to stress. That was a big part of his teaching. Also, he believed very much in monastic values. Though he would be quite free in making criticisms, I always felt part of this wasn't just from irritation, but because he was trying to teach us that this is our responsibility. You shouldn't just let things go on. You should speak up. Also, it was to make clear that that's a contribution in many ways, a way of participating. If you started to make criticisms to him privately — I'm not much inclined that way myself — but I know of a case where somebody started to complain about the abbot to him. [Bamberger snaps his fingers.] Right away he would say, "You don't do that here!" I don't think many people understand that about him. In other words, it wasn't a personal irritation or uncharitableness, it was a matter of principle. He was also a very disciplined person. I think that confuses many people, because he didn't seem to be. He was quite free wheeling in many ways, but he was very, very committed to following, for example, an horarium that he fixed up for himself. He was very sparing in the way he used his time — like, for instance, looking at new books that had come in. He would be very brief in doing that. I was there when he would come in to look at them. He would just glance through them in two minutes, and he would be out again. Whereas a lot of us would stand around and browse, and so on.

Kramer: So he was very disciplined. Would you say that the number one priority was his prayer life rather than his writing? Would it be correct to say that the writing was a kind of overflow?

Bamberger: I think it was more complicated than that. I think that he wouldn't have stayed in the monastery if writing became more important than prayer, but I think it competed at times. In working that out, he was also working out his prayer. He used it the way everybody has to use something — you know, you might use your job, you might use your

contact with guests. He used writing to work out gradually the impurities and the purities of his intentions. At times, I think he got too involved with writing, and didn't write as well. I think his best writing came when he was praying best. I always felt that.

Kramer: Do you think his best writing would have been pre-1965?

Bamberger: He wrote some good things later, but I personally think his best literature was pre-1965. Some of his more recent things — like *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* were very good writing. It comes out very well. It's clear there that prayer is his perspective.

Kramer: Right. I was thinking about your earlier comment about the Blessed Virgin. Was this really something very important for him? This is not a question that has an answer. What would a psychiatrist say about someone who lost his mother at such an early age, who goes to a monastery, and then finds this devotion a valuable part of his life?

Bamberger: That's kind of a captious question. I'm sure that there are psychiatrists who would find a lot in that. I'm not too impressed with a lot of the things that most psychiatrists say and write. I would just say — "My mother is still living and I'm very fond of my mother, and all that, but then the Blessed Mother means a great deal to me, too." What does that prove? He did say — and he wrote about this some place — that probably only strict mothers make the best contemplatives, I mean, have children who make the best contemplatives. There's something to that, I think. Strict in one sense, at least those who expect a lot. I wouldn't say that my mother was strict, but

Kramer: You have a connection with Merton in that respect. What he remembered about his mother was that she wanted him to read and she wanted him to do well. He could remember that.

Bamberger: Yes. His recollections of his mother were not very positive. She wasn't very motherly, but I don't know Everything affects everything else. My mother, in a way, was the opposite of that. She's very motherly, and especially this was true when we were little, which is the only time Merton knew his mother. But I still have a deep devotion to Our Blessed Mother. She means a lot to me. I'm sure that it relates somehow. But you didn't feel that his devotion to the Blessed Mother was sentimental at

all. It had a lot of significance for him. He had a great gift of faith, no question about that. There was something childlike about him. It was one of the most edifying things about him, in my opinion.

Kramer: I think one of the most beautiful things about the monastic office is the way *Compline* is sung everywhere and always in a similar way, and for a monk to have that as a way of structuring the day. Clearly, any monk would feel that's very, very important to end the day that way [with the *Salve Regina*]. It would have to be very important for any monk.

Bamberger: That's right. I believe so. The thing is, if you get close to Our Lord, Our Blessed Mother is there. And that's the way we see it. So, how can you stay a monk unless you discover that? The other thing I would say about Merton that made a deep impression on me — that wouldn't get out very easily, unless you knew him pretty well — was that there was a streak in him of a pure kind of humility that I never quite understood. For example, he would take advice from a confessor, see, who was not very intelligent or very cultivated, and he took it very seriously, because he felt that the confessor spoke in God's place. I remember when I was a young monk there — I forget what the question was — but he asked me a question concerning something in his own life. I started telling him what I thought about it, and I could tell that he was taking my answer very seriously in the sense of really looking for some guidance for himself, in a way you wouldn't expect of your Father Master, see? I don't think he ever lost that. It relates to his gift of faith, and also to a kind of simplicity. Although he was very intelligent and very quick, his temperament and his intelligence didn't dominate. I think his writing was that type of thing, too. It was there. It would compete at times, but when he stood back and looked at things, something else was always more important.

Kramer: Do you want to say anything further?

Bamberger: That covers it.