

# THOMAS MERTON'S

## GETHSEMANI

by **Benjamin Clark**, O.C.S.O.

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### PART I

#### THE NOVITIATE YEARS

Those of us who knew Thomas Merton as Father Louis, a brother monk, find amusing some of what is written about him by writers who extrapolate from available data and speculate on what actually happened at Gethsemani. Quite probably Father Louis himself is more amused than any of the rest of us, for he always enjoyed reading outsiders' ideas of what went on in Trappist monasteries. Few writers have shown the restraint of Cornelia and Irving Sussman in their brief biography.<sup>1</sup> Those writers are to be commended for adhering to the published facts and for refusing to be enticed into trying to read between the lines. Too often writers try to fill in the gaps by drawing on their imaginations or by repeating accounts written by others that often are based more on fancy and hearsay than on solid facts.

I wonder if monks themselves may not be responsible, at least in part, for the misinformation that is circulating about our celebrated confrere, because we have been negligent in making the facts available. Fr. Charles Dumont, longtime editor of *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, agrees that not enough has been written about Merton the monk: "In the ten years [since Merton's death] much has been written about his life as a writer, about his ideas, about his style, and about the influence that he had in the

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1. Cornelia & Irving Sussman, *Thomas Merton: The Daring Young Man on the Flying Belltower* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

and in the society of his time. His life as a monk, on the contrary, has been studied relatively little. This aspect of his personality, no doubt the most important one in his eyes, remains quite poorly known.<sup>2</sup>

As one step towards filling this gap, I have decided to record the recollections of my seven years with Father Louis, 1942 to 1949, covering the period from his novitiate to his ordination, the period that would usually be called his time of formation. Father Louis might have objected to the expression, however, for actually the whole life of a monk is a time of formation, of formation for eternal life. As St. Benedict says in the prologue to his Rule, a monastery is a school of the Lord's service, and we are students at that school all our lives.

I limit myself for the most part to this period because that is the time span of which I have firsthand knowledge, and so the one about which I am best qualified to speak. Some readers may wonder how having lived with Merton in the Trappist monastery during that period qualifies me to speak at all, because how could I know anything when we observed such absolute silence? Silence was indeed observed at Gethsemani, and strictly, but some who have not lived the life may have misconceptions about the nature and extent of that silence. Every monk had permission to speak to at least two persons in the monastery: the abbot and the prior, and sometimes to others as well if his job required it. As students, we spoke in class, and Merton and I were in the same classes through most of the period covered by this study. Then there was the sign language. Yes, it had its limitations. But within these limitations it was an effective means of communication. There was also nonverbal communication; a smile, a frown, a stare can speak volumes. Simply sharing the same experiences can be a form of communication.

And so, despite the fact that the Trappist rule of silence (not a vow) did inhibit communication to some extent, I have more than ample foundation in fact for what appears in this essay and I present it as such, as fact and not as opinion. I offer these memoirs to all who wish to know what Merton's early monastic life was like, the early, formative years of his monastic career. Events that Merton covered in *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>3</sup> or in *The Sign of Jonas*<sup>4</sup> I have either skipped entirely or treated but briefly, unless I felt that details not found in Merton's account should be added.

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2. Charles Dumont, "Un Cistercien Different: Pere Louis Merton," *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 40 (1978), p. 242.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948). Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953). Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

I have on occasion utilized autobiography for several reasons. First, knowing something about the author may help the reader evaluate his testimony. Second, in some cases I would have had to guess how a particular event affected Merton, and rather than hazard such a guess, I decided to give my own experience of the event because this seemed the honest and most effective way to narrate it. And finally, leaving myself out of an event in which I had actually participated could distort the narrative.

Perhaps the need to be autobiographical is one reason why monks who could have written an account of these years have been reluctant to do so. To tell the whole story about Merton, one must necessarily bring oneself into it because one was part of the story when it actually happened. Dom James Fox apologizes for being autobiographical in his account, but like me, he saw no other way to write it.<sup>5</sup> Many of us are reluctant to say anything about ourselves, feel our anonymity is important to us as monks. Merton recognized this desire for anonymity in his brother monks, and as a result gave most of the monks he described in *The Sign of Jonas* pseudonyms to protect their privacy (*SJ*, p. 9). And so, with nothing to hide, I have chosen to tell it as it was. This essay is a revision and abridgement of a much larger manuscript written in 1979 and deposited at the Thomas Merton Studies Center.

#### PEACE TO THOSE WHO ENTER

Let not an easy entrance be given to one newly converted, but, as the Apostle says, "Try the spirits if they be of God" (1 John 4: 1). If therefore the newcomer perseveres in knocking and is seen patiently to endure both the humiliations inflicted on him and the difficulty about his entry, and persists in his petition, after four or five days, let him be allowed to enter.<sup>6</sup>

We see that St. Benedict evidently did not want postulants to receive the red carpet treatment. The *Spiritual Directory* comments:

Although the spirit of the present age would scarcely endure such a reception, yet our Constitutions and Regulations retain a remnant of the ancient severity by requiring testimonial letters and prescribing a serious inquiry into the antecedents and disposition of the candidate.<sup>7</sup>

Reading Merton's account in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, however, one has to look hard to find any trace of such severity (*SSM*, p. 171). Merton wrote to Gethsemani after Thanksgiving in 1941 and, by December 8, was in

5. *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart ((New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 144. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Monk*.

6. *Rule of St. Benedict*, 58: 1. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Rule*.

7. *Directoire Spirituel à l'usage des Cisterciens Reformes ou de la Stricte Observance* (Briquebec: 1931); translated as *A Spiritual Directory for Religious* (Trappist, Kentucky: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1946), p. 53.

the guesthouse (the “hotel”) at Gethsemani, where the nearest thing to a humiliation was when he was put to work waxing the floors.

My experience was much the same, a welcome, not a rebuff. I had written in the autumn of 1941, received a booklet describing life at Gethsemani, and was invited to ask for an application form if I still thought this was my vocation. The application blank turned out to be a mimeographed form, asking only for essential information: name, address, marital status, education, health, copies of baptismal and confirmation certificates, and the report of a physical examination. When I returned the application form I told the abbot that my plans were to continue the current school year, second year college in a diocesan seminary, and then leave for Gethsemani. He approved the plans.

There were some in the community at Gethsemani who thought applicants should be more thoroughly screened and, after the war, visitors, including the Abbot General, said the same. The Abbot General put it like this:

Saint Benedict says that if the abbot follows the recommendations of the Holy Rule he not only does not suffer loss in the flock entrusted to him, but may even rejoice in the increase of a good flock (*RB*, 2: 32). But it must be a good flock, strictly first class, otherwise it will be a cause of grief, not of rejoicing.

The reasoning seems to have been that, as our Order has no active apostolate, we don't need to examine whether candidates are suitable for an apostolate. Our life is a school of the Lord's service. We are simply trying to become better Catholics, and so we should accept anyone who comes for that purpose. If God didn't want them to come, they wouldn't come. The error in such reasoning is that our life exposes monks to stresses that can precipitate psychological problems in persons unable to bear those stresses. Wiser counsel has prevailed. Candidates are now interviewed by a professional psychologist before they are accepted. Some have suggested that Merton would never have been admitted these days, that some of his youthful escapades would have been seen as evidence of no vocation, that we would have followed the lead of the Franciscans who did not accept him. But God has His own ways.

Unlike Merton, I had already been accepted and was expected when I arrived on 8 July 1942, the feast of the Cistercian pope, Blessed Eugene III. The abbot had told me in his letter that he would not be there that day. He was in Canada attending the dedication of the abbey church at Our Lady of Mistassini. As I was waiting at the gate I looked up at the arch and read the Latin words, *Pax intrantibus* — Peace to those who enter — a promise that I

must say has been fulfilled. At that moment, the mail carrier, Mrs. Nancy Dant, brought the mail bags for the Trappist post office (then a first class office and now closed) and handed them to Brother Matthew who stepped through the gate and gave her the outgoing mail. As she left to continue her route, he asked whether I was a visitor or wished to join the monks. When I told him I was in the latter category he directed me to the parlor to await the guestmaster.

A few minutes later the guestmaster, Father Francis, appeared and led me across the garden to the guesthouse, then located in the south wing of the main monastic building. He led me to the second floor and down the corridor to St. Gabriel's room, showed me where things were, and added that the novice master, Father Robert, would be in to see me in the afternoon. "But," he added, "he has sixteen novices and they keep him pretty busy." He walked across the corridor, opened a door, turned and said, "I'm also the librarian and must get to work here in the library. We have a retreat coming Friday and I have to rearrange things, as they use this room of the library for their conferences." Then he stepped into the library and closed the door.

#### FATHER MAURITIUS, THE PRIOR

I returned to my room, looked around it, looked out the window to study the landscape, trying to take in what I thought would be my home for the rest of my life. Soon there was a knock at the door and the prior, Father Mauritius, introduced himself. He had been guestmaster four years earlier when my family stopped at Gethsemani on our way home to Detroit after visiting Kentucky relatives near Owensboro and Paducah. He must have had a special gift for remembering people for he recognized me at once, even though I must have changed considerably in appearance between the ages of fifteen and nineteen.

Father Mauritius was a remarkable man in other ways, too, as I was to learn from daily contact with him over the next five years. I'll say a bit about him here, and also about Father Robert and Dom Frederic Dunne because these men had an important influence on Merton in his early years of religious life.

Father Mauritius was a native Hollander and spoke excellent, though not quite perfect, English. For instance he always pronounced "food" to rhyme with "good." One might say he came from a superior family, for several of his brothers and sisters ended up as superiors in their respective communities. One brother was abbot of Achel, a Trappist monastery in

Belgium. Another was provincial of the White Fathers in Tabora, Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Five years later Father Mauritius was chosen as superior of the group sent to found Our Lady of the Holy Trinity in Utah, and two years after that was elected its first abbot.

Before his entry at Gethsemani, he had been a professional nurseryman in California and his green thumb found plenty of opportunity to exercise itself beautifying the grounds. He was a man of hardheaded, Dutch common sense but also a most kindly man. He was one who came straight to the point and did not talk around a subject. As he left, he told me that Father Robert would be up in the afternoon, and recommended, "If you are wise, you will be completely open with him. For it's your superiors who have to decide whether you have a vocation. So tell him the whole story. That's the way we find out God's will for us."

The assistant guestmaster, Brother Alexander, came and led me to the church for the High Mass, placing me in the pews in the east transept directly beneath the organ. As a result I heard the organ and not much of the choir. After mass I returned to the "hotel" for the noon meal, quite substantial, but no meat. Brother Alexander told me that I would use the pews near the organ rather than the balcony (or tribune) in the church, and would eat separately from the guests. I wondered who was being protected from whom, but I supposed, "Well, it's the rule."

Brother Alexander was soon to replace Brother Matthew as porter and would spend several decades welcoming visitors and postulants to Gethsemani. He also acted as Postmaster of Trappist, Kentucky. In a few years Brother Matthew would be sent to Utah to help in the foundation of the monastery there, and Brother Matthias, a big Italian who looked like a professional wrestler, took over the assistant guestmaster's job for the next twenty years or so.

Father Francis came in as I was eating, told me that afterwards the community has an hour's siesta, called the "meridian" He suggested that I try to adjust myself to the program, and urged me to eat. "People who don't eat, don't stay," he added. It was advice I was to hear frequently. Here I had been wondering if I would be able to survive the fasts of the Trappists, and instead was to find that it could sometimes be hard to eat all they thought you should. But, on that day, after a night riding in the coach on the train and not much breakfast, it wasn't hard to polish off the meal and to sleep soundly afterward. Father Francis came in again and said, "You'll make a good Trappist. You eat everything in sight and then take a good meridian."

## SQUARE-JAWED GURU

Some time later that afternoon Father Robert came to my room. Father Louis remarked on the determination in his jaw, how he looked like he would take nonsense from no one (*SSM*, p. 375). That jaw was there all right, but somehow Father Robert's walk gave me the impression that he was the essence of kindness and paternal affection. The moment he spoke I realized that my evaluation was perfectly correct, an opinion I never had to change. As Henry McGann, he had entered Gethsemani in 1902 at the age of sixteen. "I was a roly-poly two-hundred-pounder," he told me that day. He added that he had weighed himself at the mill a short time before and had tipped the scales at 215 pounds. He was stocky, but he did not impress me as obese.

Father Robert had been novice master for nearly twenty years, had been prior for a time, and had been organist in his younger days. He was also the second cantor in 1942. A man of experience and sound judgment, he was Dom Frederic's number one advisor and was highly regarded by the entire community. He entered at the age of sixteen and had not even finished high school. The course of studies at Gethsemani was quite elementary in the early days of this century, but Father Robert was a man of determination and made good use of the facilities available to him at Gethsemani to deepen and broaden his knowledge, particularly in the Fathers, in the liturgy. As a result we were given sound, solid doctrine with no admixture of the pious stuff that is sometimes added "to edify." He used to tell me when I went to him for direction, "Son, I want you to build your spiritual life on granite." One of his favorite sayings was, "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it." He was easy going and saw no reason to make the novitiate a kind of ecclesiastical boot camp. In fact, he found such an approach self-defeating. Instead of preparing novices for a fruitful religious life, an excessively austere novitiate can give rise to a "now that I'm out of the novitiate I can relax" attitude in later life. He used to tell us that our life in the novitiate would be just the same as it would be after profession, only in the novitiate it is under more supervision.

Father Robert was sent to Utah in 1947 as one of the founders, and a year later was elected abbot of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, a position he held until his death on 3 October 1957. A year or so before he died I was in St. Francis Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina, and met the Bishop of Charleston, the Most Reverend John J. Russell. He told me that he had been to Georgia a few days previously for the dedication of the abbey church and was impressed with what he saw. "I sure

would like to have somebody like that working in my diocese," he said, "He really has built himself a church. I always say there's nothing wrong with this diocese that a million dollars and the grace of God won't fix, and your man in Georgia seems to have both."

On that day in 1942 I didn't think about a million dollars, but the grace of God was quite evident. As Father Robert left, he gave me a copy of a pamphlet he had written, *How Spiritual Force is Generated: The Apostolate of the Contemplatives*, and asked Brother Alexander to give me copies of *The Spiritual Directory* and *The Choir Usages* to study. Father Robert was to return to the "hotel" frequently while I was there, but not necessarily to see me. Two other persons came to try their vocations while I was there. One was a priest from the Indianapolis diocese (it became an archdiocese two years later), the other was a Passionist scholastic in temporary vows. Both of them entered the community during the following week. The scholastic left a month or so later for reasons of health. The priest was recalled by Bishop Ritter who felt that the diocese couldn't spare him at that time.

#### IT TAKES ALL KINDS TO MAKE A MONASTERY

The entrance procedures were the same for everyone who came to Gethsemani, and that is the reason why I am recounting my experiences. Merton's entrance was much the same as mine, but, on reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I realized that his and my reactions were anything but the same. That is not surprising since our backgrounds were quite dissimilar. He was twenty-seven, I was nineteen. He had studied at Cambridge, had his M.A. from Columbia, and had started to work on his Ph.D. I had completed only two years of undergraduate work at Sacred Heart Seminary, the preparatory seminary of the Archdiocese of Detroit. Merton had become a Catholic as an adult; I was a "cradle Catholic."

#### GOD "VOUCHSAFES"

I indicated that Brother Alexander gave me copies of *The Spiritual Directory and of the Usages*. It seems that Merton received the same two books during his stay in the guesthouse and he already began to have misgivings. Sentences like the following could have raised the hackles of one like Merton:

The Holy Mass, the Divine Office, prayer and pious reading which form the exercises of the contemplative life occupy the major part of our day. God vouchsafes mystical prayer to whom He pleases and as far as He



pleases: He does not require it from all. The essential point is that we extirpate vice, and ascend through the practice of the different virtues to the perfection of charity, that we endeavor to bring our wills into perfect harmony with the will of God.<sup>8</sup>

Such statements would probably not have bothered most of the monks at Gethsemani at that time. Merton, however, began to wonder about the real nature of contemplation.

#### "TO SERVE RATHER THAN TO RULE"

On Friday, 10 July, Dom Frederic Dunne came home and Father Robert took me to meet him in his office. The visit had to be brief, as Dom Frederic had to catch up on his mail and take care of other things that had happened during his absence. He and Father Robert decided that I should make the retreat with the men from Owensboro who were coming that weekend, and then enter the community the following Monday.

Dom Frederic — Frederic Arthur Dunne — entered Gethsemani on 2 August 1894, when Dom Edward Chaix-Bourbon was abbot. He was the second American to persevere in the Gethsemani community. The first was John Green Hanning — Brother Joachim — of whom Father Raymond wrote in *The Man Who Got Even With God*.<sup>9</sup> Fred Dunne was born in Ironton, Ohio, and was twenty when he entered. The family moved south shortly after his birth, and so he grew up in the south and always considered himself a southerner, despite the fact that his father had been an officer in the Union Army. The full story of his life is told in Father Raymond's *The Less Traveled Road*.<sup>10</sup>

Dom Frederic Dunne ran a taut ship. His government of Gethsemani was strictly by the book. His predecessor may have had a reputation for being a strict disciplinarian, but he earned it more by his personality than by rigid adherence to rules. Dom Edmond, for example, followed the principles of his own monastery, La Trappe, and exercised his monks in humility by humiliating them, but he did permit mitigations in the diet of the monks, such as allowing *mixt* during the winter season, a breakfast of six or eight ounces of bread with fruit and butter, instead of the *frustulum*, two ounces of bread allowed by the *Usages*. He would also allow monks to sleep until

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8. *The Spiritual Directory* (1946), pp. 34, 35.

9. Father Raymond, *The Man Who Got Even With God* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce Publishing Company, 1941).

10. Father Raymond, *The Less Traveled Road* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce Publishing Company, 1953). This is a popular biography of Dom Frederic Dunne, a good account of the remarkable man who became fifth abbot of Gethsemani.

2.00 a.m. on Sundays when there had been a feast on Saturday and the monks had risen at 1.00 a.m. On both these points, Dom Frederic insisted on the rule. He set the pace himself, allowed himself no mitigations, was always the first to arrive in choir in the morning, ate no *frustulum* on fast days (meaning that he ate nothing from rising at 2 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. most of the year — “It’s only tolerated” was his explanation), and observed the same restrictions on contacts with his own family that had been established for others in the community. Dom Edmond occasionally indulged himself by smoking a cigar. Dom Frederic wouldn’t have even thought of such a thing. He felt that it was his duty to show the way in everything, as Christ had done for His disciples.

Neither Dom Frederic nor Father Robert belonged to the school that exercised monks in humility by demanding blind obedience. Both were of the opinion that artificial humiliations produce artificial humility and reduce the whole spiritual life to a kind of game. They agreed with what Father Bruno Hagspiel, S.V.D., said in a retreat conference:

Sometimes novice masters and superiors ask whether they should exercise their subjects [note the word] in humility by demanding blind obedience to unreasonable commands. I always say to be as reasonable, as understanding, as paternal as you can. You will still give enough stupid commands to make saints of all of them.

Dom Frederic took literally Christ’s injunction to be the servant of all (Luke 22: 26). The motto on his coat of arms was *Prodesse magis quam praesse* (“to be of service more than to be in command”), a recommendation given by St. Benedict to the abbot in the Rule (*RB* 64: 8). Dom Frederic saw his task as one of assisting his monks on their way to God, the same way he himself was going. He did not simply impose his rigorous regime from on high, but asked counsel and took votes. When he found the community overwhelmingly in favor of his aims, he was encouraged to forge ahead.

He preached the gospel of strict observance to others, too. When sisters asked him to have his community pray for vocations in their congregations, he would tell them that the way to get vocations is to be faithful to their rule, to keep it loyally: “For the Holy Spirit is not going to send His choicest souls to communities where they would become mediocre religious.” He told me that some of the sisters did not appreciate such comments, but he added that their reaction only convinced him that his views were correct.

## GETHSEMANI'S GROWTH

Statistics seem to indicate that he was doing something right. When he was elected abbot in January, 1935, there were seventy-seven in the community. Seven of them died in an influenza epidemic before the end of February. Of the seventy who saw him blessed as abbot on 1 May, two died before the end of the year. The following year — 1936 — saw the number rise from sixty-eight to eighty-two. By the beginning of World War II there were 126 and, by 1945, 145. In 1950, fifteen years after Dom Frederic became abbot there were 266 at Gethsemani, and about 200 more in the four monasteries that Gethsemani had founded during those years. This growth began before World War II, before Gethsemani began to publish on a large scale, before Merton's arrival. All of these may have been contributing factors, but authors who see in any of them the actual cause of the growth should realize that the facts indicate otherwise. Such was the abbot who guided Merton for the first six and a half years of his religious life, recognized his abilities, and enabled and encouraged him to put those abilities to work for the good of souls.

## NEVER A DULL MOMENT

The Owensboro group began its retreat on Friday, 10 July. Father James Fox was retreat master. He was a graduate of Harvard Business School and a former Passionist, and had been at Gethsemani about fifteen years at the time. He was to be appointed superior of Gethsemani's first foundation [in Georgia] and would later succeed Dom Frederic as Gethsemani's sixth abbot. His talks were hard-hitting and to the point and were well received by the men. They were expecting that kind of retreat and would have been disappointed if they had been given anything else. Brother Alexander had me help with the cleanup crew and that gave me the first taste of working with members of the community. We observed silence, of course, and it's surprising how fast things can be done when time is not wasted in useless chatter.

On Monday morning, 13 July, the retreatants had gone, and Father Robert came to my room to take me to see the abbot again. Then we went down the hall to the secretary's office to deposit my valuables, which consisted mainly of train fare home. In the letter accepting my application, the abbot had recommended that I bring money when I came. Father Edmund, the Maltese Father Abdon in *The Sign of Jonas*, was the secretary of the monastery. He had me sign a document waiving any claim for compensation for work done while at the monastery and giving the abbot

authority to receive and give receipts for telegrams, registered mail, and the like.

Then we went to the wardrobe where I was measured and fitted with a habit. Next stop was the shoe shop where I was issued a pair of house shoes and a pair of work shoes. When we arrived in the novitiate I was shown the six-foot-square cell in the dormitory that I was to occupy from 8.00 p.m. until 2.00 a.m. Finally I was introduced to Frater Walter, a jovial, athletic six-footer from Dayton, Ohio, who was one day to be elected abbot of Our Lady of the Genesee in New York. He was to be my "guardian angel" to show me the ropes during my first days in the community. He was not permitted to speak to me, but was supposed to teach me the sign language, and he was a good teacher. He was next above Merton in seniority, having entered about three months earlier than Merton. Frater Louis — Thomas Merton — had been there seven months when I entered. I must have seen him that day, but he was just one of the novices and so I didn't see anything special about him, or about any of the others for that matter. I was new, and the novices were simply a lot of new faces to me that day. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton speaks of the type of novice who stays, the normal, good-natured, patient, obedient one who does nothing exceptional, just follows the common rule, the one who simply minds his own business, is neither a starry-eyed would-be mystic nor the life of the party (SSM, p. 383). Merton stayed. In addition he had his strong inclination to solitude combined with a horror of "giving edification" to anyone. As a result, he was not the type that a new arrival would notice.

About the title "frater." There were at that time three categories of religious at Gethsemani: the priests, the non-priest choir religious preparing for the priesthood, and the lay brothers. The priests were called *Father*, the non-priest choir religious and the choir novices were called *Frater*, and the lay brothers were called *Brother*. It was normal for any and every choir religious to become a priest. It is, in fact, doubtful that an applicant for the choir would have been accepted if he indicated that he did not wish to prepare for the priesthood. There were two non-priest choir religious in the community at the time who were not expecting to be ordained, but only because a canonical irregularity had developed after their profession as monks. All this has changed since Vatican II, and it is now recognized that vocation to the monastic state is not automatically vocation to the priesthood. The monastic state has again become what it was in the beginning, a lay state. In addition, the former categories of lay brother and choir religious have almost been eliminated, as Dom Augustine de Lestrangle had

wanted it nearly two centuries ago, and all are now considered monks on an equal basis.

### THE MONASTIC DAY

What was life at Gethsemani in 1942? It was the summer season when I arrived and a day went as follows for us novices: we rose at 2.00 a.m. and were in church reciting the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin at 2.10. From 2.30 to 3.00 there was a half hour of meditation, followed by the canonical office of Vigils and Lauds, ending around four. The *Angelus* was said (Trappists have never been scrupulous about saying it exactly at 6.00 a.m., noon, and 6.00 p.m.), and then the priests of the house celebrated their Masses. Prime was at 5.30, followed by chapter. In chapter there was the reading of the Martyrology, the chapter prayers which were a kind of liturgical morning offering, the reading of a passage from *The Rule of St. Benedict*, and a talk by the abbot, usually a commentary on the *Rule*. Several times a week there followed the chapter of faults, where monks accused themselves of external violations of the *Rule*, and pointed out the failings of others ("proclaimed" them). Chapter concluded with the recitation of the *De profundis* for the deceased. We went from the chapter room to the dormitory to make our beds, then to breakfast ("mixt").

Work was from 7.00 to 9.00 a.m. Terce began some time after 9.30, timed so that Terce, High Mass, and Sext would end about 10.55, leaving five minutes for particular *examen* before dinner at 11.00. After dinner, there was the noon-day rest period known as meridian or siesta. At 1.00 p.m. we went to church for the office of None. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Father Robert gave us a class ("repetition") covering the various things a novice needs to learn. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, the cantor Father Edward gave us a singing class.

We worked from 2.00 to 4.30 p.m., returned and prepared for Vespers around 5.10, followed by fifteen minutes of meditation, then supper. At 7.00 p.m. we went to the novitiate chapel where Father Robert gave thoughts for meditation, then to chapter for the reading before Compline, to church for Compline and the examination of conscience, and then to bed at 8.00.

On Sunday the schedule was similar except that there was no work. We rose at 1.30 a.m. and sang the entire office of Vigils except for the responsories after the readings. There was an extra community Mass after Prime and before chapter, called the Matutinal Mass, and the abbot's talk was usually longer on Sundays. There would be more announcements in

chapter also, because the lay brothers would be present on that day. In 1942 the community had the custom of saying the rosary in common in church before Vespers on Sunday. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed Vespers then, as it still does today, in some monasteries at least.

The third day after my entry into the community, 16 July, was the feast of St. Stephen Harding, third abbot of Citeaux and the one responsible for giving the Cistercian Order its structure back in the early part of the twelfth century. We rose at 1.00 a.m., sang the entire office of Vigils and Lauds, including the twelve responsories after the twelve readings at Vigils. There was a Pontifical Mass, too. Father Robert asked me afterwards whether I found the functions long. Just the contrary, they seemed to move along rapidly and carried me with them. In fact, with the exception of Holy Week (the Palm Sunday Mass in particular), I never found the ceremonies long, and Holy Week is supposed to be penitential anyway. As Merton put it: "There is not much use in making long speeches about our pains, especially on Good Friday" (*SJ*, p. 38).

It was a full schedule and it is easy to understand how one who was seeking solitude as Merton was would find it too full. But Merton had the grace to stick it out, to trust in God's wisdom even though it seemed to be contrary to his own view of his needs, and in the end he was rewarded for his fidelity. He quite rightly termed life at Gethsemani "active contemplation" (*SSM*, p. 389). It was contemplative in that the monks were not engaged in the active ministry outside the monastery, but there was plenty of activity within the monastery, and this distressed him.

Some asked why he stayed, why he didn't just leave if he thought the Carthusians had so much to attract him. One reason was the war. There was no regular transportation to any country where there were Carthusian monasteries. I think that the real answer, though, is that, while God's call leaves one free, it is insistent and demanding, as St. Paul experienced: "The love of Christ compels us" (2 Corinthians 5: 14). How can one refuse Christ after He has done so much for us? Those who have experienced and answered Christ's call will understand. To others it will remain a mystery why people who obviously could have succeeded in a career turn their backs on it and embrace a life seemingly so contrary to their inclinations: As Merton said: "I could never make a move unless I had some positive indication that it was the will of God. And I have no such indication" (*SJ*, p. 61).

## THE HABIT DOESN'T MAKE THE MONK, BUT IT HELPS

I had been in the community only two days when I found a white habit in the dormitory on my return from work. It included not only the outer garments, but also what Merton called "fifteenth-century underwear" (*SSM*, p. 384). It took a little time, but I finally figured it out and put it on. Several monks had trouble from varicose veins, and some developed phlebitis and varicose ulcers as a result of the tourniquet effect of the garter strings used to support the stockings. Fortunately, wiser counsel prevailed and we now buy normal underwear.

When I returned from the dormitory in the new habit, I was directed to the room known as "the grand parlor." There my hair was clipped right down to the scalp, while Father Robert made some remarks about saving it for relics. The grand parlor was neither grand nor what one would think of as a parlor. It was more like a locker room than anything else, the place where we changed shoes for work. The name came from the fact that it was a place where one was permitted to speak with superiors, called *grand* because it was the principal one in the house and *parlor* because the French word *parloir* means a place to speak.

Clothed and shorn I went to Father Robert's office. He turned the crank on the telephone and then asked the abbot what my name was to be. It couldn't be my baptismal name, Charles, since there already was a Frater Charles in the community. Father Robert had previously suggested that I might get a name like Paphnutius or Melchisedech, so I was in suspense. Father Robert finished speaking with the abbot, hung up the phone, and told me my name would be "Benjamin." He said the abbot told him that I was the first in the community to bear that name, so I became Benjamin I.

Work for the novices varied, but when I first entered it usually consisted in attacking weeds with hoes in the vegetable garden, vineyard, and cornfields. On Saturdays the novices swept the church. From time to time there would be a field of hay to load on wagons by hand with pitchforks. And on rainy days, there was the woodshed.

## MONASTIC MENUS

Meals were plain but substantial. *Mixt* was the monastic equivalent of breakfast. Originally monks ate only one meal a day, or two on days they did not fast. That meant that even on big feasts they ate nothing until noon. But mitigation came along. At first a drink was allowed in the morning, but no solid food. Then the drink was thickened with broken-up pieces of bread *mixed* in, hence the name *mixt*. Finally the bread was simply served

separately. During the heat of summer, and throughout the year for those who needed something extra, butter or cheese or fruit might be added, the addition being called *relief* at Gethsemani, *indulgence* in some other English speaking monasteries. Postulants were usually "on relief," as were those who had just left the infirmary.

Meat was never served in the refectory, even as relief. Ambulatory patients who needed such food were fed in the infirm refectory, a small dining room adjoining the community refectory. For those confined to the infirmary, meals were carried on trays. Eggs were served only as relief with a few exceptions, such as to a priest who had to fast late in order to celebrate a late Mass, or maybe on a monk's feast day.

The usual drink was a homemade beverage concocted from roasted barley, soy beans, or heaven knows what. On Sundays and feasts real coffee was often served. The serving cups were homemade, constructed from tin cans, and held a quart. The cups used for drinking were made of pottery with two handles, and it was prescribed that you use both hands for drinking. Wine or other alcoholic beverages were not served to the community, but sometimes were given to visiting European abbots who were accustomed to wine at home. Before Prohibition, wine had been served at Gethsemani on some feasts, but after the repeal of Prohibition the use of wine was never restored in the refectory.

*Dinner* consisted of two cooked portions, each served in a one quart bowl, normally one bowl of soup and one bowl of vegetables, with the soup usually made from the previous day's leftovers. Except on fast days of the Church, dessert was added, a dish of applesauce or rhubarb perhaps, or sometimes even candy which had been sent to members of the community by relatives. The custom was that the monk was informed of the gift so that he could thank the giver, and then it went to the kitchen to be used as dessert on feast days.

*Supper*, during the summer and on Sundays and feasts throughout the year, consisted of one cooked portion and a dessert. At both dinner and supper one could have all the bread one wanted. At these meals also there was reading, and a long grace was sung in common before and after these meals. After dinner there was a procession to the church where the grace was completed. There was no reading and grace was said by each individual monk in private at *mixt*, *frustulum*, and *collation*, which were not official meals.

After 14 September until Easter, except on Sundays and major feasts, *mixt* was no longer served, but was replaced by *frustulum*, two ounces of



bread and the usual drink. Instead of supper there was *collation*, six ounces of bread and a dish of fruit or something similar. The name *collation* originated from the *Collationes*, or *Conferences*, of Cassian, a standard work of ancient monasticism where Cassian recounts his conversations with the Desert Fathers in Egypt. This book was specifically mentioned by St. Benedict as suitable for reading before Compline (*RB* 42: 3). When the hour of the meal was advanced on fast days, a light snack began to be given during the reading before Compline so that the monks would not go to bed with empty stomachs. It was later separated from the reading and served in the refectory, but kept the name *collation* from the title of the book.

Each monk had his two-handled cup, knife, wooden fork and spoon, and a napkin which was used as a tablecloth. There was also a metal plate and a wooden serving spoon at each one's place, and a jug of water and a supply of salt for each two monks.

I never knew Merton to complain of the meals, but he never complained of anything. As for me, the fact that I went from 165 to 190 pounds during my novitiate would have made my complaints sound rather hollow. Furthermore, both Merton and I found the diet healthy for our teeth, as did many others in the community. Merton had been rejected for military service because of the condition of his teeth and I had dozens of fillings in mine. But we found that our diet in the monastery caused dramatic improvement. Monks are human and sometimes complain about the food. I remember the horrible face that the postulant next to me made at one of the portions served a day or two after I entered. Father Raymond records that the meals upset some abbots visiting from Europe, physically as well as psychically.<sup>11</sup> One of them, Dom Gabriel Sortais, later to become Abbot General, told the prior that he ate better in a Nazi concentration camp.

#### MONASTIC SILENCE

Silence was considered important at Gethsemani, although there have been exaggerated stories about Trappist silence. For one thing, we never took a "vow of silence." But the rule was quite strict. Not only was speaking forbidden but also communication by writing. One was permitted to communicate only by sign language. Furthermore, it was forbidden for novices to make signs to the professed and vice versa, as a means of complying with Canon 564 of the 1918 *Code of Canon Law* which required separation of the novices from the professed.

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11. Father Raymond, *The Less Traveled Road*, p. 205.

Some monks did go to excess in making signs, and occasionally when someone got excited he would utter words along with his signs, but in general there was a good spirit of silence in the community, something that Merton appreciated. With his lively sense of humor, he could set the whole group laughing, but, once the tension was relieved, would return to the business at hand. It was obvious that he felt we had more important things to do than to “gab” with our fingers.

#### HE FINISHED HIS COURSE IN A SHORT TIME

The Trappist Order is not engaged in the active apostolate. Even if we make foundations in mission lands, it is not to do missionary work as commonly understood. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that monasteries engage in no apostolate, that we are indifferent to spreading the gospel, that we are intent only on our own conversion and have no care for that of anyone else. First, even the most zealous missionary must be intent first of all on his or her own conversion. One cannot share with others what one does not possess. The difference between our order and missionary institutes is that we do not actively seek out the lost sheep, but we certainly are eager to help any who stray our way. How could one do less and claim to love the Lord who died for them? Most often it is a stray sheep from the Roman Catholic fold who finds its way back to the Good Shepherd after a visit to one of our monasteries. Sometimes it is one who has spent a lifetime in pursuing the pointless existence we call “the rat race,” who finally discovers that we do have a Father in heaven and that this crazy phenomenon called life actually does have meaning and is worth living.

A remarkable incident of this kind occurred at Gethsemani in the summer of 1942, a week after the feast of St. Stephen toward the end of July. Thomas Merton's brother, John Paul Merton, nearly four years younger than Tom, had become a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and came to visit his brother at Gethsemani before going overseas. Merton tells what happened in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SSM, pp. 394-400). Dom Frederic recounted the event in chapter, but my recollection of what he said on that occasion is quite vague. One of Dom Frederic's failings was his tendency to be cryptic when making announcements, often leaving his hearers in the dark as to what he was actually trying to communicate. As Merton said on another occasion: “His speech threw little light on what was about to take place” (SJ, p. 67).

Jumping ahead nine months in the story, Easter came as late as it can ever come in 1943 — 25 April. And so on a nice warm spring day, it wasn't

much of a penance to go barefoot on Good Friday as was the custom. It was even a bit of relief to give one's feet some fresh air. But Easter brought sorrow to Merton, at least naturally speaking. His sadness at John Paul's death must have been mingled, however, with the joy of knowing that he was spending his first Easter as a Catholic united to the Risen Lord, never again to be separated. John Paul Merton was born to eternal life on 17 April 1943 when his plane crashed into the North Sea (*SSM*, p. 401).

When a parent or brother or sister of a member of the community dies, there are prayers prescribed to be said for the deceased by each member of the community. A formal announcement was made in chapter by the cantor, and a notice was posted on the bulletin board. In this case it said: "The regular prayers are requested for the brother of our Frater Louis." It always seemed so impersonal. It was forbidden to speak a word of consolation or to write a note, except through a superior. About all one could do was to make the signs, "I pray for your brother." But such small expressions of sympathy were greatly appreciated, saying as they did, "I'd like to say more, but I know you're as zealous for our observances as I, and our fidelity will do more than any merely human support could."

#### THE MAKING OF A MONK

Not long after my arrival, Merton made his first petition for profession. St. Benedict's *Rule* provides that the novice is to have the *Rule* read to him after he has been a novice for two months, and again six months later, and on those occasions he is asked whether he wishes to persevere (*RB* 58: 9). The *Rule* called for a one year novitiate, but the Holy See changed it to two years in the middle of the nineteenth century when it allowed our monks to solemn vows. For that reason the intervals between the petitions were also doubled to four and twelve months respectively. And so about four months after he had received the novice habit, Merton along with four others remained outside the chapter room one Sunday morning. After the chapter prayers, Father Robert stood in the middle of the chapter and announced in Latin that the *Rule* had been read to Frater Louis and Frater Urban for the first time, and to three others for the second time. The abbot replied in Latin: "*Faciant petitiones*" ("Let them bring their petitions"). They entered, prostrated full length on the floor, and the abbot asked in Latin: "What do you seek?" They replied in Latin: "The mercy of God and of the Order." They rose and the abbot reminded them of the importance of preparing well for profession, of the need for total dedication, and of the fact that it is by keeping the *Rule* and not by merely hearing it that we will

profit from it. Then he asked them if they wished to persevere, and they replied, this time in English: "Yes, Reverend Father, with the help of God's grace and the assistance of your prayers." Before the ceremony Father Robert had pointed out to me that I should watch closely as the ceremony of my reception of the novice habit would be much the same, with the addition of blessing the habit and clothing me in it.

As July 1942 ended, I began my retreat in preparation for receiving the novice habit. I was joined by Father Augustine Moore, a priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville, who was later to become the abbot of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Georgia. Father Amedeus (whom Merton called Father Apollinaris in *The Sign of Jonas*) gave us two half-hour conferences in the infirmary chapel every day, and our work was shortened to allow time to attend the conferences and to pray privately. It was the first of eight such retreats I was to make under his direction, the later ones being in preparation for profession, for minor orders, and for the subdiaconate. That meant I must have heard at least seventy-five conferences from him, and amazingly, he always had something fresh to say. It is true that he had a rather simplistic understanding of scripture, and some of what he said would make any scholar wince, for example, that Abraham was born 1,959 years after the creation of the world. Merton reproached himself for making a face at that remark (*SJ*, p. 97). But his piety and obvious total dedication supplied what he lacked in erudition. "I'm a catechist, not a theologian," he said of himself once. He did a good job of preparing us for the graces of the coming events of our monastic lives. Father Augustine received the novice habit August 2. I had to wait because the Constitution required a postulancy of at least one month. I had entered on July 8, and so was qualified to receive the novice habit on Sunday, August 9.

How were relations between Merton and the rest of the community? I personally got on fine with him, as did most of the others. One of the novices did make me signs that I understood to mean that Merton had to be handled carefully as he was very touchy, but I was a new arrival and was still learning the sign language. If I did understand correctly, however, I suspect that the novice in question may have been indiscreet and have inquired about something that was none of his business. Merton could be curt, and had no use for gossips, scandalmongers, talebearers, or for anyone who would suggest compromising his ideals. He could react with all the vehemence of his French upbringing.

Before my arrival, Merton did cause a few of the seniors to wonder what kind of postulant this was. Father M. J. McCarthy, who had been at

Gethsemani at that time and was known in religion as Father Martin, tells it as he recalls it. He was Father Robert's assistant in 1944, but left the Order and became a priest of the Diocese of Albany, New York. He wrote as follows about Merton's first days in the community: "Hardly had he entered the monastery than some of the 'dyed in the wool' inmates asked themselves who was this cocky fellow who seemed to be lording it over all his companions . . . : [H]is haughty and arrogant demeanor . . . turned me off."<sup>12</sup>

I would say that he had a bit of an impish tone to his voice, almost a smirk, and I can understand how it could sound arrogant to one who did not know him. Readers can judge for themselves if they have an opportunity to hear any of his recorded talks. It was always there. He habitually handled serious topics with a light touch because he refused to take himself too seriously, and had some apprehension of "giving edification." He was not above teasing with other monks and enjoying an occasional practical joke. He enjoyed it most of all when the joke was on him. Once in chapter he pointed out another's mistake, and added: "It's dangerous to do things like that with stupid people like me around." Someone misunderstood and took Merton to task for calling the other stupid. Dom Frederic immediately corrected the misunderstanding by saying: "No, he's talking about himself." Merton's comment afterwards was: "See what I mean?" For another example, read his story about his attempt to drive a Jeep (*SJ*, p. 258).

A month or so after I became a novice, Father Robert celebrated the fortieth anniversary of his entry into the Order. Merton was delegated to write a card to be signed by all the novices. I wondered why he, one of the juniors, was selected, but I understood when I read and signed it. He obviously had the gift of putting words together. He was always picked to draft collective notes as long as he was in the novitiate, and he always fulfilled the task brilliantly.

### CORN TIME

Time flies in a monastery. Soon it was September and corn time. The fast of the Order began on 14 September and there was no more supper in the evening, only collation. The students had a month's vacation from studies and spent the time harvesting corn instead of attending classes. It was also the time of the Great Tricenary, thirty days of prayer for the dead,

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12. M. J. McCarthy, "The Real Thomas Merton," *The Evangelist* [Albany, New York] (17 October 1974).

lasting from 18 September through 17 October, when the non-priest monks were to say ten psalters for the deceased (*SJ*, p. 69).

Harvesting the corn was strictly manual work in those days. First we went into the fields and cut the stalks with knives, then tied them into shocks to dry. When all the corn had been cut, the first stalks were dry enough to husk, and the lay brothers brought them to the area between the hog house and the cow barn. We husked the corn, put the corn into the corn bin, and fed the stalks into a silage chopper that blew them into the loft of the barn to serve as fodder for the cattle. The silage chopper was driven by an ancient gas engine with two seven-foot flywheels turning about 180 revolutions per minute. The exhaust gave a steady, slow, and loud "pop pop," about ninety pops a minute, hardly conducive to quiet meditation. The monster broke its crankshaft a year or two later and was retired. A quieter and more modern tractor took its place. During the harvest the time allotted to work on the daily schedule was increased, and extra food was served in the evening. It was nothing fancy, but extra work meant extra appetite. Even the simplest addition to the menu was welcome.

#### THE ANNUAL RETREAT

The corn was finished in November and soon it was Advent and time for the community's annual retreat. That year the Redemptorist Father Menth was retreat master. Merton had entered a year earlier, just after the end of the community's retreat, and so it was the first community retreat for both of us. I was a bit surprised to find no mention of it in any of his writings, but Merton does not often mention retreats, possibly because he found it more prudent not to do so as long as the retreat master was alive, or maybe because his thoughts at that time were too personal and writing them would be tantamount to betraying the secrets of his Lord. But he did say: "All retreats do me good" (*SJ*, p. 315).

As a disciple of St. Alphonsus, the prince of moral theologians, Father Menth stressed the active way of the spiritual life. He began by telling of the world's corruption, of sin and the need for reparation. "The strictest kind of strict observance," was the way he put it. He emphasized the need for methodical meditation, said that few of us even got out of the purgative way here below. He added that meditation is not the same as mental movies — like dreaming of writing one's autobiography which becomes a bestselling spiritual book, and then the dome of St. Peter's lights up as one is canonized — empty dreaming when one should be busy trying to discover and eradicate one's faults. He spoke of the silly quest for

academic degrees. "The only degrees I have besides C.Ss.R.," he said, "are D.B.H., dumb but happy, and L.L.L., the last, the lowest, the least." And here was Merton who, in a few years, would publish the autobiography which he was already writing (and indeed it did become a bestseller), who was upset at the statement in the *Spiritual Directory* that God occasionally "vouchsafes" mystic graces to a few souls, who had an M.A. from Columbia and had begun work toward his Ph.D. But it was a good retreat, the ascetic and purgative orientation of the retreat suited many in the community quite well, and Father Menth came up with some gems, such as "We are what our thoughts are," something that suits the loftiest mystic as well as any beginner.

Father Robert seemed in his direction of novices to stress the ascetical. I believe the reason he acted thus was that he had had too much experience with illusions held by novices, and so found it wise to insist on the need for asceticism and to tell us to leave mysticism alone. For example, the book *The Ways of Mental Prayer*, by Dom Vital Lehodey was required reading for the novices, but only Part One and Part Two, dealing with the purgative and illuminative ways respectively. We were to avoid Part Three, the unitive way. When I read Part Three later, I doubted the wisdom of not allowing novices to read it, expressing as it does the universal call to contemplation that should be the normal development of the spiritual life for one who truly seeks God. Furthermore, the author shows that this is the universal teaching of the best theologians and masters of the spiritual life.<sup>13</sup> This was Merton's teaching also.<sup>14</sup> It became a topic on which Merton had occasion to cross swords, in a friendly sort of way, with Father Raymond who seemed afraid that Merton tried to make it look too easy in his autobiography.<sup>15</sup> It was a topic on which they continued to differ. Father Raymond says it was the beginning of years of hassle between them, but it remained a friendly debate. More will be said about the relationship of these two writers later.

### CONFESSORS

The novice master is the primary spiritual director of the novices, but the influence of the confessors is important, too. Father Gerard was the

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13. Vital Lehodey, *The Ways of Mental Prayer* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Sons, 1933), p. 222.

14. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 225. See also *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 38.

15. Father Raymond, *Forty Years Behind the Wall* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1979), pp. 9, 118-119.

ordinary confessor of the novices during our novitiate, and was also the infirmarian. His was a strongly active type of spirituality, and I sometimes wondered if he were disappointed when I came to him without many problems. I've always found that problems come soon enough without our looking for them. Also, I always found Father Gerard's advice helpful.

In addition to the ordinary confessor, there was an extraordinary confessor to whom all novices were required to go during the *ember weeks*, four times a year. Father Odo had that function in 1941, and Merton arrived in December just in time to make his confession to Father Odo, who made such an impression on Merton that he mentions him frequently in his writings, and returned to him repeatedly for guidance (*SSM*, p. 383). By the time I arrived, Father Odo had been confined to the infirmary by his asthmatic condition, and so I had no contact with him while I was a novice. He used to be brought to chapter in a wheelchair, and was seated close to the abbot where he could hear what was being said, as his hearing was also impaired.

Father James was the extraordinary confessor of the novices in 1942, and Father Lambert followed him in 1943. I've already mentioned Father James. Father Lambert was a former Benedictine of St. Meinrad's Abbey who became a Trappist after forty years as a Benedictine. A rotund, jovial monk, he never gave anyone a chance to sleep during his sermons. He was full of stories and irrepressible wit. Merton gave him the pseudonym "Father Largus" in *The Sign of Jonas*. He came from New Albany, Indiana, where he was a boyhood friend of Cardinal Ritter ("His dad was the baker, mine was the butcher," he said.) He taught Latin to the students at Gethsemani. After my first confession to him during the Lenten Ember Days in 1943, he said, "Well, they won't write on your epitaph what some priest friends of mine said they were going to write for one priest we knew, 'no runs, no hits, no errors'." He went on to tell me what he liked about life at Gethsemani, especially the feeling of equality among all the members of the community. The brothers were every bit as important in the eyes of all as were the priests. Whether one could sing well or not, one was encouraged to give one's voice in choir. And prayer was taken seriously, too. Nothing is preferred to the Work of God, as St. Benedict directs in his *Rule* (*RB* 43: 3). And referring to Merton and to several others, "Do you notice how many converts we have in our community? I guess they are like the kid who starts to play baseball and right away wants to play in the big leagues."

Father James became abbot of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, then he became abbot of Gethsemani. Father Gerard became abbot of Our Lady of



the Genesee. But Father Lambert just remained a monk. He liked Father Menth's L.L.L., last, lowest, least, and often signed his notes, "Fr. M. Lambert, L.L.L."

#### MONASTIC HEAT

During the winter months we novices spent more time in the woodshed trying to satisfy the ravenous appetites of a half dozen boilers and several wood stoves. In those days we ran a nearly self-sufficient operation. We heated with wood, cooked with wood, ran the laundry and the mill with wood. Since then Gethsemani has switched to LP gas, and so is at the mercy of the oil industry like nearly everyone else. The woods have lost their importance except as a source of lumber and as a place of solitude.

Merton mentions that the monastery was not overheated in winter.<sup>16</sup> Dom Frederic once said when some question concerning the heating plant came up for discussion, "We don't heat to keep the place warm, just to keep it from getting too cold." The radiators in church did make plenty of noise, blackened the walls, but the heat was not particularly noticeable. The wood kept us warm at least in the woodshed while we sawed and split it.

#### "THE WHOLE LIFE OF A MONK SHOULD BE A LENT"

Lent in a monastery has a character all its own as I learned in 1943, my first experience of a Trappist Lent. Of course, there was the fasting. St. Benedict begins the forty-ninth chapter of his *Rule* by saying that the whole life of a monk should be a Lent (*RB* 49: 1). Many say it is, with no meat, continual silence, no recreation, austere diet. But even apart from the fasting a monk would always know that it was Lent because the whole schedule was changed. As for meals, the *frustulum* was still available on request, but most of the monks did not eat it during Lent. It was not on the official schedule in the book of *Usages*. Dessert disappeared from the dinner table and the noon meal was half an hour later. Actually the fasts as practiced in the Order at that time, even though more severe than generally practiced in the Church, represented a considerable mitigation from those observed at Gethsemani fifty years earlier. The fasts then were as prescribed in the *Rule* of St. Benedict. Dom Augustine de Lestrangé had restored the primitive fasts when he founded his community in exile at La Val Sainte in Switzerland during the French Revolution. The congregation

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16. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. viii.

of Trappists to which Gethsemani belonged had remained faithful to them. Some other monasteries had not, but had returned to the less austere regimen of De Rance's La Trappe. In 1892, when the three congregations of Trappists reunited at the request of Pope Leo XIII to become the present order, the question of which lenten program should be observed naturally came up for discussion. The sentiment was strong for making the primitive rule the norm, but the Holy See intervened and insisted that we adopt the less austere norm of De Rance. "So the rule says you may not eat before Vespers," the Pope's representative might have said, "then move Vespers up into the morning like others do who follow the *Rule* of St. Benedict or who use the *Roman Breviary*."

And so, during my first Lent in 1943, Vespers was said about 11.30 a.m., and dinner was at noon. Collation was added in the evening. That meant that the whole Divine Office except Compline had to be squeezed into the morning. The High Mass in Lent was sung after None, but None was early in the morning so the fast was not exceptionally long for the priest who celebrated it. Most people, however, found the program austere enough. Father Raymond wrote: "I must say that if we use the word *fast* regarding the Jesuits, we will have to use some other word for the monks. The closest would be *starve*. That is the way I felt that first Lent at Gethsemani."<sup>17</sup> Still it was nowhere near the earlier regimen, when there was but one meal a day, taken in the evening after Vespers. The monks worked all day on an empty stomach, and the priest who sang the High Mass after None had to keep the strict Eucharistic fast, not even drinking water from midnight until 2 or 3 p.m., and would have to do it every day for an entire week.

Then there was the Lenten Reading. On the first Sunday of Lent there was in chapter a large table covered with books, one for each member of the community. In each book a slip was inserted with the name of the monk for whom the book was intended. The books were selected by the abbot, and nobody knew what book he would be given until the cantors distributed them. Most of the books were standard spiritual classics, such as the works of Alphonse Rodriguez, St. Francis de Sales, or Dom Frederic's favorite author, Frederick William Faber. For those whose first language was not English, it might be a book in that monk's native tongue. Lenten reading lasted forty-five minutes and filled the time slot taken by Vespers during the rest of the year. It was also a time of special silence, and the abbot

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17. Father Raymond, *Forty Years Behind the Wall*, p. 64.

was in the scriptorium along with everyone else for this exercise.

It may have been on one of the feasts or on one of the last three days of Holy Week during this Lent, a day when the entire Office of Vigils was sung, when Merton and I were assigned to sing one of the responsories together. He and I had one thing in common, excellent singing voices, at least as far as volume was concerned (*SSM*, p. 388). Quality, well that's something else. Father Robert once said to me afterward: "You two were *yelling*, not *singing*!" After our profession both of us were made assistant cantor at one time or another with the hope that the quality might improve if we were next to the cantor, and that our leather lungs might help the cantor to have enough volume in the middle to be heard the whole length of the choir. There were thirty monks strung out in a single line on each side of the choir, and so it was often hard to keep everyone together.

#### AUTHORIZED TO AUTHOR

The Constitutions prohibited studies during the first year of the novitiate, but allowed them in the second year provided they did not interfere with the proper formation of the novices. As this was interpreted at Gethsemani, novices were not allowed to join the philosophy or theology classes, but could study Latin in their second year of novitiate. Classes were conducted every morning during the work period with Father Lambert as one of the teachers. For those who needed more Latin than could be taught in the second year of novitiate, the classes continued after profession. Merton had completed a full classical course and had done work on the graduate level, so he did not join the class. Instead he spent his morning work time in the novitiate common room. It was then that he began his career as a monastic author.

As I also had completed a classical course in seminary in Detroit and was ready to begin philosophy when my first year of novitiate was finished, I was given special assignments, particularly typing. I remember one such assignment which Merton records (*SSM*, p. 401). Gethsemani had entered a contract to translate the work of St. John Eudes for the publication of a new edition. Several of the monks had been assigned volumes to translate, and Merton was given *The Kingdom of Jesus in Christian Souls*. The publishers had allowed only a short time for the work to be completed, and so I was assigned to help Merton meet the deadline. I typed the finished copy in triplicate as Merton dashed off the original on sheets of yellow paper. He managed to finish, but with little time to spare. I was always a page or two behind. I just couldn't seem to catch up. He turned out pages at a furious

pace and passed them to me. One reason I never quite caught up was the fact that he did not have the most legible hand in the world. If illegible handwriting is a mark of genius, Merton's IQ must have been way up there. And too, he was doing this in a hurry and under pressure. It often took some time to decipher what he had written. With the short time available I tried to figure it out myself and decided it would be better not to ask him for clarification if at all possible. Despite the rush, however, Merton again showed his mastery of the English language, and I frequently made him a sign at the end of a session that I liked some particularly felicitous rendering of the French. It certainly did not sound frenchified. Of course, he couldn't do much with the content, typical of the Baroque era when St. John Eudes wrote. The saint had a special love of the number thirty-four in honor of the thirty-four years of Christ's life on earth, and the book contained an elaborate assortment of acts for every conceivable situation — all long, flowery, and ornate.

When the work was finished and delivered to the publisher, I told Father Robert that I thought Merton had done an excellent job of translating. Father Robert told me that the publisher agreed and said that it was the best translation of any of the works of St. John Eudes that he had seen.<sup>18</sup> As the name Thomas Merton would have meant nothing at that time, the translation was published without mentioning the translator's name.

Another translation project at this time where I was asked to assist Merton was that of a series of articles in *Collectanea Cisterciensia* by Father Seraphim Lenssen of Tilburg Abbey in Holland. It was a historical study of the veneration of Cistercian saints in the Cistercian Order.<sup>19</sup> This was a strictly scholarly project, a study well ballasted with copious footnotes. In addition to providing a translation for the benefit of those interested but unable to read French, Merton produced an abridgement for use in refectory reading for the community. This was strictly in-house authorship, not intended for publication.

He was, however, also writing for publication. It was about this time that Dom Frederic set him to work writing the life of a French Trappistine, Mother Mary Berchmans who, as a young religious, was "volunteered" by her convent's chaplain to go to Our Lady of the Angels in Japan. She was to become a nun of exceptional holiness. It took him three years to complete

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18. John Eudes, *The Kingdom and Life of Jesus in Christian Souls* (New York: Kenedy, 1946).

19. Seraphim Lenssen, "Apercu historique sur la veneration des saints cisterciens dans l'Ordre de Citeaux," *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorem* 6 (1939), pp. 7-34, 167-195, 261-275. Additional articles were published after World War II, but we did not translate them.

this biography. He did not spend all that time in writing it. He had several other projects underway. It finally appeared in 1948, shortly before *The Seven Storey Mountain*, under the title *Exile Ends in Glory*.<sup>20</sup> Father Raymond says he gave this three word review of it to Merton, "Tom, this stinks!"<sup>21</sup> Merton himself did not think too highly of it (*SJ*, p. 54). I personally would say that it was somewhat above average as hagiography, but certainly not outstanding. One other writing project in which Merton was involved at this time was known only to the abbot and the novice master, as far as I know. He was writing some of the poems that would appear in *Thirty Poems* (published in 1944) which would make the name Thomas Merton known in the literary world.

To the rest of us Merton was just Frater Louis, one of the novices, doing his job, minding his own business, a pleasant companion. During the summer of 1943 he made his second petition for profession. I had witnessed the ceremony many times now, and it always seemed like the final eight months of novitiate flew by after that. It seemed like the novice who had just made his second petition was almost immediately proposed for profession, the votes were taken, and the profession followed in a few days. It was just one more example of the way time flies in a monastery. Merton's case was no exception, and I was to find later that neither was my own.

The annual retreat of 1943 was preached by Father Thomas Kilduff, O.C.D. It's too bad that Merton recorded no personal observations on either of the community retreats of his novitiate. It would have been interesting to compare his reactions to the disciple of St. Alphonsus, prince of moral theologians, to his reactions to the disciple of St. John of the Cross, prince of mystical theologians. While not neglecting the basics, Father Thomas faithfully followed St. John of the Cross in pointing the way to genuine contemplation. The basic turn away from evil to good is essential, but it is only the beginning. Nothing less than total gift of self is worthy of the religious. This was Merton's view, too, but he records nothing special about it at this point. Possibly one reason is that the end of 1943 in a sense fits in between *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which deals mainly with his life up to his entry into *Gethsemani*, and *The Sign of Jonas*, which tells about his life after his first vows.

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20. Thomas Merton, *Exile Ends in Glory* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1948).

21. Father Raymond, *Forty Years Behind the Wall*, p. 6.

## THE WAR AND THE NOVICES

Compared to our brethren in many countries, we at Gethsemani were blessed, singularly blessed. It was the time of World War II, but we hardly knew there was a war. At Gethsemani, we had no newspapers, no radios. About all the news we received was what our relatives told us. We could hear the guns booming at Fort Knox as artillerymen were being trained. Many of the visitors at the monastery were in uniform, but I wonder how many of us knew the difference between a sergeant major and a drum major. I had registered for the draft the week before I left for Gethsemani, and had given Gethsemani as my address. That turned out to be a wise move, as the only further contact I had with the draft board was to receive the questionnaire. The draft board in Bardstown, Kentucky, worked closely with Gethsemani, appreciated the needs of the monks, and so everything went quite smoothly.

Rationing caused few problems, except for those who had to cope with the paperwork involved. There were "T" stickers on the windshields of our trucks, but few of us understood what they meant. We just drove our trucks up to the monastery's gas pump and filled the tank whenever needed. We were allowed more sugar than we could actually use, especially with fifty colonies of bees working for us. Our shoemaker extended the life of our shoes so well that everybody remained well shod despite wartime restrictions. Coffee was served so rarely that we never came close to using up our allotments. As for meat, my mother once wrote me, "You don't get meat, we can't!"

There were a few reminders of the war, however, besides the guns at Fort Knox. We grew hemp for rope, and had detailed instructions from the government to make sure that nobody got any marijuana. One frequent reminder was a request for prayers for someone killed or missing. The prayer in the Missal "For time of war" was added in every Mass, and every evening after the *Salve Regina* we sang the motet *Parce Domine*, "Spare your people, Lord."

The size of the novitiate was another reminder. With the military taking just about every able-bodied young man except those employed in critical civilian positions, few could come to try their vocations with us. By the end of the war the novitiate had dwindled down to about ten. Even there the war's impact was not serious, as many of our monasteries would have counted themselves incredibly blessed to have ten novices at one time. There were remarkable men among them, too. Merton, of course. There were four who were to become abbots, and most of the others

became priors, cellarers, and novice masters. Much of the credit must be given to the enlightened guidance given by Father Robert. With a smaller group he was able to give each one more personal attention. He was willing to learn from the novices, too. I noticed a more affective turn to his direction, a turn away from the legalism often found in the spiritual books of the period. Perhaps some of this was due to Merton's influence, but, as I said, there were other outstanding men in the novitiate. Father Robert was doing his own studying and reflecting. He would never feel that he had complete mastery and merely had to pass it on.

He remarked to me more than once that St. John of the Cross as novice master was able to lead his novices to infused contemplation in a matter of months. He realized, of course, that infused contemplation is a pure gift of God, but wondered if he was failing in some way to dispose us to receive it. I didn't know enough about the subject at the time to say anything, but on looking back and calling to mind some of the monks who were novices under Father Robert, I'd say he did a good job of disposing them, for they were ready when the Spirit began to take over in their lives. It didn't often happen in the novitiate, however, but some years later.

Father Robert was anything but a legalist. His talks on the liturgy, for instance, were definitely not talks on rubrics, and in those days liturgy was too often considered a subdivision of canon law. For the most part he left the rubrics to his assistant, leaving himself free to concentrate on the inner meaning of the rites. In the same way, in discussing the rules of the Order, its history, and its customs, he always looked for the spiritual side. Our group was one of the last he was to direct for the full term of the novitiate, for he was sent to Utah to assist in the foundation of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity in 1947, and was elected abbot of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Georgia in 1948.

When the country went on war time, moving all the clocks up an hour, Gethsemani kept its clocks running on Central Standard Time. This was not a protest against the war, nor an expression of contempt for the foolishness that thinks that advancing the clock will add any length to the day. It was strictly practical. In summer we retired at 8 p.m. Moving the time of retiring an hour earlier would have meant going to bed an hour before sunset in June and July, and so it was decided to leave the clocks alone and continue to follow the schedule as before. It did cause some confusion to guests, however, with "monks time" running an hour later than "war time."

## TWENTY-TWO TICKETS TO GEORGIA

The monastic grapevine was active as 1943 drew to a close and 1944 began. Dom Frederic made several trips to Atlanta to negotiate purchase of Honey Creek Plantation as a site for a new monastery. It seemed a good location, far enough from the city to keep the world away, and yet near enough to provide the necessary contacts. He did not foresee the suburban sprawl that now, forty-eight years later, threatens to engulf the monastery. As deals were settled and arrangements were made, Dom Frederic disclosed the results. But he continued to play his cards close to his chest as was his custom, and so the rumors continued to circulate.

1 January 1944 brought the annual shuffling of appointments. It was Dom Frederic's practice to make all the appointments in the monastery for one year at a time. Some, like those of novice master or cantor or secretary, tended to be more or less permanent and were repeated every year, although occasionally there would be a surprise even here. Other offices were changed every year or two, including especially that of prior (he said, "This will help you know how to vote when it comes time to choose my successor"). Toward the end of December, speculation on what would happen on 1 January always provided grist for the rumor mill. One time Father James, speaking to the community shortly before the annual shake-up, advised his hearers, "If you don't get what you like, try and like what you get."

Each year on 1 January, after the chapter prayers had been said, Dom Frederic preached the sermon for the Feast of the Circumcision. As on other occasions, some of the monks might succumb to a hazard of the monastic life, sleeping during sermons. But when the 1 January sermon ended, all were wide awake. This year in particular we were all alert, as the new assignments could give a clue as to the probable makeup of the new foundation. There were plenty of clues, but clues that were interpreted differently by different monks, with the result that it was still mostly guesswork. Then there were monks who didn't speculate — "God's will be done."

Dom Frederic had consulted with his council before this, and some of his plans were known to its members, but the members of the council were monks who knew how to keep a secret. He had asked the future superior to examine the proposed list of personnel, had removed a name or two that the future superior had found unacceptable, had added some that he wanted, but, as he said in chapter, "I'm certainly not giving him all that he wants, otherwise we wouldn't have anyone left here at home!" It was



still supposed to be a secret who would be the superior, but everyone knew the answer. It was obvious. Father James had been consulting with the abbot so often, was seen every day in the vault (where Merton was later to do his writing) packing boxes and checking lists, and was so obviously the man best qualified for the job, that speculation on that question had practically ceased.

19 March was the day of Merton's simple profession, when he bound himself by vows for three years. Actually it was a renewal of vows he had already made privately to the abbot over a year earlier, on 21 December 1942 (*SSM*, p. 400). In most cases, having novices make profession would be the most significant event of the day. But not that day. On 19 March, after Merton had pronounced and signed his vows, had been given the black scapular and white cowl, and had resumed his seat in the chapter room, all attention was given to Dom Frederic as he read the list of those selected for the Georgia foundation. In general, it was as much a surprise to those picked as it was to everyone else. Dom Frederic did not feel any obligation to ask whether they would accept, as he thought their vow of obedience already covered that. On this point he was later to learn that he was mistaken, because the General Chapter of 1901 had ruled that an abbot may not order a religious to form part of a group destined to found a new monastery, a ruling for some reason omitted in the English translation made at Gethsemani. When his superiors showed him the ruling, he accepted the correction, and permission was granted to any who so wished to return to Gethsemani. A few returned but nearly all stayed. On subsequent foundations, and in the case of additional monks sent to Georgia, the consent of those concerned was always asked.

The monks selected certainly had short notice for two days later on the feast of St. Benedict, 21 March, Dom Frederic and twenty-one monks were driven by neighbors from Gethsemani, the monastery, to Gethsemane, the railroad station. Dom Frederic had chartered a combination baggage and passenger car, but had been unsuccessful in his effort to have the car left on the siding at the railroad station earlier in the day so that it could be loaded. It was winter, so the train's steam line was in use for heating the cars, and the railroad didn't want to have any trouble with it out in the boondocks.

When the train arrived, the conductor advised the monks that they had only ten minutes to load, but when he saw the mountain of cargo, he decided he could give them another ten minutes without running too late. And yet, ten minutes later everything was aboard. A surprised conductor

signaled the engineer, and the new community was Georgia bound. There was still work to do, however, as things had just been piled helter-skelter in the baggage compartment. So, as the train rolled on through the night, the monks set to work to put some order into the cargo and to open a passage for the trainmen to walk through to do their duties.

The following morning they were in Atlanta, and friends drove them out to their new home. Some home! The hayloft had been converted into a monastery of sorts, the animals continued to be housed below. They had plenty of fresh air that spring, as the building was anything but airtight. And when summer came, the sun beat down on the metal roof and made the interior like an oven. Someone suggested they call it "Our Lady of the Frying Pan."

The arrangement was strictly temporary. They were able to purchase a second-hand sawmill and soon were cutting pines into lumber, and were erecting a frame building to serve as a slightly less temporary monastery. Soon thereafter Dom Frederic engaged an architect to draw plans for a permanent monastery. The foundations for the permanent building had been laid while Father James was still in Georgia. When he was elected abbot of Gethsemani, he found the financial state of the two communities to be such that it was wise to halt construction temporarily. Later his successor as abbot, Father Robert, now Dom Robert, judged that the community's finances had improved enough for him to complete the building, which is an outstanding example of the possibilities of architectural concrete.

(to be continued in *The Merton Annual* 5)