

# THOMAS MERTON'S GETHSEMANI

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## PART II

### BACK TO THE BOOKS

Merton's profession was the way he liked it, quiet. But it meant a definitive step forward in his life. He was now officially committed for three years, and immediately began his formal studies in philosophy. He had not studied philosophy as such, but his wide reading on the subject, particularly in his work on the Ph.D. thesis he had planned on Gerard Manley Hopkins [*SSM*, p. 235], had given him a substantial basis on which to build, and so he was to spend only the rest of the year 1944 and the year 1945 in the philosophy class, which normally lasted three years at Gethsemani.

The class met every morning in the lay brothers' novitiate reading room. Father Timothy who taught the course had been a novice with us a year earlier, and had studied at Louvain in preparation for his ordination to the diocesan priesthood before he came to join us. He was later to be appointed to teach theology at Gethsemani, and eventually was director of students at the house of the Abbot General in Rome.

We used as text the three-volume series by J.S. Hickey, abbot of Mount Melleray in Ireland 1932-1934, a text quite widely used in seminaries in the United States at the time. The text was in Latin, but English was spoken in class, unlike some seminaries in the United States at the time where the philosophy lectures were still given in Latin. Most of our students did not have enough Latin background for

that, and some found even reading the text rough going at times. Incidentally, the use of Latin for lectures was not a peculiarity of Catholic seminaries except that they were the last to drop it. A hundred years ago it was the accepted thing that classes be taught in Latin at schools of the Ivy League, and a thorough knowledge of the language was a prerequisite for admission to college anywhere, not only at places like Princeton or Harvard or Yale.

I had already made my second petition for profession in December of 1943, and it seemed almost no time until Father Augustine, Frater Bruno, and I were proposed as candidates for simple profession. In due time the votes of the solemnly professed were taken, but we were told only that we had been accepted, how many favorable or unfavorable votes any of us received was not revealed. Father Amedeus gave us our retreat, and we made our simple vows for three years on August 15, 1944. The following day I joined Merton and three others in Father Timothy's philosophy class.

Our text seemed to follow Suarez and Rickaby more closely than anyone else. Merton, however, had taken a liking to Scotus, and his contacts with the Franciscans while teaching at St. Bonaventure's College in Olean, New York, had helped intensify that liking. And so he would stand up for Scotus when the text attempted to refute the Scotist position. Father Timothy encouraged discussion in class, as it helped make the students take a more active part in the work of learning. Merton didn't need much encouragement.

Silence was important at Gethsemani in those days. It is important in maintaining proper order in any religious community. The limits of permission to speak were therefore quite sharply drawn. Teacher and students were allowed to speak in class, but not before or after, and in class under the control of the teacher and only on matter belonging to the class. Generally this rule was well observed, but where speaking was authorized none of the group proved to be tongue-tied.

At frequent intervals students were assigned papers to write on topics covered in class. The papers might be a summary of material recently covered, development of a particular topic in which the student had a special interest, presentation of the views of other philosophers on a topic. After the student had read the paper, all the others were asked to give their comments, and general discussion of the topic followed. We always looked forward to Merton's papers, as they would be meaty but not heavy, for he already had the touch that was to make his writings popular with so many readers.

I recall two papers that he gave in the part of the course called Ontology or General Metaphysics, one on the principle of individuation, where he supported the views of Scotus, and the other on the distinction between essence and existence according to Saint Thomas. The first was the result of his defending Scotus orally in class when the topic came up in the course. Father Timothy told him, "OK, write a paper on it." The second, I believe, was a volunteer effort.

He gave another paper when we began the study of Cosmology, discussing the place of Cosmology on the spectrum of human knowledge. He showed how the scholastic treatment of Cosmology covers areas that are not ordinarily treated by courses in other institutions, or else are scattered around in so many other courses, such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, geology, that nobody gets the overview of the subject that is presented by scholastic Cosmology.

The mention of Cosmology reminds me of the day when we began to study the scholastic theory of the composition of material things, the concepts of matter and form. Father Timothy introduced it saying that philosophy uses common words, but often invests them with special meanings, and matter and form are prime examples. He listed a number of meanings that the words *matter* and *form* have in common usage, but they are not the meaning of the words as used in scholastic philosophy. He invited the students to contribute more. Some of the contributions were: *matter* as in "What's the *matter* with you?" A paper to be filled out, as in *Form 1040*. Something printed, as in reading *matter*. A wooden mold for shaping concrete, a concrete *form*. Then there was the expression, "It's only a *matter* of *form*." Merton suggested, "*Matter* reminds me of something that comes out of a boil."

On Wednesdays, Father Odilo gave the philosophy students an introductory course in New Testament Greek. As Merton and I both already studied Greek, we were exempted. I took advantage of the day to cover by private study the part of the philosophy course I had missed, with Father Timothy periodically checking on my progress. Merton went on with his literary activity, and it was probably during this time that he put the finishing touches to the writings that soon were to end his anonymity in the community. I still recall him, both in the novitiate and in the scriptorium of the professed, writing away in what looked like an old-fashioned account book, but I paid little attention to what he was doing as it was none of my business. When *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the *Sign of Jonas* appeared, however, I

finally knew what it was all about. It was a journal he was writing, but not a cash journal.

#### TOASTMASTER FOR THE JUBILEE

In August of 1944, Dom Frederic celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his entry into the Order. Pressed by the community to mark the event with some kind of real celebration, he consented, but insisted that because of the war the celebration be kept to a mere family affair. It was restrained, but a few outsiders were invited, notably Archbishop John A. Floersh of Louisville.

A dinner was served in the refectory after Mass, with the abbot's table enlarged to accommodate the invited guests. No meat was served, still it was a repast that one seldom sees in a Trappist monastery. There was a fish, also clam chowder. Captain James Kinnarney, a retired detective and one of Gethsemani's principal benefactors, helped in the kitchen. At one point in the preparation of the food, he produced a bottle of Kentucky's best bourbon and emptied the contents into the pot, saying, "Now you'll hear some speeches!"

Merton acted as reader during the meal, and read testimonials, telegrams, and congratulatory messages addressed to the abbot. At the end of the meal he introduced Archbishop Floersh, and invited the archbishop to turn the floor over to the next speaker. But after his speech the archbishop simply resumed his seat, and Merton had to introduce the rest of the speakers as well. He began with the comment, "Since the archbishop has reneged to act as toastmaster, it comes back to me to introduce...." He tells about the event in *The Sign of Jonas*, saying how the ice cream set aside for him had melted and he didn't eat the fish, and that he couldn't sleep afterward because he thought he had insulted the archbishop. In actual fact it seemed to me that he simply had not made himself sufficiently clear. The archbishop was intent on his conversation with Dom Frederic when Merton asked him to speak, and one couldn't hear too well at the head table anyway. But Merton didn't realize this, and it upset him at the time.

Kinnarney's contribution to the clam chowder didn't go unnoticed. The archbishop said to the abbot, "There's meat in that soup!" But there wasn't.

#### EXAMINATIONS AND REPORT CARDS

Like students everywhere, in addition to their classes students had also to face examinations. At Gethsemani they were conducted twice a year, in June and December. The school term ran concurrently with the calendar year and also with the abbot's appointment year. The June examinations were mid-term therefore, and the December ones were the finals. Novices also had examinations given by the novice master on the same days that the students had theirs. In addition there were the special examinations required by Canon Law to be taken by candidates for ordination to minor or major orders. These examinations were all written, at least all those I took at Gethsemani, but oral examinations were not excluded in principle.

Dom Frederic read the results of the June and December examinations in chapter as soon as they were available. He had a more or less standard speech of introduction, something like this: "A friend of mine once told me, 'I like all your cheese, but some of it is better than the rest.' I'll say the same thing about these marks. They are all good, but some of them are better than others. Why do I announce them publicly? Well, you will have to be voting on these people, so I feel it's my obligation to give you as much objective information as I can to help you decide how you will vote."

Merton was usually at the top of the class but not always; sometimes he was number two. One of the priests made me a sign once when that happened, wondering whether maybe the teacher was just trying to keep Merton humble. None of our teachers operated that way. This teacher himself told me later that there were others in class every bit as deep as Merton, but Merton had the gift of expressing his thoughts brilliantly. And after hearing some of the papers they gave, and later some of the practice sermons in the theology class, I must say that I had to agree.

The end of 1944 saw the publication of Merton's *Thirty Poems*. But at Gethsemani few knew much about it. The whole project was handled by Bob Lax, who gave the manuscript to Mark Van Doren, and the latter in turn gave it to James Laughlin at New Directions, who published it.

#### V DAY

After simple profession at Gethsemani, the custom was for the monk to continue to follow the exercises of the novitiate for a period of time, usually a month or two, determined by the abbot. The monk

would be free from attending novitiate classes, would be assigned to employments (novices ordinarily were not), would attend classes as full-time students preparing for the priesthood, and thus would make the transition from the novitiate to the community under the guidance of the novice master. Merton had left the novitiate three months before I made my profession, and around the end of September Dom Frederic announced that I would be associated with the professed.

I soon found myself acting as one of the abbot's secretaries when the workload was heavy. My work in the secretary's office brought me into frequent contact with Father Raymond, who did his writing in one corner of the office. I might occasionally meet Merton in the corridor as he was on his way to the office he shared with Father Anthony, or later to the vault. We might conduct a bit of banter in sign language, but not much. We both had work to do and not much time to do it. At this period few in the monastery knew what Merton was doing, and I was as much in the dark as anyone.

The war came closer to me in the latter part of 1944, when my brother Frank had graduated from high school, was drafted into the army and began his basic training. He was sent to Europe early in 1945. "It didn't last long after he got there," my mother boasted in a letter she wrote me shortly after the end of the war. We gathered that the Allied forces had invaded continental Europe. Then it began to be prayers for a son in Germany, so I concluded that things were doing well. Finally one day in April 1945 Dom Frederic broke the silence and announced that the war was almost over, that there were only a few pockets of resistance left, and then on Monday, May 7, it was time to announce that the Germans had formally surrendered. There was a simple thanksgiving ceremony, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament with a *Te Deum*, if I remember correctly, and life went on as usual.

There was an occasional word on how things were going in the Pacific, but not much. Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Coral Sea, Guadalcanal, and the like, were still as unknown to us as they had been to most Americans in 1939. Finally on August 15 we were told that World War II had ended. No mention was made of the atomic bomb, in fact many in the community didn't even know that it existed until months later as news trickled in.

Yes, we had often been exhorted to pray for peace. We had the oration "free time for war" in every Mass, as already mentioned. We were often asked to pray for deceased or missing friends or relatives of members of the community and of benefactors, but for that we did not need to know who was in command of the Allied forces in Europe or

whether they were still fighting in North Africa. Dom Frederic felt that our job was to pray, not to second-guess the generals.

But now the war was over and the country was returning to normal. Gethsemani simply went on as before. Contact was resumed with Europe and soon we were able to get choir books for the many men who had entered since 1939. During the war, Father Amedeus had made corrections in old, retired choir books from the library, many of which had come over from France with the founders in 1848; he also wrote supplements in manuscript. Father William kept at work in the bindery repairing and rebinding the books to extend their lives a few more years. Dom Frederic had an edition of one hundred copies of the *Cistercian Gradual* photolithographed and bound in Louisville, large folio volumes with pages eighteen inches in height, printed on one hundred percent linen paper. He somehow convinced the War Production Board to allow him to print the books.

But now the books were coming again from our monastery at Westmalle in Belgium where Cistercian liturgical books had been printed since the end of the French Revolution, and the substitutes were returned to the library. Rationing was ended, and it was possible to make the needed alterations and new construction to house the growing community. The real effects of the war on Gethsemani were not felt during the time of the actual conflict so much as during the years that followed, when young men, and some not so young, began to come in droves to join the community. Around 1950 there were ninety novices at Gethsemani.

#### A MONASTERY IS NEVER FINISHED

The influx of new vocations meant new construction and remodeling of existing buildings. The need for space had already made itself felt before my arrival, and when I came there were several projects going full speed ahead. It took some doing to adapt a monastery built for sixty or eighty monks to accommodate two hundred.

Adapting the church to accommodate the larger number was the easiest part. Additional choir stalls were built; some things were re-located to make more efficient use of the available space, and additional altars were built for the increasing number of priests in the house.

A new wing was added to the novitiate, housing an additional dormitory, lavatory, and chapel.

But the big project was the excavation of a cellar under the entire monastery building, giving one additional storey to the house

without adding an inch of height. This had to be done entirely by hand, pick and shovel work, and the dirt hauled out in wheelbarrows. The dirt was dumped behind a retaining wall near the novitiate and provided a terrace outside the new novitiate wing. But getting the dirt out was not the hardest part. The monks who built the original monastery used stone for foundations, not concrete. It took a lot of work with sledge hammers, air drill, and pry bars to make needed openings in those foundations.

After the excavation was finished there was construction work to be done. The work had just about reached the construction stage when I arrived in 1942. I recall old Father George, the subprior, then nearly ninety, directing the work of digging a twelve-foot-deep ditch for the drain from the excavation under the chapter room. It didn't take much directing, only work, and Father George was in the ditch swinging his pick with the best of them, setting the pace for the others. When that was finished, for the next few months the concrete mixer was working next to the chapter room as the monks went ahead with the construction.

A new kitchen and store room was built beneath the community refectory. When it was finished, the old kitchen upstairs was removed and the space used to extend the refectory. A new tailor shop was built in the basement next to the bakery, and then the old one upstairs was converted into more dormitory space. The blower for the pipe organ was moved from a room at the end of the chapter to a new place in the basement under the chapter, and the chapter was extended. And so it went. New recruits continued to arrive and it was back to the drawing board to figure out where to put them. Dom Frederic used to say, "A monastery is never finished."

Most of this construction was either completed or well under way by the beginning of the war. During the war some construction work was done, but rationing of building materials limited it to what could be done by remodeling, by using supplies already on hand or salvaged from other buildings, or to what the War Production Board could be persuaded was needed to support activities essential to the war effort. Once the cellar project was completed, work commenced on the "red house," a brick structure providing offices for farming, dairying, and similar operations, and additional space to store farm tools and supplies. The brick for this was procured from an old distillery nearby.

The building of the "red house" was to cost the life of Brother Christopher, a carpenter. He was standing on top of the brick wall and accidentally touched the 2300-volt line running alongside the building.

The jolt he received caused him to lose his balance and he fell to the ground twenty feet below. He died in the hospital a few days later from a broken neck.

What part did Merton have in all this construction? Not much. He was in the quiet of the vault, working on his manuscripts. But he did come out when needed, even to fight a forest fire.

#### A BENEDICTINE RETREAT

The annual retreat of 1945 was preached by Father Thomas Verner Moore, O.S.B., a psychiatrist with additional doctorates in theology and philosophy. Merton mentions conversations with him in *The Sign of Jonas*, when he tells of receiving the news of Father Moore's later entry into the Carthusians (*JON*, p. 60). Moore was certainly no adherent of any school of psychological determinism; he laid it squarely on the line: it's up to us to use God's grace to overcome our inner drives and tensions and to become the Christlike individuals God wants us to be. "People often ask us where one draws the line between normal and abnormal behavior, between psychotic and neurotic. My reply is that from my experience there's no line to draw. It all depends on how much your community is willing to put up with. While they may get the merit of charity from bearing with you, you certainly aren't doing much to increase your own merit, and, while being a difficult character may seem to succeed in getting you what you want, you find out that when you get it you aren't satisfied. For nothing can satisfy us but God, and when you act in that way you are trying your hardest not to seek Him."

I didn't particularly notice his reference to the Carthusians. But then I have never felt the attraction Merton felt for the solitary life. Saint Basil may have put it a little too strongly, but he does make a point when he asks how one can practice the second most important commandment of love of neighbor without a neighbor to love. Some people manage to do so very well, however, such as lighthouse keepers, forest fire lookouts.

#### FOREST FIRE

Speaking of forest fires, on All Saints Day, November 1, 1946, Father Mauritius, the prior that year, rounded up everyone he could find and led them through the woods to fight a forest fire. Merton and I were both in the group. The line filed out through dry stream beds and along wooded trails until we were at the edge of the monas-

tery's property. Father Mauritius satisfied himself that the fire was already under control and would spread no further, and then led the group homeward, saying, "At least we got a nice walk out of it." Nearby was the cabin of Hanekamp, a man who Father Mauritius said had tried his vocation at Gethsemani some years before but had not stayed. Later he returned and established himself in the woods and lived as a hermit, coming to Mass at the monastery but otherwise keeping out of sight. Merton, of course, was an interested listener and asked further questions. He and Father Mauritius discussed the eremitical life most of the way home. As I was unaware at the time of Merton's strong desire for the eremitical life, I paid only passing notice and so am unable to report what passed between them that day. Merton remembered, however, and refers to it twice in *The Sign of Jonas* (JON, pp. 202 & 264).

Twelve years later, our community retreat in 1958 at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina was given by Dom Eugene Boylan, abbot of Ros Crea in Ireland, and writer of several significant books on the spiritual life. Dom Eugene's brother was superior of the Carthusian monastery then recently established near Arlington, Vermont, and maintained a negative attitude towards receiving religious from other institutions. "They can sanctify themselves right where they are," was his opinion. My own experience of almost fifty years seems to bear this out. In particular, I've seen several cases of religious who came to us because "they didn't keep the rule in the community I was in before." I'm inclined to reply, "You might as well look elsewhere. We don't keep the rule here either." At least that's what the candidate will usually decide before he has been with us very long. No community keeps its rule perfectly, that's why there are chapters of faults, visitations, and why we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation. A vocation is not *from* something but *to* something. Perhaps Father Boylan would have been excessive if he had closed the door completely to religious from other institutions, but I agree fully that he was right in discouraging them.

When he was at Mepkin in 1958, Dom Eugene's room was next to mine, and so we had several chats as we shared many common interests. He had read some of Merton's earlier writings and had misgivings. He was going to Gethsemani the following week to conduct the retreat there, and he meant to ask Merton why he was so interested in solitude. His first-hand knowledge of the Carthusian life caused him to doubt both Merton's Carthusian vocation and the willingness of the Carthusians to accept him. He did not know, nor did I at the time, that a profound change had taken place in Merton at the time of his

ordination to the priesthood. He was still desirous of solitude, but now it was in complete submission to God's plan. Dom Eugene must have been convinced after his talk with Merton, as I never heard of his doubts again.

#### NOVITIATE FOR PRIESTHOOD

At the beginning of 1946 it was decided that Merton could be promoted to theology, and so from then on he attended classes on the other side of the little cloister in the common room of the professed lay brothers where Father Anthony taught theology. Like Father Timothy, Father Anthony had been a novice with us. As I was still in the philosophy class, my contacts with Merton were fewer in 1946. Ordinarily after one had left the novitiate one had no further contact with the novice master. But many of us asked permission from time to time to consult with Father Robert, or went to him for confession once in a while. On one such occasion he told me that Merton was delighted with Father Anthony's course. He had appreciated philosophy, but philosophy had necessarily remained on the natural plane and had avoided treating of revealed religion which is theology's domain. One approaches philosophy with one's head. To get the most out of theology, in fact to get anything of real value, one must approach it with one's heart. And that was what Merton was looking for.

Father Anthony had studied in Rome and had been exposed to scholarship in all its various forms, and had received his fill of much of it—the subtle distinctions and empty erudition affected by some theologians, the negative tone adopted by others whose idea of theology is to learn how to refute errors. What is needed, he would say, is prayerful penetration of God's word; especially for contemplative religious it must be an exercise in contemplation. Not that such an approach was wanting in the Roman universities, it was just that there was too much of the other. A true theologian, he would say, must be a saint. He saw the theology course as the novitiate for the priesthood, the time when one tries to make oneself into another Christ with the help of God's grace, or better, works at removing the obstacles to the working of the Spirit forming Christ in one's heart.

It was evident that Merton was guided by these principles. Particularly in *The Sign of Jonas* we find him returning to them often; we see him basing his spiritual life on them as he continues with his study of theology. He was preparing himself to receive the Holy Spirit when the bishop imposed his hands in ordination, and his readiness was to be rewarded. Despite his increasing literary activity he was

concentrating during these years on preparing for the priesthood, in fact he was using that very literary activity as part of that preparation, especially from 1948 on when he began to work in a room by himself and realized there is no incompatibility between praying and writing (*JON*, p. 15).

During 1946 and early 1947, Merton was given the tonsure and four orders, as was done in the days before Vatican II. The ancient Cistercian custom of blessing the crown on the day of profession instead of giving the clerical tonsure had not yet been restored at Gethsemani. Dom Frederic still followed the Roman Pontifical and the Ceremonial of Bishops for all pontifical functions. Elsewhere in the Order abbots were using the newly-published Ceremonial of Abbots, based on the Cistercian Ritual which the Holy See had declared to be the authentic norm of the Cistercian Rite. Gethsemani had to wait for Dom James Fox to become abbot before it caught up with the rest of the Order in abbatial ceremonies.

The beginning of 1947 saw the four of us move across the little cloister to join Father Anthony's theology class, where with Merton and two others already there we commenced our study of fundamental dogmatic theology and of Sacred Scripture. The Scripture class would last throughout the entire theology course. Dogmatic theology would take three years, and in our fourth year we would get moral theology and canon law, subjects which Merton and his two companions had covered in 1946. Church history would be inserted as a once-a-week thing during part of the course, much as Greek had been during the philosophy course. Homiletics and pastoral theology would be given as occasional short courses, with regular scheduled practice sermons, such as Merton speaks about in *The Sign of Jonas* (*JON*, p. 42).

I recall one of Merton's practice sermons, where he used some of the hagiographical tales from an early Cistercian writer to illustrate his point. Like many medieval legends, they seem to be the products of a fertile imagination rather than of a passion for objective truth, a point which Merton admitted, adding, "Such legends were meant as vehicles of instruction, not as much as strictly objective history. I personally like them better as a means of instruction than the dry lectures that too many people seem to think are the only valid way to instruct."

March, 1947, was to be an important month in Merton's life, quite in line with the teaching of Saint John Eudes about the month of March being the most important one of the year, the month of the Incarnation and also of the Passion and Resurrection. At the beginning

of the month he received the last of the minor orders, that of acolyte, and towards the end of the month he was to make his solemn profession, when he dedicated himself to the Lord's service for life by pronouncing his final vows.

At the end of February theology classes were interrupted and all the students had a three-day retreat in preparation for tonsure and minor orders, conducted as always by Father Amedeus in the infirmary chapel. Then on March 2, my first-year theology companions and I received the tonsure, and Merton and his classmates were ordained acolytes.

Merton mentions one distraction that went with the retreat, some pictures by Father Odo decorating the chapel, drawings that contained ambiguities that had you wondering whether you were looking up or down (*JON*, p. 143) But the distraction was minor, as Father Amedeus was never a boring preacher. Even the inaccuracies of his scriptural exegesis kept us on our toes, and, if his understanding of a text was occasionally faulty, his doctrine was as sound as ever, and there was no doubt about the love of God and of the community in his heart.

Then on the feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, Merton made his solemn vows after the gospel of the pontifical Mass. He read the schedule of his profession, signed it, placed it on the altar, then sang the *Suscipe*: "Receive me, Lord, and I shall live, and You will not disappoint me in my hope." As the choir sang the *Miserere*, he knelt before each of the members of the community in turn to ask his prayers and to be embraced by each, then returned and prostrated before the abbot who recited the four long prayers for the blessing of a monk.

Afterwards he said he did not feel much like writing about it, but he did give us a page in *The Sign of Jonas*, and there is nothing that I can add to that (*JON*, p. 33).

A week later the Abbot General began the regular visitation of Gethsemani, which will be discussed later. Then followed Holy Week and Easter, but finally all the doings were over, and after the first week of April things settled down again and theology classes resumed.

#### FOR THE BIRDS

Dropping back a bit in our story, by May, 1946, it was possible for the abbots of the Order to assemble for the General Chapter at Cîteaux. It was to be Dom Frederic's last. He took his first airplane ride and didn't like it a bit. He reported in chapter after-

wards, "Man was never destined to fly. It's for the birds!" But at the time it was the only way one could cross the Atlantic, as passenger steamship services had not yet been restored. And for Dom Frederic steamship travel would have been only a little better than flying, as he had never been able to acquire his sea legs.

This was an important General Chapter, the first since the war, the first in eight years. The first order of business was to elect an Abbot General, the office having been vacant since the death of Dom Herman-Joseph Smets at the beginning of the war. Then there was all the business that had accumulated during the war years, the need to guide things back to normal, particularly in the European houses that had been in the thick of the fighting, and that had seen many of their monks inducted into military service, some of whom did not return.

At the General Chapter some of the abbots criticized Dom Frederic for having made the foundation in Georgia without the permission of the General Chapter or of the Abbot General. The facts that no General Chapters were being held and that the office of Abbot General was vacant apparently did not seem to justify his action in their eyes. But they were satisfied when he showed them the indult from the Holy See obtained through the Apostolic Delegate exempting him from those provisions of the Constitutions because of wartime conditions. His request for permission to make the foundation in Utah was unanimously granted by the General Chapter, as was his request to erect the Georgia community into an abbey.

A good example of Dom Frederic's relentless drive of himself appeared on his return trip. After leaving Ireland on May 16, he ate and drank nothing until his return to Gethsemani in the afternoon of May 17. He wanted to be able to celebrate Mass on his return, and those were the days of strict Eucharistic fast; nothing, not even plain water, could be taken after midnight. Because he was going westward, six more hours were added to the fast. But the Lord had mercy on him and closed the field at New York so that the plane had to land in Washington, thus saving him a few hours of riding the train. Dom Frederic did not like riding ships, and he found the low-flying propeller planes of those days even worse. But he had not missed his daily Mass, so he felt it worth all the trouble.

#### VISITORS FROM EUROPE

After the General Chapter, visits by European abbots began to occur frequently, the first in eight years. Several, including the Abbot General, came in 1947. The first was Dom Benoît, abbot of Our Lady

of the Lighthouse in Japan, who arrived before the Abbot General. He spoke English as well as French and Japanese, and told us of the war as seen from the Japanese side, and of how the American army of occupation had helped the people recover. He told of how the GIs supplied the Sisters with blankets, food, and used their skills to repair things. Dom Frederic had to interrupt to ask him to explain what GI meant as many of the monks would not know. Dom Benoît said he was planning to resign as abbot, for it was time for the Japanese to have one of their own, and they had a man who could do the job and do it well.

Soon afterwards, on March 25, the Abbot General, Dom Dominique Nogues, arrived to make the regular visitation. Both he and Dom Benoît were monks of Thymadeuc, and after years of separation met again at Gethsemani.

Visitations are supposed to be made annually in each of our monasteries by either the Father Immediate (the abbot of the house from which the founders had come), or by the Abbot General. The war had made visitations impossible, as it had also prevented General Chapters. In addition, the former Abbot General had died and so had Gethsemani's Father Immediate, the abbot of Melleray. As a result, any visitation had to wait until either a new Abbot General or a new abbot of Melleray could be elected. The 1946 General Chapter had picked Dom Dominique to head the Order, and now he was trying to visit every monastery he could to learn for himself the state of the Order.

Dom Dominique had been superior of a Canadian monastery for some time and understood English, but he preferred to have as secretary someone who was fluent in French, so Merton was picked.

As Merton says, the General looked like someone who meant business (*JON*, p. 33). Later contacts would serve only to enhance that first impression. But he was no autocrat or mere strict disciplinarian. He was most paternal, interested in everything, gave all as much time as needed. He had his own ideas and ideals of monastic life, however, and had no use for anything that threatened to compromise them. At the General Chapter and elsewhere he showed himself an implacable foe of mitigations, and of pampered human nature, and quickly quashed proposals tending in that direction. In this he and Dom Frederic were one. It was reported that he once said, "Every community seems to have a couple of difficult characters, and when one of them reforms, dies, or leaves, another seems to rise up to take his place."



The General began the visitation March 26, the day after his arrival. It was strictly by the book. The visitor is supposed to interview each and every member of the community, a task he had finished by April 2, Wednesday of Holy Week. He had also inspected the house and checked the accounts and was ready with his conclusions. But he wanted to preside over the solemn ceremonies of Holy Week, culminating in the Easter Sunday Mass at which he pontificated, wearing the purple *cappamagna* as he entered the church, a privilege granted to him by special indult, yet looking perfectly miserable in all those fancy clothes. He had told me during my interview that he thought pontificals were for bishops and not for abbots, that our Order should strive for simplicity and avoid the distractions that go with elaborate ceremonies, and in doing this we would simply be following the guidance of our first Fathers and of Saint Bernard in particular.

After Easter he closed the visitation, had Merton as his secretary read his findings, recommendations, decisions, all embodied in what is known in the Order as the "Visitation Card," and added his comments. In keeping with his ideal he urged our fidelity to our observances, added that several had come to him with specific comments on details of our rules, but that he would not give a decision. He said that there are commissions set up by the General Chapter to study such questions, and that we should develop our own expertise on the local level to settle such questions where possible. He had strong words for people who use zeal that others observe the rule to cover their own irregularities.

He asked that extra devotions not called for by the rules of the Order be suppressed as community exercises, such as the local custom of reciting the rosary in community before Vespers on Sunday, and of giving Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament on Fridays after Compline. "We already have a full day of prayer without adding anything," he said.

Finally he commented on the growth of the community, and on the necessity of being selective in accepting candidates. In fact, as a result of his interviews during the visitation, he recommended that several should not remain in the monastery; for what reasons and how he communicated his decision in these cases, whether to the person himself or to the abbot or other superior, I had no way of knowing.

Rumor had it that Dom Dominique always came to the closing chapter of the visitation wearing his monastic cowl over his clerical suit, with his bags already packed and loaded into a car with driver at the wheel and engine idling, so that afterwards he simply removed the cowl, donned his hat and coat and left, before he could be buttonholed

by anyone in the community. There may be some truth to this rumor, as he always did seem to vanish after the end of a visitation. He still had fifty or so monasteries to visit.

#### THOMAS MERTON VS. FATHER RAYMOND

We monks who knew them are amused by the stories of conflicts between Merton and Father Raymond, or about either of them thinking of leaving the monastery because of conflicts with superiors. Often the stories go further and say that the monk in question has already left, as in the incident told by Father Raymond when someone informed his brother that Father Raymond had been seen at a night club in New Hampshire. Father Raymond's brother Ed Flanagan pinned the speaker down after he finished and asked him when, where, and what night club, and then proceeded to inform his informer that Father Raymond must have the power of bilocation, as he and his brother had been visiting Father Raymond at Gethsemani the very day and evening when Father Raymond had been reported seen at the night club in New Hampshire.

Such stories sell. But the plain fact is that all such stories are completely untrue. Yes, there was a bit of good natured banter between the two writers, the kind that expresses mutual respect and esteem. But it could cause a literally-minded person who did not know them to think they were swapping insults. Between friends the apparent insult can often conceal the highest compliment.

While neither of them saw eye-to-eye with superiors or with each other in everything, such disagreements as did arise never even approached the stage where a breakdown in communication threatened. Such disagreements were inevitable, given the persons involved. For when two people see eye-to-eye on everything, one of them is not thinking. And both authors, as well as their superiors, did their share of independent thinking. Besides, Father Raymond was a wild Irishman who liked nothing better than a good argument.

Both authors came in for their share of criticism. What author doesn't? Their abbot passed on to them the criticism he received and added his own comments. But Dom Frederic did not hesitate to defend them in his contact with outsiders, no matter what he might tell them at home, a fact that they both appreciated. We were often amused by the way critics would sometimes disagree among themselves, one praising highly what another roundly condemned.

In his later years, when Merton espoused the cause of peace and disarmament so outspokenly, a position he had always held, he

came in for plenty of criticism from the hawks, criticism that often took the form, "I wish he would stay out of politics," once again demonstrating the fact that "meddling in politics" usually means simply holding political views differing from one's own. In the same way the leaders of one's own party are "statesmen," those of other parties are "politicians."

Merton could also express his opinions of other writers. It was always a treat when he was reader at meals. He read well, and so spared our ears some of the harsh treatment they received from listening to some who weren't quite so good. He himself has some comments on readers who fracture the English language (*JON*, p. 122). But positively too when he read he had that bit of bedevilment in his voice that made it sound like he enjoyed doing it, and he would never spoil a punch line. As already mentioned, some of the old timers thought he sounded a bit cocky at first, but once you got to know him you knew better. What I found exceptionally enjoyable was the way he once read a book that dripped with what he called "that greasy, sticky stuff that some people call unction"; he read it in his most unctuous tone of voice, sounded almost like a mother telling her tot a bed-time story. Fortunately he was only a substitute reader that day, otherwise I'm sure some of the more straight-laced brethren would have complained about it.

Both authors' books were often read during meals. Merton mentions one such instance in *The Sign of Jonas* (*JON* p. 109), and compares his reaction to that of Father Raymond when the latter had to sit through the reading of one of his works. I also know of Father Raymond's reactions, because he asked me to check the manuscript for *Burnt Out Incense* for typos after it had been read at dinner and before it was sent to the publisher. I don't recall the exact comment he made at the time, but it was something to the effect that I might also see for myself what he had actually written.

Father Raymond and Father Louis were of markedly different personalities, and this difference is reflected in their styles. Father Raymond was more of a *you* writer; he talked *to* his readers, while Merton was a *we*; Merton talked *with* his readers. The titles of several of Father Raymond's works show this quite clearly: *You Can Change The World!*, *Say Fiat And Remake Your World*, and *You*. Father Raymond also belonged to an earlier generation, to a time when a bit of classical elegance was appreciated and even expected, when figures of speech, such as alliteration or onomatopoeia, balanced periodic sentences, and classical allusions were the accepted way of writing for publication, and when poetry had meter and rhyme.

Father Raymond himself tells of how he exploded when the galley proofs of *The Man Who Got Even With God* came to him for correction. He insisted, demanded, that they print what he had written, not what their editor thought he should have written, "I'm the one who will be criticized for what I write, not the editor!"

Merton, on the other hand, had frequently to contend with the censors of the Order who complained of the sloppy English he wrote, even rejecting the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* because it didn't seem ripe for publication and advising the author to take a correspondence course in English grammar (*JON*, p. 40). The superiors of the Order wisely decided to overrule the censor's objections on that score, feeling that the publisher was in a better position to judge such questions, particularly since the publisher's money was saying that the book was ripe enough to be published. As for hearing it read, Merton, making no pretense of having a classical style, gave readers little to misinterpret, and so his humiliations were of another kind, "Golly, did I say *that!*"

Writing as much as he did, and with months and sometimes years intervening between writing and publication, Merton would often forget what he had written, and so would be surprised and sometimes humiliated to hear it read. I recall when *Seeds of Contemplation* was being read I asked him what a passage I found obscure really meant. His reply was something like, "I don't know what it means myself, but people buy it so I write it."

Evelyn Waugh shared the opinion of many others that Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* needed editing, and as a result it appeared in England as *Elected Silence*, with improved syntax and punctuation. Passages thought by Waugh to be offensive to British readers were suppressed, such as Merton's account of "the dark, sinister atmosphere of Cambridge" (*SSM*, p. 118), or his attack on the Church of England (*SSM*, p. 115 & 176). It was only in 1976 that the American edition became generally available in England. Merton mentions Waugh's visits in *The Sign of Jonas* (*JON*, p. 119 & 135) but merely says that he was glad that Waugh edited the *Mountain*. If he was dissatisfied with the result, he kept it to himself.

Father Raymond preferred active opposition to Communism, wrote *The Trappists*, *The Reds*, and *You* after reports had reached us about the fate of our monasteries in mainland China. Merton had played with Communism in his Columbia days (*SSM*, pp. 141-147) for about three months, and was soon fed up with the whole thing. Some of his later writings, however, might well have convinced anyone with John Birch leanings that Merton was still a covert

Communist agent, for wasn't he against our involvement in Vietnam? Wasn't he against our expenditures for arms, when the military might of the United States was the only thing that stood between the Communists and world domination? Merton clearly saw that military might is something indifferent in itself, can be used for good or evil. And so the United States military could well have been the very instrument for the Communists to use to achieve world domination. It was the U.S. military that unwillingly gave them the atomic bomb, for instance. In fact, Merton saw that the way to triumph over atheistic ideologies is through interior conversion that makes materialistic ideologies irrelevant and empty. "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32).

Not that Father Raymond undervalued the importance of our interior conversion. In actual fact his books have proved to be quite effective in leading souls to the interior life. The contrast is rather between Father Raymond's more active approach to the spiritual life, while Merton tended to stress the passive as was pointed out earlier. In other words, the two did not contradict each other but rather complemented each other. Some souls tend more to an active spirituality, some to a more passive one. Both ways lead to God, and the Spirit has guided souls to the heights of holiness by both paths. God gave Gethsemani two writers of such differing temperaments so that different groups could find guidance.

#### EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Trappist life has been called hard, austere, penitential, and it is, to some extent at least. But dull and monotonous it is not. It is full of surprises. Some I fear are deterred from following a vocation to our life because they think it must be boring, much as I think many of us fail to desire everlasting life because we think it would be monotonous, at least after the first shine had rubbed off. I wonder for how many of us heaven is merely the less undesirable alternative, we may be more concerned with avoiding hell than with going to heaven. I don't claim any special insights to offer that would stir up a desire for heaven, none that our Lord Himself hasn't already offered us, but I can give a few examples of the kind of thing that happens often in a monastery to insure against monotony.

There are, for example, the events of daily life, some tragic, some comic, and some of the tragic ones become comic when we look back at them. About eleven o'clock one evening in the spring of 1947 I awoke with an upset stomach, upset enough that I rose and headed for

the washroom, "just in case." On arriving there I found a fair number of other monks gathered for the same reason. Later it was discovered that someone in the kitchen had added some rancid cheese to the soup; it was too far gone to serve even to the monks, "but maybe it would go if it were put into the soup." It went all right, but it came right back. I'm not sure whether Merton was a victim or not. He doesn't mention the incident in *The Sign of Jonas*. Maybe he didn't eat the soup and slept through the whole affair.

We had another such incident but not as serious. The baker had left some steel wool in the mixer after cleaning it, with the result that the next batch of bread was the most iron-rich bread in the U.S.A.

Occasionally we have a fire at our monasteries. There's nothing like a fire to break any monotony. Unfortunately, though, sometimes it can be serious. Gethsemani has had several, but none resulted in death or serious injury as far as I know. In the fire that burned the college in the spring of 1912, Dom Edmond saw a sign from God that the work of Trappists as teachers was ended at Gethsemani. Gethsemani lost two barns to fires, and two fires at the gate house. For the second one in the spring of 1948, there was a shipping office next to the post office in the gate house where books and other items sold by mail were packed. One day some papers fell on the pot-bellied stove they used to heat the room, and the entire room became engulfed. But it was held to one room. The monks plus volunteer firemen from Gethsemani and New Haven managed to extinguish it. After the fire there were about forty empty soda-acid fire extinguishers lined up on the sidewalk, one gutted room in the gate house, and nobody hurt. But running up to the third floor of the "hotel" to get fire extinguishers certainly did not help Dom Frederic's heart, so maybe he should be listed as a casualty.

On the more pleasant side, on September 21, 1947, Archbishop Floersh came to Gethsemani to ordain Fathers Arnold and Leonard to the priesthood and Frater Urban to the diaconate. After dinner the community gathered in chapter. Dom Frederic announced that something had come from the Holy Father, and asked Archbishop Floersh to deliver it. The archbishop rode and walked over to Captain James Kinnarney, the retired detective who was one of Gethsemani's benefactors and whose donations to the Church in Louisville were also extensive. Knowing the hearing problems of the octogenarian, the archbishop bent over close to his ear and said in a loud voice that Pope Pius XII was conferring on him the medal *Pro Ecclesia et pro Pontifice* as a token of the Pope's gratitude for all that the captain had done to foster the spread of the Church in the Archdiocese of Louisville and

throughout the United States. Captain Kinnarney tried to reply, but couldn't control his emotions, so Archbishop Floersh said, "Why Captain, you're crying!" And Kinnarney replied, "I can't help it, Archbishop" (JON, p. 67).

#### GO WEST, YOUNG MEN

After the visit of the Abbot General in 1947, Dom Frederic concentrated on preparing for the coming foundation in Utah. He had gone west in January to look at property and found nothing suitable at a price he was willing to pay. After the visitation he went again, and this time closed a deal for a site at the head of Ogden Canyon near Huntsville. On June 29, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Dom Frederic read the list of those picked to go to Utah and announced that the departure would take place July 7. Father Mauritius, who had been prior when I entered Gethsemani, was named superior. As had been the case when the Georgia community left, there was a note of sadness. You can't live with people for years striving to grow in charity without making it hard to separate from them permanently.

July 7 came. It was summer. Steam would not be needed to heat the train, and the first leg of the trip was only to Louisville. So the railroad left a Pullman and a baggage car on the siding at Gethsemane, and loading could be done at a more reasonable pace than during the day. In the evening the monks were driven to the station, boarded their cars, and in due time they were coupled to the end of a train and taken to Louisville, where the cars were made up into a train bound for Saint Louis and points west.

Dom Frederic once remarked that when you needed someone in the monastery to do something you could never find anyone who was free, everyone had too much to do already. But send thirty people to make a foundation and somehow all the jobs they left vacant are filled. It was the same this time. A little shuffling of assignments, and life went on as before. Not that the absent were not missed. But things got done and life continued. A sobering and at the same time a consoling thought, none of us is indispensable.

THE CENTERNARY YEAR, 1948 - Continued on next page

## THE CENTENARY YEAR, 1948

Dom Eutropius Proust had led his band of monks from Melleray in France in their long and arduous voyage across the Atlantic on the sailing ship *Brunswick*, and then up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers on the steamboat *Martha Washington*, to their new home at Gethsemani. Dom Frederic wanted to do something appropriate to celebrate the centenary. He recalled what Dom Edmond had done on previous anniversaries, and felt he had to do at least as much. He mentioned plans in chapter, said something about a three-day celebration. To Merton's great relief, it was eventually to be cut one day (*JON*, p. 75). BUT 1948 was to be a year remembered for other reasons.

The year began uneventfully enough. The annual shakeup of officers on January 1 held few surprises, as the departure of the monks for Utah in July had already made a shuffling of jobs necessary to fill empty places, and so at this time most officers were simply re-appointed to their current assignments. On his return from the General Chapter of 1946 Dom Frederic had the highest praise for the abbot of Bellefontaine. Dom Gabriel Sortais, who acted as the promoter at the chapter, and had the questions as well organized that everybody knew what was happening and the voting went smoothly and expedi-

tiously. The appreciation of Dom Gabriel's competence was great, as was evidenced by his election to the office of vicar at the end of the chapter. The vicar actually has no function in the Order as long as the Abbot General is alive. The vicar's one job is to convene a plenary General Chapter on the death or resignation of the Abbot General. As a matter of historical fact, however, it is usually the vicar who is elected Abbot General and so the vicar can be called the heir-apparent.

Dom Frederic said at the time that he hoped to have Dom Gabriel visit Gethsemani some time. The year 1948 offered an opportunity. Dom Gabriel was planning to visit Canadian houses as their Father Immediate, and so Dom Frederic invited him to come south and visit Gethsemani too as the delegate of the Abbot General, and Dom Gabriel was happy to accept the invitation. It was to prove a most providential visit.

Early in this same year of 1948, Dom Frederic received an offer from Bishop Emmet Michael Walsh of Charleston, South Carolina. Henry R. Luce, founder of *Time* magazine, and his wife Clare Boothe Luce, author, playwright, and former member of Congress, were offering a gift of seven thousand acres of land, mostly forested, Mepkin Plantation, and Bishop Walsh asked Dom Frederic to accept it as a site for the foundation of a monastery. With Gethsemani still overcrowded after two foundations in four years, and remembering how much the sites of those two foundations had cost, Dom Frederic did not have to think twice before accepting such an offer. He felt that seven thousand acres was too much land, however, and suggested that Mr. Luce divide the property and retain most of it. And so Dom Frederic made trips to South Carolina to arrange the transfer of the property, despite the warning of the doctor when he was hospitalized in January that his heart could quit any time, and would do so sooner if he didn't slow his pace.

In May he went to Utah to see how things were going after ten months. In June he made the regular visitation of Our Lady of the Valley in Rhode Island, the community that was a few years later to move to Spencer, Massachusetts. On his way home he stopped in New York State to look at some property being offered by Mr. Richard Worrell as a site for a foundation, then hurried back to Gethsemani to tackle the work that had accumulated during his absence and to plunge into the work of preparation for the centenary celebrations.

The month of July also saw the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and its phenomenal and immediate success. By this time nearly everybody in the community knew who Thomas Merton was. But it made no difference. He was accepted as a brother in the community who just happened to have the gift to write books, just as Brother Jerome knew how to care for bees, sheep, hogs, and a few other things, or Brother Dominic knew where all the pipes were.

Brother Joseph here at Mepkin Abbey told me recently how he had been cleaning the Gethsemani guest house (the "hotel") in June, 1948, and saw a clipping lying on a table in one of the rooms about Merton's poetry winning an award (*JON*, p.105), identifying the writer, Thomas Merton, as Father Louis of the Abbey of Gethsemani. "I had been living with him for nearly four years," Brother Joseph said, "and only then did I learn who he was. I had always liked him from my very first days at Gethsemani, thought him a good religious, but now I knew he was also a gifted writer."

It speaks well for the Gethsemani community that Merton was neither idolized nor "put in his place." but merely accepted for what he was. And that attitude was to continue for the rest of Merton's life and still continues. Dom John Eudes Bamberger develops this same view at greater length in *Cistercian Studies*, where he speaks mainly of the later years of Merton's life, after he had become nationally known. The article is obligatory reading for anyone who would wish to know what Gethsemani's monks thought of Merton, ut the title really says it all, "Thomas Merton, our brother." The same thing is said again and again by the various contributors to *Thomas Merton/Monk*.

ORPHANS - Continued on next page

## ORPHANS

Dom Frederic had a full schedule planned for the month of August: Gethsemani's visitation by Dom Gabriel, the visitation in Georgia, possibly a second trip to Georgia with Dom Gabriel, preparations for the General Chapter scheduled to begin September 12 which he planned to attend. An important item of business for that chapter was securing approval of the two projected foundations, those in South Carolina and in New York.

On Tuesday, August 3, he had me in his office giving me tasks he wanted done while he was making the visitation in Georgia. I noticed a wasp exploring the room. It finally landed on Dom Frederic's head. Before I could warn him not to, he reached up to brush it off, and the wasp stung his hand. Dom Frederic applied some aqua ammonia to his hand to relieve the sting, and continued giving me instructions. It was the last time I was to see him alive.

That evening he left for Georgia to make the visitation. The following morning in chapter, the prior Father Odilo told us we were orphans, that Dom Frederic had died on the train at Knoxville, Tennessee, and arrangements were being made by the local undertaker to bring the body home for burial. Whether the wasp sting had anything to do with it, I don't know. But now he was gone, and it was up to us who were left to carry on the work after him.

## GETHSEMANI'S SIXTH ABBOT

After the interviews it was time to hold the election. Dom James Fox arrived from Georgia with two companions. As abbot of a house founded from Gethsemani, he had the right to vote in the election. His companions were to act as the witnesses for the election. Dom Edmund Futterer, abbot of Our Lady of the Valley, also had the right to vote and was present. Technically all the monks in Utah were still members of the Gethsemani community and had the right to vote. But they waived that right, considering the practical impossibility of bringing them all back to Gethsemani just for the election.

The election took place on August 23, and Dom James Fox was elected. Elections of abbots follow rules similar to papal elections, but somewhat simplified. There is a conclave, the election takes place in a locked area with no one allowed to enter or leave. After each vote the ballots are burned, with straw to produce black smoke if no one received a majority, without straw to produce white smoke if someone is elected. On this occasion when the white smoke arose from the



chimney a photographer outside shot a flash bulb, triggering an explosion from the abbatial throne. Dom Gabriel later criticized the way seculars get into American monasteries. I'm sure they would have done nothing of the sort at Bellefontaine. Dom Gabriel reminded one very much of Charles de Gaulle. They were both men of commanding stature, and of commanding personality too. And both seemed to have the same uncomplimentary opinion of Englishmen and Americans.

#### UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Upon accepting election as Gethsemani's abbot, Dom James ceased to be abbot of the Georgia monastery, and was now responsible for presiding at the election of his successor there. And so he did what was necessary to get Gethsemani back to its regular routine then boarded a train for Georgia.

The Georgia community chose Father Robert McGann as its second abbot and called him from Utah. Dom James then hurried home to prepare to leave for the General Chapter.

The chapter over, Dom James settled into his new job and began to make his influence felt. Dom James was not Dom Frederic and he had his own ideas on how a monastery should operate, stricter on some points, more lenient on others. As already noted, Dom James did not adhere as strictly to the policy of no one ever going out of the monastery as did Dom Frederic, but in another area he was stricter in his control of the monks' correspondence. Dom Frederic gave out mail as it came, for example, while Dom James gave out mail four times a year, the only times monks were allowed to write.

December 21, 1948, marked the hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the pioneers at Gethsemani, and Dom James was able to persuade Archbishop Floersh to come that day and ordain Frater Louis and Frater Amandus subdeacons.

On December 21 the Matutinal Mass following Prime was said by Bishop Cotton of Owensboro, and the High Mass after Terce by Archbishop Floersh who ordained the two candidates subdeacons. That afternoon in chapter a bit of a celebration was held, with talks by the bishops and a play written by Father Raymond, *An Afternoon With The Prior*. It was performed by Father Raymond, Father Odilo the prior, and Frater Benignus, one of the junior religious. It was essentially a discussion of the early days of Gethsemani, and could have been given by Father Raymond as a lecture, but it certainly held one's attention better in the form of a play. There were some negative reactions to the new administration. Any change is bound to stir some. Some thought

Father Raymond's play a desecration of the chapter room and wondered what the deceased abbots whose portraits graced its walls would have thought of such a thing.

Under Dom Frederic the monks did not shave, but instead our chins were gone over once a week using an electric hair clipper with a 4/0 blade, which cut the whiskers quite close, about the equivalent of one day's growth after a clean shave. Dom James introduced safety razors which were issued to all the monks, had lights and mirrors installed in the washroom. Merton commented, tongue in cheek, "Horrors!" (*JON*, p. 142). Twice a week was established as the minimum for shaving. While Merton's remark was facetious, some of the monks did think it a bit scandalous to have mirrors where they could look at and admire themselves. Or was that only the excuse: they just didn't want to shave?

On feast days sometimes instead of the refectory reading, music was played over the refectory loudspeakers, and once at least it was transmitted live from the chapter room, with several monks producing it. Always religious music, of course, but the Rule of Saint Benedict did not provide for such deviation, and so there were some who didn't like it.

And so it went. Everybody wanted some changes, but usually not precisely the changes that were actually made. Life went on, postulants continued to come, and many of us agreed with Merton that the new abbot was a holy one, quiet and humble (*JON*, p. 118). The number in the community rapidly approached the two hundred mark. More space was needed. Dormitory cells were constructed in every available location, and preparations for the new foundations went forward with all deliberate speed.

On January 1, 1949, Dom James continued Dom Frederic's custom of making appointments on that day. Father Anthony was appointed prior, Father Placid cellarer (business manager). Merton was appointed second master of ceremonies. Father Placid decided that the room being used by Merton for his writing was needed for the cellarer's office, located as it was next to the front door of the monastery and convenient for the installation of a telephone. And so Merton retired to the vault where he was to do much of his writing during the next few years, about as quiet a place as one could find at Gethsemani (*JON*, p. 146).

March 19, feast of Saint Joseph, seems to have been a special day for Merton. He made his simple vows on that day in 1944, and his solemn vows in 1947. Then in 1949 he was ordained deacon on that day (*JON*, p. 170). He found this ordination a special grace, but it was

only a prelude to what he was to be given when he was ordained priest. "The diaconate is big," he wrote. It was in part the fruit of his careful preparation, but it went beyond what could be expected from even the best preparation, was a gift of God, pure and simple.

Dom James felt strongly about the place of the liturgy in the life of the monks and did everything he could to make it more dignified and prayerful. In the spring of 1949, James Burns, organist and composer, made a retreat at Gethsemani, and at the request of Dom James conducted a workshop for the organists. He insisted that the accompaniment of the choir should be simple, should flow from the music, and should not call attention to itself. It should support prayer and not be a distraction. He watched the technique of each organist and offered suggestions. One day he played for the High Mass. Afterward he asked who had the strong tenor voice right behind him. Told that it was Father Raymond, he replied, "I'm glad to hear that, as I heard that he had left the monastery."

#### ARE YOU FATHER LOUIS?

There was no slackening of the pace when Dom James took over the reins. If anything it was quickened. Preparations were going forward for the big centenary celebration scheduled for June 1. Novices were practicing singing, Frater Walter was painting the coats of arms for the various bishops who would attend, the brothers were erecting a huge platform in Saint Mary's field for the altar and sanctuary, and contacts were made with military personnel at Fort Knox for assistance in handling the large crowd expected. Merton was relieved of his duties as second master of ceremonies on this occasion. Now that he was nationally known, his desire to keep out of sight with all the visitors around was easily understood and was respected. This gave him an excellent opportunity to prepare for his ordination, which went smoothly enough. Fathers Louis and Amandus were now priests. What we didn't realize at the time was that this ordination really was a day of special grace for Father Louis. For the rest of us it was May 26 and the big celebration on June 1 was only six days away.

It turned out to be a perfect day for the celebration. It was estimated that five thousand people attended, including dozens of bishops and archbishops, our Abbot General, and Dom Edmond's old friend Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, who had become quite feeble. Monsignor (later Archbishop) Fulton J. Sheen preached the sermon, and everything went smoothly.

Merton spent that day with the press corps. He introduced himself to them and told them he would see that they got all they wanted as long as they didn't tell anyone else who he was. His strategy seems to have worked, as few people managed to find him. Not that they were not looking. I must have been asked fifty times by nuns and others, pen and autograph book in hand, if I were Thomas Merton, or if I knew where he was. I could honestly say I didn't know, and made sure I didn't find out until the thing was over so I wouldn't have to lie to them.

Our Abbot General Dom Dominique took advantage of his presence at Gethsemani to conduct a regular visitation. As before, he interviewed all the monks again, and a few minutes before his departure made public his findings, then vanished from sight. He reported that he had heard some complaints about the new administration. That play in chapter got special mention. "But it only happens once in a hundred years." He reminded the monks that they had voted for Dom James as abbot, and that they should look above the merely human and recognize that God had put him there. He concluded by saying that most of the changes that Dom James had made were changes recommended by superiors of the Order, by himself and Dom Gabriel in particular, and that Dom James was one of the most cooperative abbots in the Order. In other words, "Don't complain to me about what he's doing. I told him to do it!"

#### AUTHORS IN A MONASTERY

Merton was far from being the only author at Gethsemani. Father Raymond also produced a sizeable number of books, one of which, *The Man Who Got Even With God*, made the best-seller list. Dom Robert McGann wrote a pamphlet on the apostolate of the contemplatives and another on Saint Bernard when he was novice master. Father Timothy edited a text of the Rule of Saint Benedict and wrote an introduction to it. Father Alberic, with the assistance of other monks who were specialists in various fields, wrote a *Compendium of the History of the Cistercian Order*. Father Amedeus wrote the life of Dom Edmond Obrecht, fourth abbot of Gethsemani. And there were others. Merton also mentions this extensive literary activity at Gethsemani in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SSM, p. 412). It began several years before his arrival. And so it is not correct to see Merton as unique in the community. Writing for publication was encouraged, had been encouraged years before Merton came. Dom Frederic Dunne did not see writing as incompatible with our contemplative vocation,

rather he saw it as an apostolate that fits in quite well with our life. He must have told me a dozen times as he gave me letters to answer, "Whether it's a book to be circulated by the thousands, or a letter to be read by one person, say something that will help souls draw nearer to God. And that goes even for business letters. We have something far more precious than anything money can buy."

Dom Frederic was a printer and bookbinder, and came from a family involved in the printing business. It is not surprising then that he felt the way he did about the apostolate of the printed word. One of his first acts as abbot was to obtain from the Abbot General permission to publish books and booklets on the Order. He not only did not discourage writers, he tried to develop them. In this he did not conform to the views of many in the Order, including those responsible for writing the Order *Statute in Censorship*, which gives as its first norm after insisting that the prescriptions of canon law must be obeyed: "The General Chapter reminds all religious that the publication of books must be by way of exception in our life of retirement and solitude, unless they are destined for the religious of our Order or treat of questions concerning the Order."

Dom Gabriel Sortais, the abbot who presided at the election of the abbot of Gethsemani in 1948 and later became Abbot General, also had dim views on publication of monks' writings. After discussing publications currently appearing, he adds, "The many publications of which I have spoken have given birth in too many monks the desire to write." He hastens to add that several monasteries do have religious with a real talent for writing, a talent which they generously sacrificed when they entered the cloister, but which the Lord, after accepting the sacrifice, has decided should not be buried, and so superiors have asked these superiors to continue to write.

But the desire to write and to publish has more than once entered the spirit of religious with neither the knowledge nor the talent to become writers. Articles and books are sent to censors that aren't even worth examining, but it's hard to make the writers understand this. Autobiographies have been written which have little interest, but how to convince the authors?

He concludes, "Our duty as abbots is to counsel our monks in this as in everything else, to keep them from deviating by recalling them as needed to simplicity and humility. A monk must be alert to listen to God, but that supposes before all that he does not put himself forward.

*Tacere et audire discipulos convenit* says Saint Benedict (*RB*, 6:6), the disciple should be silent and listen."

Father Charles Dumont appears to have been unaware of the attitude of the superiors at Gethsemani during that period and to have assumed that they shared the views of the European abbots he knew. He wrote, "The misunderstanding seems to me to arise from the meaning that the Father Master [Dom Robert McGann], his abbots, and other authorities in the Order gave to the word *write*. For Merton it meant that they positively encouraged him to pursue a career of writer and of publicist. For the others, (and how could they have suspected the difference in this unique case?) *to write* meant to study and compose some studies on liturgy, philosophy, observances, or Cistercian hagiography."

No, quite the contrary. Dom Frederic and Dom Robert were not thinking of books that would gather dust on library shelves. They also understood *to write* in the sense that Dumont attributes to Merton, they were thinking of books that would be read, and widely read, for the good of souls.

There was no conflict between Merton and his superiors. It was between Merton and Merton, as Dumont brilliantly notes elsewhere: "Exuberant, untimely, he wanted to be more active and more contemplatives than his rule and his abbot could allow." Dom Frederic had seen in his authorization from the Abbot General a *carte blanche* authorizing him to publish almost anything, and he found nothing incongruous in a monk's writing for publication. But Merton, with more time than the abbot to read what was being said on the subject in other parts of the Order, did have doubts. The conflict seems to have been between Merton's idea of the monastic vocation and the abbot's, and between his own desire, compulsion even, to write, and his idea of what a monk's life should be, conflicts that were never settled, because neither he nor his superiors fully understood how they existed. Merton would go to Dom Frederic with his misgivings, and merely receive assurances that what he was doing was for the good of souls and that he should go on writing. The basic question was not faced because the abbot was unaware of its existence. Yes, Dom Frederic knew some abbots who held such views, but he did not agree with those views. There were other points on which he disagreed with other abbots in the Order. But he saw no point in endless discussion, life is too short. He had already made up his mind, so why waste time discussing it further? He was convinced that the apostolate of the

printed word was compatible with our life, and so he encouraged his monks to write.

Dom Frederic would suggest topics for Merton to treat, but left it free for him to decide whether they were worthwhile or whether he could do them justice (*JON*, p. 46). When Merton asked permission to stop writing poetry, Dom Frederic replied that he might stop if he found it a burden, but that he wanted him to go on reaching souls (*JON*, p. 72). In the end Merton was to see that his writing actually did not interfere with his life of contemplation but rather fostered it, and that Dom Frederic and Dom Robert had acted most wisely in encouraging him to become a writer, in such a way that his writing not only did not interfere with his life of prayer, but rather *demand*ed a life of more intimate union with God (*JON*, p. 90).

In his earlier days, however, while he was still trying to resolve the conflict, it occasioned the resurgence of his desire to become a Carthusian, which he wisely decided was a temptation. It was more a desire to get away from something than to follow God's call. Actually the conflict was never resolved. Instead the guidance of the Spirit cut the knot that held him bound and lifted him above it. And this was at the time of his priestly ordination.

After the death of Dom Frederic, as noted, Dom James Fox became abbot of Gethsemani. Dom James shared the view of the European abbots on writing by monks. As already noted, he tightened the rules on correspondence. Monks, he felt, should not spend time writing either letters or books. Ours is a contemplative vocation, pure and simple, and contemplation is a full-time job. Other orders may have the job of sharing the fruits of contemplation, *contemplata tradere*, to use the classic phrase, our job is simply to contemplate. As a result, the literary output of Gethsemani all but disappeared during his term of office, except for what Fathers Raymond and Louis produced. By this time their position as internationally recognized authors was so well established that an exception had to be made, and in addition there were contracts with publishers that had to be honored. But Merton was discouraged from answering fan mail and used form letters instead (*JON*, p. 147), a decision that suited him fine, for he never would have been able to handle even a fraction of the correspondence generated by his published works. As for conflict between Merton and Dom James, the fact that they were each others' confessors should be enough to show that there was no rift between them.

One final remark seems in order here. Martin Maisholt, reviewing Cornelia and Irving Sussman's *Thomas Merton* in *Religious*

*Media Today*, says, "As the 'American monk,' Thomas Merton was exploited, overworked to the point of breakdown and manipulated by those through whom he vowed obedience. He was yet another victim of another profit-conscious system." If the Sussmans said that, I was not able to find it in their book. As I said at the beginning of this study, I have found their book to be one of the best in adhering closely to the facts and avoiding editorializing. As to Merton's being exploited, I must deny the charge, from personal knowledge. The statement of Maisholt is completely erroneous and without foundation, except possible in the prejudice that says we Americans are all materialistic. Dom Frederic never saw the publication of Merton's writings or of the writings of anyone else in the community primarily as a source of income. Of course nobody objected if the books sold well and the royalties helped pay the bills. As Merton put it, "Here is the book I couldn't make a go of ten years ago—now it is a success just when I am at Gethsemani and Gethsemani needs money..." (*JON*, p. 111), but money was never the primary end. If some projects needed money, the Lord would supply it, and He did. And if other projects earned money, it was just one of the ways the Lord used to supply it.

As for Dom James Fox, he was amused to read, "Evidently the superior had Father Louis chained to a typewriter to keep on turning out articles, prefaces, periodicals, poems, books, and so forth," when some monks were complaining to the visiting abbot during the regular visitation that Father Louis was getting away with everything, was being allowed to do just about as he pleased.

"Indeed," Dom James adds, "I never asked him to write a single thing except on one occasion. Several years ago a friend was helping to prepare the Papal Pavilion for the World's Fair in New York. He asked me if I would have Father Louis compose an appropriate prayer for a souvenir card for all those who visit the pavilion" (*MONK*, p. 155).

With the centenary doings and the visitation over, plans for the new foundations and preparations for leaving began to occupy our time. The Georgia pioneers had been given two days' notice that they were on the list before they actually left, and the Utah founders had a week or so to prepare to leave. But the New York and South Carolina foundations were staffed with monks who had known in many cases for several months that they had been selected. Thus I knew that I would be heading south some time in the fall. Father Anthony had been designated superior for the South Carolina monastery, and Father

Gerard for the one to be founded near Rochester, New York. In consultation with Dom James they worked out who would go where and a final list of personnel was ready by September. At least it was intended to be final, a name or two was added or deleted before the actual departures.

The foundations absorbed most of our attention, but things were happening at Gethsemani too. On Saturday, July 16, Feast of Saint Stephen Harding, Merton was the deacon at the pontifical Mass. Everything went as usual until the gospel. About halfway through, Merton suddenly stopped singing and collapsed on the floor. He got up immediately, however, before anyone could help him, and went on to finish the gospel. He still looked a bit shaky and disoriented. As we began the *Credo*, Father Gerard came out from the sacristy and replaced Merton for the rest of the Mass. I never heard what was the cause, but apparently it was not serious as he was back in choir for Vespers that day (*JON*, p. 206).

#### CONSTRUCTION NEVER ENDS

The coming foundations would relieve some of the pressure caused by the rapid growth of the community, but not all of it. To accommodate the increase in numbers in the choir novitiate, a partition was built across the choir scriptorium, and the north end of the room was given to the novices. That meant that the novices had all the light and ventilation, and the end left for the professed was the part directly over the boiler room and the bakery. The temporary arrangement with the boiler outside the builder had ended the previous autumn, and a boiler had been installed in the old boiler room under the scriptorium. With the boiler room and the bakery downstairs, the room was cozy during the winter months, but more like an oven during the summer (*JON*, p. 209). It was not as bad as it sounds, however, as the choir professed were now using the library as a scriptorium annex.

I went to South Carolina in mid-October, my first time out of the monastery since I entered seven years previously to help with the construction and remodeling, and I returned at the end of the month to join the community in its retreat, with Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen acting as retreat master, a retreat that Merton mentions only incidentally (*JON*, p.244). Possibly he couldn't say much about it because it was so full he didn't know where to begin.

Monsignor Sheen gave us all he had. He told us of the man who said to him once, "Monsignor, I really appreciated your Good Friday

talk in Saint Patrick's Cathedral. That was the most pleasant hour and a quarter I've ever spent." Sheen added, "Why I've never talked an hour and a quarter in my whole life." Maybe not, but he did go an hour and ten minutes with us, and nobody minded it a bit.