

MERTON OF GETHSEMANI
AND
BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

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He arrived here well after Compline on Palm Sunday of Holy Week, 6 April 1941. The Visitors Register for that date gives his name as "Merton, Thos. James;" Age, "26;" Habitual Residence, "St. Bonaventure NY;" Profession, "Professor;" Remarks, "Retreat."¹ But before leaving early on Easter Monday of the following week, the young professor from St. Bonaventure's added a note in Latin after his earlier entry in the Remarks-column, a note which is a citation of Psalm 8, verse 6, but adapted in the plural: *Minuisti eos paulo minus ab angelis*—"Thou hast made them (that is, the monks of Gethsemani) a little less than the angels." Thos. James Merton was back on 10 December of the same year, this time as a postulant; and it would not be long before the enthusiastic aspirant to monastic life was discovering, now as Frater Louis, that his brethren at Gethsemani were considerably less than just a *little* less than the angels.

Still, in any listing of the major happenings that marked and defined Thomas Merton's ascent of his seven storey mountain, that Holy Week retreat would have to come close to the head of the list. Many pages from the journal he kept during that week were retained for later publication in *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*;² and the same material is recognizable in his lengthy account of that

1. Gethsemani Archives, Retreat House Register for 1941.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Cudahy, 1959), pp. 183-203, Part 4, "Interlude: Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani [Holy Week, 1941]." Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

decisive week in *The Seven Storey Mountain*,³ where the section ends with the lines:

And so, about the last thing I did before leaving Gethsemani, was to do the Stations of the Cross, and to ask with my heart in my throat, at the fourteenth station, for the grace of a vocation to the Trappists, if it were pleasing to God (*SSM*, p. 332).

Now, among the twenty-three pages of the manuscript journal devoted to the Holy Week retreat, almost a third of them are devoted to lengthy extracts of the treatise by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo*, *On the Love of God*, along with Merton's own notes and personal reflections—some of which reflections were later retained for publication in *The Secular Journal*, but out of context. Only a passing reference in *The Seven Storey Mountain* tells us what Merton was reading during this crucial week: "Nevertheless, back in the monastery I read St. Bernard's *De diligendo Deo* ..." (*SSM*). Here the context is supremely important. It was Good Friday. The retreatant, having followed almost ten hours of the monks' practically uninterrupted chanting and psalmody, was exhausted. "I could not pray," he writes, "I could not read any more." He got Brother Matthew to let him out of the front gate, and then "went for a walk along the enclosure wall, down the road past the mill, and around the back of the buildings, across a creek and down a narrow valley, with a barn and some woods on one side, and the monastery on a bluff on the other" (*SSM*). He was standing almost on the spot that marked the beginning of the path that, years later, was to lead to his hermitage. "Out here I could think," he continues; "and yet I could not get to any conclusions. But there was one thought running around and around in my mind: 'To be a monk...to be a monk...'" He looks at the brick building which he takes to be the novitiate, and which looks like a prison or a citadel. He sees the enclosure wall, the locked gates. He thinks of the hundreds of pounds of spiritual pressure compressed and concentrated within those buildings and weighing down on the heads of the monks; and he thinks, "It would kill me." Confirmed momentarily in his Franciscan vocation, he tells himself: "...This is my kind of spirituality, to be out in the woods, under the trees...." But then he comments: "...I was trying to persuade myself that the contemplative cloistered

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), pp. 319-332. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

life was not for me, because there was not enough fresh air...." Then straightway, in the next paragraph, he writes: "Nevertheless, back in the monastery, I read St. Bernard's *De Diligendo Deo* . . ." (*SSM*). That 'nevertheless' is important, for it suggests a paradox. Having insisted to himself that the contemplative cloistered life was not for him, he nevertheless goes back to the monastery and reads, what? St. Bernard's *On the Love of God*, a treatise which the professor from St. Bonaventure's evidently identifies with the "contemplative cloistered life" which was not for him.

This page from *The Seven Storey Mountain* might give the impression that Merton's reading of *De diligendo Deo* began only as of Good Friday afternoon; but the datelines of his journal clearly show that he had begun taking notes on it several days earlier, on Tuesday of Holy Week. The punctuation and orthography of his excerpts make it clear that the edition he was using was the classic one by the Maurist scholar, Dom Mabillon, reprinted in Volume 182 of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*⁴—a volume he perhaps found on Monday, while browsing through the bookshelves in the retreat house. His *De diligendo* entries for Tuesday cover only the first two chapters of the treatise, where Bernard explains why and how God should be loved, and how love for God begins with self-knowledge. With his characteristic genius for always being able to recognize the essential, Merton copied out the fundamental texts and added just a few glosses. But as Holy Week progressed, what he was reading more and more took hold of him. The glosses lengthened and turned into extended commentary, until, on Holy Saturday, the reflections on Ch. xii (in which Bernard sums up the essential of his teaching on love) turned into a virtual compendium of ideas about three of Merton's favorite themes: charity, freedom, image. Much of this later material appeared, with editorial revisions, in the Holy Saturday entry of *The Secular Journal*:

Charity and freedom are inseparable. Love must be free. Only charity is perfectly free. Love is loved for itself, not determined by anything outside itself. It is not drawn by the satisfaction of anything less than itself. Only in charity, that is disinterested love, is love perfectly spontaneous.

All love that is less than charity ends in something less than itself. Perfect charity is its own end, and is therefore free, not determined by anything else. God alone is perfectly free,

4. Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, Volume 182, Cols. 975-1000.

infinitely free. He is Love Loving Himself. Because He is absolutely free, His love can do whatever it likes.

We are constituted in His image by our freedom which is not absolute, but contingent. That is, we are free in proportion as we share His freedom, which is absolute. We are free in the sense that no one determines our free choice: we are so much our own masters that we can even resist God, as we know to our sorrow! But we are also free to love for the sake of loving, to love God because He is Love, and to find for ourselves in the perfect freedom of Love's own giving of itself.

Pride and self-love are the love of death, because they turn away from God in Whom is all life: they necessarily tend to nonbeing, and to death (*SJ*, pp. 202-203).

This is pure Bernard. This is also pure Merton. And this is the doctrine that lies behind the splendid opening lines of the autobiography:

On the Last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of French mountains on the border of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born ... (*SSM*, p. 3).

It is hardly fortuitous, then, that the Holy Saturday entry of his journal ends in a manner wholly consonant with his reading of and reflection on Bernard's treatise *On the Love of God*:

I desire only one thing: to love God. Those who love Him, keep His commandments. I only desire to do one thing: to follow His will. I pray that I am at least beginning to know what that may mean. Could it ever possibly mean that I might some day become a monk in this monastery? My Lord, and my King, and my God! (*SJ*, p. 203).

What Thomas James Merton had come to realize during this Holy Week retreat of 1941, in a climate created by the liturgy of Holy Week, by the observable dedication of the community of Trappists, and by his reading of St. Bernard on the love of God, was to be determina-

tive for the whole course of his future life. This is not to say, of course, that it was only during the Holy Week retreat of 1941 that he first began to understand the implications of the Johannine formula that God is Love, but simply that, under the aegis of St. Bernard, he now began understanding and responding to the exigencies of that Love with a new and deeper sense of urgency.

There are those who have understood Merton's spiritual journey chiefly as a journey into freedom. I have no great quarrel with this, except when such authors seem to identify Merton's feast of freedom in terms of a liberation from the constraints imposed by a monstrously brutal institution such as the Trappists or the Roman Catholic Church. This is piffle. Rather, Merton's understanding of freedom was, like that of Bernard and the whole tradition crystallized by Bernard, inextricably bound up with love. And this, I suggest, was central to Merton's Holy Week experience of 1941. "Sometimes," he wrote in his journal for Wednesday, April 9,

we see a kind of truth all at once, in a flash, as a whole. We grasp it in a block, in its wholeness ... We do not understand it all thoroughly, yet we know it with some certainty, although vague, rough, and in outline. This is especially true of Philosophical and religious ideas.

But once this general figure has become our property and, we think, part of us, in this first easy-seeming intuition, and we store it in our minds and take it for granted, then, by a new series of minute, difficult, toilsome steps, we begin to find out, elaborately and with a great deal of trouble, different things that are only details of this same big idea, and aspects of it, and parts of it. Thus after seeming to catch the whole idea at once, easily, we go over the whole thing again and rediscover it with great difficulty in all its parts. And this may take months or even years (*SJ*, pp. 191-192).

Or even, might one not add, a whole lifetime. Indeed, I would like to suggest that Merton's spiritual evolution could be described in terms of a constant rediscovery in all its parts, but at greater depth and with new and often painful insights, of what he had already grasped in its wholeness during the months which preceded his definitive entry into the community of Gethsemani. Metaphors such as those of spiritual ascent or journeys are decidedly useful, even necessary for anyone attempting to discourse on the life and message of Thomas Merton. But every comparison limps; and what is wayward

about these images of ascent or journey is that they suggest that the climb to the summit or the journey onward and beyond mean a leaving behind of all that has come before; whereas, for Merton, reaching the final summit ended, surely, in a burst of recognition, and journey's end meant coming to the home which he had never really left.

The former professor from St. Bona's returned to Gethsemani on 10 December, 1941. On St. Lucy's day, 13 December he transferred from the retreat house to the novitiate; and on Tuesday, 16 December, he received the oblate's habit and began his preparation for the reception of the novice's habit he was to receive a few months later on the first Sunday of Lent. He donned his oblate's habit, went to the Father Master of the novices to learn his new name, which was Frater M. Louis; and then, without more ado, went to the novitiate scriptorium to post his new name on front of that box that was to represent, in his own words, "all the privacy that I had left." And what was Frater M. Louis going to keep in that one small box?

...a couple of notebooks full of poems and reflections, and a volume of St. John of the Cross and Gilson's *Mystical Theology* of St. Bernard, and the letters I would receive from John Paul at his R.A.F. camp in Ontario, and from Mark Van Doren and from Bob Lax (*SSM*, p. 384).

If I had to suggest a single image by way of depicting the essential Thomas Merton, I believe that a sketch of the contents of that one small box would do it rather well: notebooks of poems and reflections to stand for Merton the poet and author and Christian thinker; St. John of the Cross and *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* to stand for Merton the man of prayer and interiority; and the letters from his brother John Paul and his dearest friends to stand for Merton and his extended family that would grow and multiply in time to take in virtually everyone.

So Bernard, who had been with Thos. James Merton as he entered upon his Holy Week retreat, was also with Frater M. Louis as he entered upon his postulancy and novitiate. There was now, however, something significantly different in the young novice's reading of St. Bernard, and this was the immediate context in which he pursued this reading. He was now in a place where everything had fallen into place, a place where what he was reading was validated by the lives and experience of those who lived there with him. In a letter written to his closest friend, Bob Lax, almost on the eve of his final departure from St. Bonaventure for Gethsemani, Merton had

expressed the expectation that "Once I can be in the place where I belong entirely to God and not to anyone less than Him,... then I guess problems about writing and everything else will not be much problems any more."⁵ Young Merton was being, perhaps, a bit sanguine in his expectations. Still, it is certainly true that Gethsemani was just such a place where he could hope eventually to belong entirely to God. Less than a year later Frater M. Louis was again writing Lax rhapsodically and perhaps a bit disjointedly about this place where the most important reason for the palpable joy everywhere in evidence "is the presence of God here in this house, loving to be with His children because they love nothing but for Him to be with them & with all men... Also, a lot of my brothers are really saints, and it makes you very happy simply to see them walking around full of God. All the joy in this house is Christ...." This introduces a paragraph that is extraordinary as a veritable summa of Bernardine and Augustinian spirituality:

All the joy in this house is Christ, in whose flesh we know God the only way anybody knows Him (even those who don't believe in Christ see the invisible God only because Christ was made flesh) and all the joy in this house & in the world is in the Love of Truth that are perfect, 6, and are a Person, or rather 3. But we can only see the Father's His Holy Ghost through Christ, who, being man & God, creature & creator, is the fulfillment of the whole of creation, being the bond that unites everything created with God, not in the order of being, but in the order of Love. For all things are united to God in one sense by the fact that He keeps them in being. But creation can only be perfectly united to God in love, through Christ, because it is through Him that the rational creatures are taken up to God, in love, taking with them all the other creatures by their love for them, in God. And when all things are properly ordered among themselves, the lower & the higher, and when the higher are perfectly ordered to God as their final cause (i.e. love Him with their whole heart & mind because He fulfills them & He only fulfills them) then there is

5. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*; selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 163. The letter is dated from St. Bonaventure, December 6, 1941). Hereafter referred to in the text as *RJ*.

Peace. For peace is the tranquility of the order of love. (RJ, pp. 165-166)

Then, without transition, Frater Louis tells Lax that "All these things I read in St. Augustine: the Commentary on the Psalms, the Book of the Sermon on the Mount, etc.;" and he goes on to speak about St. John Chrysostom, Dionysius the Areopagite "who is very like St. John of the Cross," and St. Teresa of Avila's *Autobiography* ("O boy! This you should read as fast as you can get it! O what a book!"). The paragraph ends with the sincere but hyperbolic (and somewhat ungrammatical) statement: "I feel as if I never read anything before the Fathers of the Church: everything, even Dante, Shakespeare, etc. seem like nothing." Blake he does except, but only because of "how much he knew about the humanity of Christ, & how important." In the next paragraph, Frater Louis is telling Lax how much he likes the monastic practice of listening to reading during meals. "It is nice to listen to books, even bad books, while we eat our black bread & oats etc. Not that the books are all bad or all good. Sometimes very good, like St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles...*" (RJ). In quite the same vein Frater Louis was later to tell in his autobiography how, instead of using the hour and a half interval after the feast day Night Offices for writing poetry, he had been devoting that time, during the past six years, to "reading nothing but one or another of some three or four books, St. Augustine's Commentary on the Psalms, St. Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, St. Ambrose on some of the Psalms or William of St. Thierry on the *Song of Songs*." He goes on: "Sometimes I look at one or another of the Fathers, or else read Scripture *simpliciter*. As soon as I had entered into the world of these great saints, and begun to rest in the Eden of their writings, I lost all desire to prefer that time for any writing of my own (SSM, p. 390).

Earlier, as Thos. James Merton, Frater Louis had had, obviously, at least a nodding acquaintance with Fathers such as Augustine and Bernard, thanks to the writings and lectures of scholars such as Gilson and Dan Walsh. But now he was getting to know them on intimate terms, and the experience was clearly a heady one. This should not be taken to suggest, however, that, in basking in the Eden of patristic writings, Frater Louis was disavowing his earlier allegiance to Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus. Both at Columbia and at St. Bonaventure, Merton's initiation into these great theologians and into the method of scholastic inquiry had been systematic and anything but superficial. All his life he was especially grateful for the keen

honing of his critical faculty which the scholastic method had helped ensure; and, indeed, I heard him saying more than once that one of the main reasons for studying theology (by which he meant scholastic theology) was to learn how to think straight and to develop a critical judgment. Throughout, then, all the early Merton writings and conferences dealing with Fathers such as St. Bernard, it seems clear that his approach and style of expose were much conditioned by his earlier exposure to scholastic theology.

Scholastic theology? But he was a poet! a prose stylist! Precisely. This may smack of paradox for many of us; but an appreciation of the scholastic method was, for the young Trappist, in no way incompatible with his love for words and fine writing. In this he was, perhaps, representative of a breed that has all but died out (more's the pity)—the renaissance-type monk of the sort the anonymous "S.M.C." wrote about in her novel *Brother Petroc's Return*. Revived from his state of suspended animation four hundred years after his apparent death, the sensitive but superlatively sane and spiritually hale Br. Petroc confronts situation after situation illustrative of our own somewhat zany spiritual civilization in which we muddle along as best we can. After examining a review copy of *The Beaten Track to God*, a *vade mecum* of what, to Brother Petroc, is a "strange new spirituality," he jots down an analysis of the theses propounded, and then refutes them point by point in arguments couched in syllogistic form. But then our logician takes note of the unexpectedly mild February morning high on the cliffs of Cornwall, and spontaneously pens a lyric on the back of one of his scraps of paper: "Of wynter-thorn and white-thorn / Fain would I sing, / Of Marye Flower of Heaven, / Of Chryste our King ..." ⁶ One of the novel's characters, upon reading Brother Petroc's jottings, notes that this juxtaposition of poetic talent and relentless logic is none too common nowadays. It was, however, characteristic of Frater Louis, at least in his better moments—for he was quite capable, from time to time, of abandoning relentless logic for flights of fancy that, for the less imaginative among us, might seem to border on the irrational. Still, his thought processes depended, generally speaking, not only on poetic intuition of a high order, but on logic. Take, for instance, the letter of October 1, 1960, written to the English priest and scholar, Fr. Bruno Scott James. Fr. James had apparently written of a black desolation which had left him feeling as though he were in hell. Merton responded

6. "S.M.C.," *Brother Petroc's Return* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Image Books, 1955), p. 92.

movingly and insightfully, and halfway through the letter reached the point where he could write:

And so joy in the Lord. A scholastic question: "Whether there be joy in hell." *Distinguo*, etc. etc. etc. Where the Lord is, there is joy. If He be in our hell with us what are we worried about? ... People don't pay any attention to the mystery of the descent into hell anymore.⁷

This passage is typical: a profound insight of the utmost seriousness colored by high humor and a sense of logic.

It was providential, then, that Merton's early introduction to St. Bernard had taken place under the guidance of Etienne Gilson with his masterful *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*. This seminal study was concerned neither with the life of Bernard nor with his theology as a whole, "nor integrally," writes Gilson in his preface, "with his mysticism; but with that part only on which his mysticism rests." This Gilson intended to deal with as a clearly defined system, as "systematics;" and he quotes, disapprovingly, M. Pourrat: "The mysticism of St. Bernard is not set out in any systematic form...it has moreover no scientific character; it is essentially practical."⁸ Gilson admits that "St. Bernard was in no wise a metaphysician. This conceded, he goes on to insist:

...but he must remain in our eyes a theologian whose speculative vigour and power of synthesis puts him among the greatest. That his mystical theology is essentially the science of a way of life is not to be doubted, but I hope to show that it is nevertheless a science, and that its structure could hardly be more rigorously synthetic than it is.... When the author's principles are known, his language understood, his treatises, even his sermons, speak with all the severe precision and exact technique of the most densely-packed pages of Anselm or St. Thomas Aquinas. No one is likely to forget the soul of the mystic; but I think, on the other hand,

7. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters on Renewal and Spiritual Direction*; selected and edited by Brother Patrick Hart (NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 36. Hereafter referred to in the text as SC.

8. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1946), pp. vii-viii. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Gilson*.

that we shall come to know it better for the future, the less we forget the thought of the theologian. (*Gilson*, p. viii)

Nothing could have been more congenial to the young Trappist aspirant, who had attributed his conversion in part to his reading of the writings of Gilson and Maritain, and who, in an early memo outlining his *curriculum vitae*, had said: "As a result of studies and reading which familiarized me with the works of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, but particularly as the result of God's grace which now began to move me with the most urgent promptings of desire, I began going to Mass at Corpus Christi Church, West 121st Street, New York. And there, I soon began to take instruction and was happily baptized on November 16, 1938." (SC, p. 6. The memo, written early during his postulancy [January 2, 1942] at the suggestion of his Father Master, was addressed to his abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne.) And he later gratefully acknowledged the role Gilson had played in his conversion in a personal letter to Gilson, at a moment when the great scholar was suffering from bouts of deep discouragement:

To you and to Jacques Maritain, among others, I owe the Catholic faith. That is to say I owe my life. This is no small debt. Can you feel so abandoned as you do when you are handing out to other people as great a gift as the kingdom of heaven?(SC, p. 31).

But *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* was for Merton, an ideal introduction to St. Bernard not only because of its author and his scholastic inspired mode of analysis and synthesis, but perhaps even more so because of its objective content. The very first chapter, "Regula LXXIII," helped determine the young Merton's approach to Bernard by situating Bernardine mysticism as well as Cistercian mysticism in general not so much in the context created by the Cistercian program of reform and renewal based on the Rule of St. Benedict as interpreted in the light of the Desert Father tradition, and as read under the influence of writers such as Cassian and Gregory the Great. The title to the second of the three major sections of this first chapter served wonderfully well to orient Frater Louis in his further reading of Bernard and the other Cistercians: "Divinization by Ecstasy." Each of the following chapters can similarly be said to explore themes which underlie much of Merton's later writing: *Regio dissimilitudinis* (Region of Unlikeness), *Scholar caritatis* (School of

Charity), *Paradisus claustralis* (Paradise of the cloister), *Unitas Spiritus* (Oneness with the Spirit). These themes appear, too, in one of the early poems from collection *A Man in the Divided Sea*, published in 1946 but written well before that date. The poem-triptych "Clairvaux" begins with lines spoken by Clairvaux herself:

Hidden in this heaven-harbor
Wood-cradle valley, narrow and away from men
Bernard built me, model of all solitudes,
Picture of contemplation and of love
figure of all prayer
Clairvaux cloister. . . .

Holy, immense, the arching air,
The vaulted heaven, full of liberty. . . .

O white, O modest cloister,
Shy cloister, Heaven is your prisoner,
He comes to earth and hides His image in your
heart

Where He may rest unseen

O holy Bernard, wise in brotherlove,
Vintner who train and grow, and prune and tie
us
Fast, trim us in sure and perfect arbors of
stability and rule:
You have foreseen what vintages the Holy
Spirit,
Ripening in our concord, as in vine-vein the
strong sun
Will trample in His press, His charity, in the
due day,
To barrel us, His Burgundy.⁹

9. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (NY: New Directions, 1977), pp. 127-128.

A rather important development in Frater Louis' reading of Bernard and the Cistercians took place the year after his reception of the novice's habit. He had been allowed to pass the first year of his novitiate following the outdoor workschedule of most of the novices, breaking rocks on the back road or splitting logs in the woodshed. But now, referring to his Lent of 1943, he writes,

I had some indoor work for part of the time, since Reverend Father had already put me to translating books and articles from French.

And so, after the conventual Mass, I would get out book and pencil and papers and go to work at one of the long tables in the novitiate scriptorium, filling the yellow sheets as fast as I could, while another novice took them and typed them as soon as they were finished. In those days I even had a secretary (*SSM*, p. 401).

This humdrum work of translation soon expanded, however, to include work of a much more original sort. Frater Louis, now in simple vows, began writing sketches of the lives of Cistercian saints of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In a memo of writings completed and projected, and addressed to the Fathers of the General Chapter of 1946 for their approval, Frater Louis referred to these sketches under the title, *Moines Blancs de l'Age d'Or* (White Monks of the Golden Age), and described it as "A large volume, almost 500 pages, of the lives of the greatest Cistercian saints of the 12th and 13th centuries. All these lives are based on authentic documents, in accord with the research information supplied by the Commission of the New Menology. We have with special care followed the Bollandists, seeking above all to be objective and true, so as to grasp the true Cistercian character of all our saints—their spirituality, their prayer, etc. This has not yet been published, but it is all ready."¹⁰ This bulky collection of hagiographical sketches, which Merton sometimes referred to under his preferred title, "The Valley of Wormwood," was never published; but it did circulate in American Cistercian circles at a later date (1954) in mimeographed form, but

10. This memorandum, written in French, may be read in the English translation by William H. Shannon in *The Merton Annual 2* (1989) pp. 80-84, with special reference to p. 81 for the text quoted.

without the slightest hint of authorship.¹¹ For Merton buffs, *White Monks of the Golden Age* is not without interest as a witness to the author's orientation even from his novitiate years. Frater Louis had a genius for skimming through the source material—not all of it was particularly noteworthy on the score of substance—and for identifying with uncanny skill those details which best lent themselves to his purpose of revealing the true Cistercian character of these saints. He had long since, of course, begun to come to grips with the fact that, as he saw it, the true Cistercian character of just about everything in the life stood much in need of being revealed. "It seems to me," he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in a particularly forthright passage which happily managed to get past the censors, that

our monasteries produce very few pure contemplatives. The life is too active. There is too much movement, too much to do. That is especially true of Gethsemani. It is a powerhouse, and not merely a powerhouse of prayer. In fact, there is an almost exaggerated reverence for work in the souls of some who are here. Doing things, suffering things, thinking things, making tangible and concrete sacrifices for the love of God—that is what contemplation seems to mean here—and I suppose the same attitude is universal in our Order. It goes by the name of "active contemplation." The word active is well chosen. About the second half of the compound, I am not so sure. It is not without a touch of poetic license.

It is only in theory that our will can be disinfected of all these poisons by the universal excuse of "obedience." Yet it has been the Cistercian formula ever since St. Bernard of Clairvaux and a score of Cistercian Bishops and Abbots in the Middle Ages... (*SSM*, p. 389).

So there it is: Bernard the exemplar of Cistercian mysticism *par excellence* is also the exemplar of the questionable Cistercian formula according to which contemplation is sacrificed to the exigencies of activity. Much of our monk-author's efforts in his later writings on things Cistercian was to be spent defending the primacy of contemplation; and page after page of *The White Monks of the Golden Age* attests to the young Merton's zeal in demonstrating the "true Cistercian character" of our tradition—a wholly laudable preoccupa-

11. For details, see the article by Chrysogonus Waddell, "Merton and the Tiger Lily," in *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989), pp. 62-63.

tion, but one which sometimes threatened the objectivity which he meant to bring (and usually did bring) to his reading of these hagiographical sources. However this may be, Frater Louis was no longer able to bask disinterestedly in the Eden of the writings of the Fathers (and of the Cistercians in particular). His work as translator and writer about things monastic and Cistercian necessarily affected the dispositions which he brought to a great deal of his reading. Formerly he had been reading the Cistercians concerned chiefly with simply enjoying them and turning his insightful reading of their writings to his own spiritual advantage. Now he was reading them with much the same joy as before, but with the further concern of communicating their riches to others.

It is much to be regretted that the section on St. Bernard is missing from the 1953 mimeographed version of *The White Monks of the Golden Age*. Possibly Frater Louis' original intention had been to treat of Bernard separately and at greater length and depth than was possible in *The White Monks*—although in his General Chapter memorandum of 1946 there nowhere appears among the 24 projects listed (some of them multi-volume) a full-length study of Bernard. Or possibly he did include a sketch of the Abbot of Clairvaux in the original collection, but excerpted it and used it for other purposes later on, when *The White Monks of the Golden Age* had been shelved. We do have from this early period, however, two important monograph-length studies of aspects of Bernard's doctrine.

Earliest in date—though it was published only in 1948—is Merton's contribution to the edition of his translation of Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard's *The Spirit of Simplicity*.¹² In its concern for ongoing renewal, the General Chapter of 1925 had called attention to simplicity as the chief characteristic of the Order, and had asked the abbot of Sept-Fons, well known as a spiritual writer (*The Soul of the Apostolate*) to write an official report on this highly relevant topic. In translating the report, Frater Louis weighed it in the balance and found it somewhat lacking. Despite the fact that Dom Chautard had devoted the opening pages of his report to "Interior Simplicity" as the every other kind of simplicity of the more outward source of every other kind of simplicity of the more outward sort, Frater Louis felt that the theme of interior simplicity had received short shrift. "As

12. The full title reads: *The Spirit of Simplicity: Characteristic of the Cistercian Order. An Official Report demanded and approved by the General Chapter Together with Texts from St. Bernard of Clairvaux on Interior Simplicity; Translation and commentary by a Cistercian Monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani (Trappist, Kentucky, 1948).*

the official report," he explains in the translator's introduction, (SS, p. ii) "deals principally with external simplicity, that is, with simplicity in clothing, buildings, the liturgy and so on, we have considered it worth while to add a second section devoted to a brief outline of the doctrine of St. Bernard on Interior Simplicity or, to be more exact, on the importance played by interior simplicity in the ascetical teaching of the great Cistercian Doctor of the Church, as expressed in four typical groups of quotations from his most important works." On the next page he justifies his appeal to St. Bernard, "who is for us *par excellence* our commentator of the Rule and Master in the Spiritual Life...;" and he proceeds straightway to summarize St. Bernard's teaching on simplicity as consisting in "getting rid of everything that did not help the monk to arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way. And the shortest possible way to arrive at union with God, who is Love," he continues, "is by loving Him, in Himself, and in our brethren." With relentless logic Frater Louis goes on to explain that, for our Fathers, simplicity therefore meant discarding not only everything opposed to charity, to the love of God, but also discarding all means of getting to God that are less direct, less perfect, less effective, even though they might, indeed, bring us to union with Him indirectly and in a roundabout way. When it came to love, what Frater Louis clearly wanted was the shortest and the quickest way of getting there. But this is possible only if "the intellect and the will of the monk seek one object alone, God as He is in Himself, not merely as reflected in His creatures or in His gifts." (SS, p. iii-v)

This preface was omitted in the later posthumous edition printed in 1980 in *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard*¹³ but the texts by Bernard together with Merton's notes and comments were reproduced with only minor editorial changes and so are now easily accessible to the general public. After a rapid presentation of Bernard's anthropology, Merton, in Gilsonian terms, sketches the Cistercian background within which Bernard's teaching on simplicity has to be situated:

And the whole purpose of the Rule of St. Benedict and the Cistercian Usages is, according to St. Bernard, to keep man in an atmosphere where, by obedience, poverty, solitude, prayer, fasting, silence, manual labor and the common life, he will be

13. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, Cistercian Studies Series 9 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 107-157.

constantly running into occasions where he will be brought face to face with the truth about himself, and forced to recognize his misery without God, with the result that he will turn to God in supplication, begging Him for that grace and infused charity which will enable him to purify his soul of the hideous layer of duplicity and free the divine image within him from all the sordid appetites and evil habits that cling so obstinately even to souls that have devoted themselves for years, with the most ardent generosity, to the wholehearted service of God in the cloister.

But this purification is only the beginning. As the Father looks down from heaven into the loving soul that seeks Him in "tears of compunction" and beholds there the likeness to His son reappearing, as the simplicity of the concealed image begins to be freed from the dark crust of sin, He instantly pours more love into the soul and raises it up towards Him ever more and more, until finally, by a faithful correspondence to grace, the perfect image is restored, and the soul is now utterly purged of all the "fear" that is unseparable from "unlikeness" to God. From then on, the way to heaven is nothing but confidence and love, and St. Bernard does not hesitate to promise as the normal term of the Cistercian life of simplicity, a perfect union of wills with God, by love, which he calls the Mystical Marriage (SS, pp. 79-80 [1948]; SS, p. 110 [1980]).

Normal term. The emphasis is Merton's. This was always to be his emphasis—even when, later on, his terminology changed drastically, partly out of deference to readers, Christian and non-Christian alike, who could hardly be expected to cope with the traditional vocabulary of Christian contemplation. Indeed, even the term "contemplation" was one he later hesitated to use, given the ambiguities the term seemed to conjure up in the minds of so many of those whom he was now addressing. Hardly a month before his death he touched on his dearly held belief, in his circular letter to friends written at New Delhi, and dated November 9, just a short while after his memorable conversations with the Dalai Lama at Dharamsala:

He (the Dalai Lama) was very interested in our Western monasticism and the questions he asked about the Cistercian life were interesting. He wanted to know about the vows, and

whether the vows meant that one became committed to a "high attainment" in the mystical life. He wanted to know if one's vows constituted an intuition into a mystical tradition and experience under a qualified master, or were they just "equivalent to an oath"—a kind of agreement to stick around. When I explained the vows, then he still wanted to know what kind of attainment the monk might achieve and if there were possibilities of a deep mystical life in our monasteries. I said well, that is what they are supposed to be for, but many monks seem to be interested in something else. . . . (RJ, pp. 119-120).

"St. Bernard does not hesitate to promise as the *normal term* of the Cistercian life of simplicity... the Mystical Marriage".... "But many monks seem to be interested in something else..." Scholars have written, with varying degrees of insight (and at times stupidly), about Fr. Louis' sometimes painful relationships with representatives of authority, both within the Order and without. But nothing was so painful for him, over the long haul, than the abiding sorrow he experienced from the fact that, as he saw it, so few seemed to reach the normal term of their monastic commitment as he had understood it from his reading of the most qualified of Cistercian mystics, St. Bernard. True, Merton's reading of St. Bernard was much conditioned by his love for Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross; but there is precious little in Merton's exegesis of Bernard that Bernard would likely have disavowed. You can certainly put your finger on particular passages where Merton had misread the text or read into it a meaning somewhat wayward of the truth. But the broad sweep of Bernard's thought is always there. And it is a fact that Merton always thought of the twelfth-century Cistercian monks as persons of the most congenial sort. Just a few days before the circular letter referred to above, Merton was writing from Dharamsala itself to Mother Myriam Dardenne, abbess of Our Lady of the Redwoods, in California:

... I have met six or seven other Lamas who are reputed to be very great mystics and who are in fact very impressive. With all of them I have had really delightful and fruitful conversations (with a good interpreter) and it has been an amazing experience—like meeting monks of the time of St. Bernard (SC, p. 409).

But to return to *The Spirit of Simplicity*, there are four series of composite texts which Frater Louis presents (in his own translation) and annotates: Text I, "Man's Original Simplicity" (Sermons 81 and 82 on the Song of Songs); Text II, "Intellectual Simplicity," on humility in truth (Sermons 35-38 on the Song); Text III, "Simplification of the Will," about obedience and the common will (Sermon 3 In Paschal Time); Text IV, "Perfect Simplicity," about unity of Spirit with God (On the Love of God, ch. 10). The choice of texts is remarkable, as are Father Louis' annotations. Indeed, it might serve a useful purpose for one of the many Merton scholars in search of a theme to take some of the ideas expressed in this early didactic essay and trace them through their later development in the Merton corpus. Take, for instance, Frater Louis' discussion of the Bernardine (and Socratic) maxim, *Know thyself*.

And if the first step in the Cistercian ascent to God is for the monk to *know himself* [here Frater Louis has a footnote referring to Gilson's treatment of the theme] we may reasonably say that, in some sense, the whole life of such a one will consist in being himself, or rather trying to return to the original simplicity, immortality and freedom which constitute his real self, in the image of God.

We will never completely succeed in being ourselves until we get to heaven. Meanwhile on earth our chief, in fact our only task, is to get rid of the "double" garment, the overlying layer of duplicity that is not ourselves (SS [1948], pp. 89-990; SS [1980], pp. 118-119).

Merton on Knowing Yourself—a fine title for some future doctoral dissertation. The title might smack a bit of Merton of the late '50s or mid-'60s, but the doctrine would still be substantially Merton's of the mid-'40s. True, the vocabulary would now be rather different ("false self," "empirical self," etc.); and Merton would obviously have profited during the intervening years from the insights of scholars representative of several different disciplines. But the doctrine would be substantially the same; and the author's evolution would have been not by way of disjunct leaps but by way of an unfolding of what had already been implicit in his early reading of Bernard *à la Gilson*.

Many pages of Frater Louis' commentary make for poignant reading after the lapse of almost a half-century after the time they

were first written. What he was writing about was not a matter of pure speculation, but a matter, for him, of spiritual life or death.

Take, for instance, Frater Louis' summation of Cistercian asceticism in his proposal for a practical application of St. Bernard's teaching on "man's original simplicity." What he here sketches (SS [1948] pp. 90-91; SS [1980] pp. 119-120.) is not just a practical program for monks in general, but a program which he would spend a lifetime attempting to realize for himself. "The first step in the monk's ascent to God," he writes,

will be to recognize the truth about himself and face the fact of his own duplicity. That means: *simplicity in the sense of sincerity*, a frank awareness of one's own shortcomings.

And was there ever a writer more aware, more frank, and more prone to publish abroad the never-ending litany of his own real or imagined shortcomings? Point Two:

He will also have to overcome the temptation to excuse himself and argue that he is not, in fact, what he is (whether he argues with other men, with himself or with God, it does not matter.) Hence: *simplicity in the sense of meekness-self-effacement, HUMILITY.*"

And we think of all the many instances, recorded and unrecorded, in which a somewhat aggressive and disputatious Fr. Louis went to more than heroic lengths to make amends almost to the point where meekness and self-effacement seem to verge on the obsequious. Take, for instance, his reaction of wholly justifiable umbrage at some of the silly objections raised by one of the Order's censors, who had demanded, among other things, that the phrase "without Christ there is no salvation," used in *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* be qualified. "I insist ... on saying that this seems to me slightly idiotic," wrote the irate Fr. Louis to the Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais: "I will make the correction, as much as he wants, but don't I have the right to tell him what I think of it, provided it is charitable?" (SC, p. 98. Letter of Sept. 1, 1956) A few days earlier he had written to the censor concerned:

When I was at Collegeville recently, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, who is a good judge of character, assured me that I was much more aggressive than I realized. This accounts for that fact that my

letter to you was probably much more violent than I intended it to be and I deeply regret if I have wounded you. It was certainly not my intention to do so. . . . Father, it seems to me that the difficulty is not so great. . . . I certainly felt that by your *demanding* some of the changes in *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*, I was being unnecessarily cramped and the effect on the work, if this principle were pushed to its conclusion, would be a bad one. On the other hand I am certainly grateful for all the care with which you have checked my theological statements. . . ." (SC, pp. 96-97. Letter of Aug. 27, 1956).

No, simplicity in the sense of meekness and self-effacement did not always come easy to the sensitive monk, who went through life with nerve-ends exposed. Here his private journals helped provide something of a release for his pent-up emotional responses to difficult situations; and there were countless occasions when, having preserved a reasonably calm demeanor in the midst of an emotional maelstrom, he turned to his journal and, in private, poured out his anguish and anger.

Point Three admitted of a twofold division:

He must strive to rid himself of everything that is useless, unnecessary to his one big end: the recovery of the divine image, and union with God. Now simplicity takes on the sense of total and uncompromising mortification.

(a) Of the lower appetites: hence the simplicity in food, clothing, dwellings, manner of life as laid down in ... (and here Frater Louis lists some of the sources of early Cistercian usage).

(b) Of the interior senses and the intellect: This means simplicity in devotions, studies, methods of prayer, etc., and calls for the complete simplification in liturgical matters and the decoration of churches for which the early Cistercians were so famous.

(c) Of the WILL. This is the most important task of all. In the works of St. Bernard, the amount of space devoted to other forms of mortification is practically insignificant in comparison to the scores of pages which are given up to the attack of self-will and its utter destruction. Hence the stress on the

great Benedictine means of penance which resumes all others for the monk: OBEDIENCE. This will produce that simplicity which is *synonymous with docility, the trustful obedience of a child towards his father. The supernatural, joyous obedience of the monk who seeks to prove his love for Christ by seeing Him in His representative, the Abbot.* SS [1948], pp. 90-91; SS [1980], pp. 119-120).

The capitalization of WILL and OBEDIENCE, and the italicized lines are by Frater Louis—in token, perhaps, of his realization that these terms were to define the arena in which much of his ascetic struggle was to take place.¹⁴

Step (a) in this process of simplification in matters of food, clothing and the like was largely provided for by the Trappist regime then in force. Some readers might voice the obvious objection, of course, that Thomas Merton was unashamedly a bon vivant up to the day of his death. Witness his December 8th flight to Bangkok, on which he had, he gleefully records in his Asian journal for all posterity to read, “a very comfortable ride, overeating, drinking two free, and strong, Bloody Marys ...”¹⁵ We ought not begrudge Merton his occasional lapses, about which he generally tended to be more vocal than need be. The ascetic regime he followed at Gethsemani was, for him, more exigent than for most of the rest of us. His health was far from robust. The chronic insomnia, colitis, and host of related problems which plagued him and accompanied him throughout the whole of his monastic journey were a burden few of us would have been able to bear while simultaneously, for most of this time, functioning as Father Master, first of the junior monks, then of the novices, carrying on a correspondence with scores of individuals, authoring articles and books remarkable for their number and their quality, and, let us not forget, following the daily round of monastic exercises that began with Vigils and ended with Compline, and included eight choral Offices, to say nothing of the daily conventual Mass (and sometimes two on Sundays and feasts till the '50s) as well as Mass celebrated in private, plus the considerable amount of time reserved for spiritual reading, study, and solitary prayer. His writings and his observable comportment attest, too, to the seriousness with which he

14. Emphases editorially removed in the later edition, SS (1948).

15. *The Asian of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (NY: New Directions, 1973), p. 253.

took simplicity in devotions, studies, methods of prayer and the like; and one always knew where he stood so often as there was question of liturgy and church art and architecture. There was, indeed, a somewhat cruel joke about his ideal form of choral Office: the brethren standing facing each other in two choirs in an utterly bare oratory, and in an unbroken silence interrupted only by an occasional profound bow and a gently murmured. . . “N a d a.” Again, whatever his excesses may have been before his conversion, he brought to the monastery a highly disciplined approach to all that touched on the intellectual life. As for point 3 (c), which he summed up in the one word OBEDIENCE, we all know (and interpret diversely) his sustained struggle in this arena, a struggle which lasted the whole of his monastic life, and which, howsoever painful, seems now to have been (at least as some of us see it) a necessary condition for his growth and spiritual enrichment.

Frater Louis' contribution to *The Spirit of Simplicity* ends on an eminently practical note. In his “Conclusion” (omitted in the edition of 1980) he formulates his plea that we return to our sources in order to appreciate at greater depth our Cistercian heritage. But such a return, he admits, depends on the accessibility of the sources for English-speaking communities. A meditative reading of the ascetic and mystical treatises of our Cistercian Fathers, he writes, will help ensure fidelity to our own traditions which “will procure us the special graces which God has placed there for us, and *which we will not be able to find anywhere else.*” (SS [1948], p.138) And he goes on: “We can never hope to acquire the spirit of simplicity characteristic of our Order if we never enter into contact, directly or at least indirectly with the sources from which it flowed.” (SS, p. 138).

Rendering the twelfth-century sources accessible to English-speaking communities was no mere velleity on the part of Frater Louis. The memorandum he addressed to the General Chapter in 1946 offers a prospectus for a veritable library of translations (with commentaries) and studies on early Cistercian spirituality and history.¹⁶ A number of these projects had already been completed; and some of them were to be completed at a later date. It is clear, however, that already Frater Louis had acquired, at this early date, a familiarity with the basic sources such as can be qualified only as impressive, to use a rather weak expression. The fact that this was also the period when he was following the standard course of studies leading to ordination to the priesthood worked to his advantage. He once told me

16. See above, Footnote 10.

that ten minutes was usually all he needed to cover the assigned material for a given day, which left him free for other reading and study of a more serious sort (while the rest of his confreres were working against the clock in the hope, often vain, of finishing the day's assignment within the prescribed time).

What is important to retain at this point is that, already, Frater Louis, soon to become Father Louis was reading, studying, and placing his erudition at the service of a steadily growing body of readers. Almost immediately after his ordination to the priesthood on Ascension Thursday, 26 May, 1949, he began giving conferences to the novices and young monks already enrolled in the program of studies in philosophy and theology. Thus began his splendid "Monastic Orientation" conferences, most of them preserved in outline form, and, beginning at a later date, taped on the first tape-recorder to make it into our cloister, a serviceable Wollensak. Fr. Louis was now officially charged with contributing to the formation of a new generation of monks and future priests (since, at that time, the choir novice was inevitably destined for eventual ordination); and the formation which Fr. Louis was helping to ensure was a specifically monastic and specifically Cistercian formation. There was nothing the least bit parochial or insular about this formation—quite the contrary. The conferences did indeed range over vast territories; but what brought everything into a certain kind of unity and clear focus was the conferencier's insightful skill in relating everything to the Cistercian monastic life as lived here at Gethsemani (or, at least, as ideally lived here at Gethsemani). "The classes are going along well enough but they take a lot of time" he writes to his long-term correspondent of some twenty years, Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, S.D.S., who served as typist for his "Monastic Orientation" conferences. "In all, you know, I have some seventy students. And I am building up from the ground—trying to develop a spiritual theology that suits a contemplative monastery! And one which gives the proper place to the Fathers and especially to our Cistercians" (*RJ*, p. 198. Letter of January 7, 1950).

Then came the regular visitation of May, 1951, at the end of which Fr. Louis found himself appointed Master of the Students—"a new thing here," he writes to the same Sr. Thérèse. "I have to form the whole Scholasticate, so to speak, out of air. It is a job. You understand that I belong entirely and before all to my charges. . . Please do not forget to pray for my scholastics. There are nineteen of them—and good ones too" (*RJ*, p. 207. Letter of May 21, 1951).

And he really did belong to us.

The better to give an idea of the kind of material with which we were regaled, perhaps it would be worthwhile to reproduce here the Table of Contents of Fr Louis' *An Introduction to Cistercian Theology*, one of the many lecture-series given during his time as Master of Scholastics (as we students were called back then):

Preliminary Matter

The Desire of the Soul for the Knowledge of God

Introduction: The Desire to Know God

Importance of Knowledge - "scientia Dei"

Scriptural Basis

St. Gregory of Nyssa on Moses

Dispositions in Approach to its Study

Knowledge in Saint Bernard

Truth in the Cistercian Life

"Curiositas" and "Consideratio"

Diagram: St. Benedict's Degrees of Humility and

St. Bernard's Degrees of Truth

Questions for Discussion After Sermons 81, 82 (*In Cantica*)

Basis for St. Bernard's Doctrine on "Image and Likeness"

(St. Augustine)

Diagram: Degrees of Ascent to Wisdom

Part One

The Region of Unlikeness (*Regio Dissimilitudinis*)

Christian Socratism

Need of Recollection to Heal Wounds of "Curiositas"

Humility - Truth - The Likeness to Jesus We are Created to Love God

Portrait of the Soul "in Regione Dissimilitudinis" Conversion

The Essence of conversion - Humility

The Danger of Insensibility

Sidelights on St. Bernard and quietism

Abandonment: True and False Beatitudes

Self-Will

Consectaria: Trust

"Regio Dissimilitudinis" in the Monastery

Part Two

The School of Charity (Scholar Caritatis)

Introduction: Texts: St. Benedict: *Prologue*
Exordium Magnum
Scriptura

Diagram: The Sacerdotal Prayer and
 The Canon of the Mass

Our Lady and the Nascent Church
Dominici Scholar Servitii
 St. Bernard's *Pentecost Sermons*

Truth as the Basis of Asceticism
 St. Bernard's *Epistle to Henry Murdac*

St. Bernard's *Dedication Sermons*
 A Digression on St. Augustine's *Enarratio in Ps. 41*:
 A Source of Cistercian Teaching on Charity
 Connatural Knowledge of God
 Compassion
 Degrees of Love
 Union in Penance
 Union in Joy

By way of a prefatory note concerning the nature of what Fr. Louis calls "these rough notes" there is a formula in which the Father Master sums up in Benedictine and Bernardine terms the essential of Cistercian mysticism as he understands it:

The Cistercian saints were eminently practical in their doctrine. It was merely the expression of their whole interior life—and this, according to St. Benedict, could be nothing else but a search for union with God (*si vere Deum quaerit*) through the love of Jesus Christ (*amori Christi omnino nihil praeponant*) by the purification of our hearts through perfect love which "casts out fear" (see *Rule*, ch. 7, end) and restores the soul to the perfect likeness of God.¹⁷

17. Unpublished mimeographed lecture-notes, Volume 19 of the *Merton Collected Essays*, prefatory note (without page-number).

Meanwhile, Fr. Louis, whose international reputation as an author of note had already been firmly established thanks to the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), had begun publishing works in which St. Bernard featured large. In 1948 there was the lengthy monograph, "The Transforming Union in St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross," published in installments in the Order's periodical *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum* between April, 1948 and January, 1950.¹⁸ The title itself suggests the author's intent: to demonstrate that Bernard's mysticism stands comparison even with that of the great Carmelite. The last installment had no sooner been published than he was writing to the great St. Bernard scholar, Fr. Jean Leclercq, that

...the rather technical study which I undertook for the *Collectanea* and which, as you see on reading it, was beyond my capacities as a theologian. The earlier sections especially, in my study, contain many glaring and silly errors—or at least things that are often very badly expressed there. If I write a book on the saint I shall try to redeem myself without entering into the technical discussions that occupy M. Gilson in his rather brilliant study [*The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*] (*SC*, p. 20).

Fr. Jean was less censorious. When this lengthy article was re-printed in 1980, together with Father Louis' contribution to *The Spirit of Simplicity* and the equally lengthy study, *Action and Contemplation in St. Bernard* (based on lecture notes), Fr. Jean marvelled at their timeliness, even after more than a quarter-century:

Indeed these texts have lost nothing of their value of timeliness. One could even say that in this era of post-critical Bernardine studies, it is useful to find an approach which is, so to speak, pre-critical: ingenuous, fresh, almost naïve. In each of these texts the reader will find an assemblage of sharp insights and justified admiration for Bernard (*TMSB*, p. 11).

18. *Collectanea O.C.R.* 9 (1948) pp. 107-117; pp. 210-223; 10 (1949) pp. 41-52; pp. 353-361; 11 (1950) pp. 25-38.

And Fr. Jean goes on to analyze each of the three essays in a masterful analysis invaluable as a guide to the reader.

His final word is:

His patient association with St. Bernard as well as his own acuity explain Merton's special insights. Thanks to them these works of his monastic youth on the Abbot of Clairvaux preserve the true value of the texts. They are and remain classic (TMSB, p. 13).

Many pages of Merton's history of American Trappist-Cistercians and Cistercian spirituality, *The Waters of Siloe* (1949) are similarly the fruit of Fr. Louis' reading of Bernard of Clairvaux; and it was by no means a publicity ploy when The Order's History Commission published in 1953 their collection of scholarly studies to mark the 800th anniversary of Bernard's death, it was Fr. Louis who provided the preface, "Saint Bernard moine et apôtre."¹⁹

1953 was also the year in which Fr. Louis unwittingly became the victim of a bit of European editorial manipulation. Permission for him to write an article on "St. Bernard and America" for the French monastic journal *Témoignages* had, for reasons unknown to me, been refused. Fr. Louis wrote to the editor expressing his apologies, but also commenting briefly on the theme he had foresworn:

Saint Bernard's position in America is a rather unusual one. Americans have discovered the Cistercians with an enthusiasm which, although somewhat superficial and disturbing, yet reflects a genuine hunger for God ...

Yet even Cistercians themselves in this country of ours are not very well acquainted with their Father—Saint Bernard. They will celebrate the centenary year of 1953 with a dutiful piety. Conferences and similar exercises will be given in his honor at Gethsemani. Yet with the close of the year, there will still be no essential change in the situation. As Father

19. Commission d'Histoire de l'Ordre de Cîteaux, *Bernard de Clairvaux. Preface de Thomas Merton* (Paris: Editions Alsatia, 1953), pp. VII-XV. Published in the original English version in *Disputed Questions* (1960) pp. 274-290, as well as in the English journals *Cross and Crown* 5 (1953) pp. 251-263, and *The Tablet* 201 (May 1953) pp. 483-439 and pp. 466-467.

Master of the scholastics, I am able to observe their reaction to the reading of Saint Bernard. Only one amongst them understands and loves him, and he is a convert with a thoroughly cultured and intellectual background. Two or three are slowly getting to know Saint Bernard with the aid of Gilson's book; most of the rest have tried, from time to time, to do the same. They are repelled by his allegorism. It gives them an initial impression of a shallow rhetoric. With typical American pragmatism they ask "What is the purpose of all these allegories?" "Do they truly express the meaning of the sacred text?" and so forth. They are completely lacking in a feeling for symbolism, and are as yet too unacquainted with Scripture to penetrate its inner meaning as our Fathers did before us.²⁰

The somewhat unscrupulous French editor managed to get the article he had unsuccessfully requested by printing these paragraphs from Fr. Louis' personal letter, and then tacking on, without transition, some pages borrowed from the French edition of *The Waters of Siloe*.²¹ The testimony provided by the letter is rather on the poignant side, given the fact that, for the preceding four years, Fr. Louis had been preaching St. Bernard in season and out of season. "Conferences. . . will be given in his (Bernard's) honor at Gethsemani." Indeed, we who were in the scholasticate at that time remember them well: we were the ones who had to give them. Frater Abraham on "St. Bernard and the Love of Jesus;" Frater Eymard on "St. Bernard and the Eucharist;" Frater John Eudes on "St. Bernard and Truth;" myself on "St. Bernard and. . . Music". . . Fr. Louis' mood changed, and even before the series of chapter-room St. Bernard conferences had ended he was writing the editor of *Collectanea O.C.R.*, in a typically Mertonian *volte-face*: "Pray for me, Father, and for my scholastics. They are such wonderful monks. They gave some very good conferences on St. Bernard, conferences that belied the hasty note of mine that was published in *Témoignages*. They *do* love and understand his spirit" (SC, p. 67).

Another Bernardine fruit of 1953 was Fr. Louis' *The Last of*

20. Taken from the mimeographed *Saint Bernard and the Church*, Vol. I (Spencer, Mass.: St. Joseph's Abbey, 1955) p. 48.

21. *Témoignages. Cahiers de la Pierre-qui-vire* 38-39 (1953) pp. 88-98

*the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Doctor Mellifluus.*²² Its occasion was the publication of the encyclical letter issued by Pius XII to mark the eight-hundredth anniversary of the saint's death—though the bulk of the encyclical was actually ghostwritten by the then Abbot General of the Cistercians of the Common Observance, Dom Sighard Kleiner.²³ Fr. Louis was impressed by the encyclical, and wrote to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr:

Have you seen the new Encyclical on St. Bernard? At first when I heard about it in a newspaper clipping, it sounded tame. I never saw anything so strong on the mystical life. It was a great inspiration to me to read the original Latin, when our Procurator General sent me the text from the *Osservatore Romano* (RJ, p. 214. Letter of June 30, 1953).

Everything about the handsomely printed book is fine: the Preface, which explains the use Pius XII makes of St. Bernard's doctrine to bring the highest spiritual perfection within reach of all Christians, whether in the cloister or the world; the biographical sketch, "The Man and the Saint;" the introduction to "Saint Bernard's Writings" which, in astonishingly few words, goes to the heart of each of Bernard's major writings and communicates their substance; then the equally insightful "Notes on the Encyclical *Doctor Mellifluus*," followed by the text of the encyclical in English translation. Predictably, Fr. Louis rated the book light-weight: ". . . I have a small volume on St. Bernard about to appear," he writes to Fr. Jean Leclercq in late April of 1954.

It is very slight, not a formal life, simply a brief introduction to the saint and to the recent Encyclical. . . When you see it, you will probably agree that it adds nothing to the number of excellent studies of St. Bernard, including your own. . . (SC, p. 76, Letter of April 27, 1954).

There are, of course, a number of excellent introductions to St. Bernard and his doctrine, and each can be recommended as serving a

22. Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers: St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical "Doctor Mellifluus"* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954).

23. From a conversation with Fr. Albéric Altermatt, monk of Hauterive, Switzerland (where Dom Sighard was once Superior), and frequent resident at the Common Observance Generalate in Rome.

particular purpose. But for the reader unfamiliar with Bernard and his times, unfamiliar, too, with monastic spirituality and medieval theology, *The Last of the Fathers* has much to offer. Indeed, it has much to offer even the professional medievalist, in that it provides a structure around which he or she can organize related material.

1954 by no means marked the end of Fr. Louis' involvement with St. Bernard. Conference notes and articles continued to appear. But now the moment has come for me to face up squarely to the fact that Fr. Louis had serious problems with St. Bernard. These dated back to the days when, early on in his monastic career, the young Frater Louis began having doubts as to the contemplative dimension of the monastic life lived at Gethsemani. His uneasiness became compounded as, more and more, he had to address himself to the problem of his aspirations to a greater solitude, to a more absolute form of the contemplative life. His growing reputation as a spiritual master did nothing to ease his situation. Our abbot, Fr Timothy, once quoted the priest-sociologist, Andrew Greeley—how accurately, I do not know—as having concluded, at the end of a survey of life in religious communities in the U.S.A., that the greatest problem in these communities was *envy*. It would seem that anyone who, by reason of a particular excellence stands out in a given religious community, risks getting swatted down by those who feel their own stature diminished by whoever happens to stand higher—and Fr. Louis stood head and shoulders above the rest of us. Most of the brethren could only rejoice at this. But there were also those, decent enough fellows for the most part, who, for the greater glory of God and the well-being of the Order, made the swatting down of Thomas Merton one of their principal and most pleasurable occupations. The Novice Master in particular feared for the safety of his charges who were being exposed, he felt, to the deviant spirituality being preached by the Master of Students to novices and junior monks alike. "I would obviously be in the wrong," writes Fr. Louis to the Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais, in 1954,

if I wanted to make Cistercians love the Carthusian life. It would be a very great injustice to orientate cenobites towards the hermitage. I assure you, Most Reverend Father, that this I have never done. . . When I speak of exterior solitude, I endeavor to do it in the sense of Saint Bernard, whom I do not fail to cite. I speak very little of this solitude,

as I concentrate my conferences above all on charity obedience, and the virtues of the common life, etc. Let anyone consult the notes of the last two years..(SC, pp. 74-75. Letter of April 14, 1954).

And in the same letter he refers to his longtime sparring partner, Fr. R., "who fancies I try to push all of the students towards solitude and infused contemplation, [and who] preaches in chapter that one must not desire infused contemplation, and even aiming at it makes us run the risk of becoming insane. . . (SC, p. 75). Nor should we forget that there was more than one of the Order's censors who, from the security of his own comprehensive understanding of the Cistercian charism, was alarmed at writings obviously the product of a spirit *peu cistercien*. In a context such as this, it was inevitable that Merton, who as Frater Louis had read and loved Bernard for the sheer joy of it, now, first as Master of the Students and later as Novice Master, discoursed on Bernard, universally acknowledged as *the* principal exponent of Cistercian spirituality, with necessarily mixed feelings. See, this was *Bernard* he was teaching and writing about, not John of the Cross! This was *cenobitic* spirituality he was preaching, not anything that could be fairly challenged as suspect of hermitism! Symptomatic of his wounded sensibilities was his decision, upon being appointed Novice Master in 1954, to take a private vow. Writing to the Abbot General, he says:

Perhaps you will say that Dom James is quite imprudent to make this choice (of Merton as Novice Master). To protect him, and to protect the house and the novices, I have made a vow...not to say anything to the novices that would diminish their respect for the Cistercian cenobitic life and orientate them towards something else. If I happen to violate this promise, I will have to notify the Father Abbot. I will try to do all that is possible to give them a truly Cistercian life, cenobitical and liturgical...(SC, p. 93. Letter of Oct. 18, 1955).

And he kept this vow.

For himself, however, Fr. Louis had long since sorted out the problem of an Order-specific spirituality. In early February of 1952, he had written the Carthusian writer, Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion:

For me this matter of spirituality tries, superficially, to be a problem. Yet I know it can never really be a problem because after all what I love is not spirituality, but God. Therefore, when considering my 'obligation' to form my scholastics along specifically Cistercian lines, and according to something called 'Cistercian Spirituality,' I can do it with abandonment and objectivity (I hope) and still remain myself. It may sound like heresy, but personally I feel that if I become too meticulously Cistercian (according to some ideal category in the spiritual books), I will only be for my pains less of a Cistercian, because my solution is yours: for me to be a Cistercian is to be a man who loves God in a Cistercian monastery—in sympathy with St. John of the Cross and Ruysbroeck and a few other people who are not Cistercians, and also with a few others who are. It does not seem to me to be a reserved or even a mortal sin to live in a Cistercian monastery with more actual sympathy for St. John of the Cross than St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Though I by no means refuse to read St. Bernard (SC, p. 33. Letter of February 9, 1952).

And he continues speaking about the particular "problem," if problem it be, that Bernard now poses for him:

I just cannot assert that he nourishes me as much as others do . . . For when I read St. Bernard, I am more drawn to study than to contemplation. He does not draw me to rest in silence and darkness: he evokes spontaneous admiration for a rather brilliant theological manner of meditating on the Scriptures which is, for me, something short of prayer. This is what other Cistercians find in him. I therefore can find what they find. But since it is not what I seek, I cannot pretend to rest there. I have no quarrel with them: they can have their gay garden. I am happy with St. John of the Cross among the rocks. When I find God then I am a Cistercian, because then I reach the end for which He brought me to the monastery. The rest is a waste of time (SC, p. 33).

Perhaps Fr. Louis is here a bit dismissive of "other Cistercians," for more than one Cistercian monk or nun finds in Bernard what Merton finds in John of the Cross; and anyone who really knows Bernard finds, not only gay gardens, but rock-strewn

landscapes in which even a John of the Cross would have felt at home. We might also recall that, a scant decade earlier, Frater Louis was enthusiastically describing to his friend Bob Lax his discovery of the Eden of the writings of the Fathers, among whom Bernard figured significantly (and we all know that "Eden" means "Garden"). If Fr. Louis now preferred companionship with John of the Cross among the rocks to the gay gardens of the Fathers, this is less an indication of his formal renunciation of the past than an indication of the direction in which his spiritual journey had taken him, the direction along which he was to travel still farther.

But there is another reason why Fr. Louis almost inevitably would experience hesitations vis-à-vis Bernard of Clairvaux. As he was to write to his mentor and close friend Mark Van Doren in 1962, "... the safe I can no longer stomach" (*CRJ*, p. 45. Letter of Aug. 9, 1962). Just so. And who was as "safe" as Bernard of Clairvaux? Bernard who was the champion of orthodoxy. Bernard who always knew what the score was. Bernard the arbiter of political and theological correct thinking. To the best of my knowledge, this was an aspect of Bernard which Fr. Louis reserved for an occasional aside remark—usually sarcastic. Thus, when Michael Mott correctly states that, in speaking of the battles between Bernard and Peter Abelard in his novitiate conferences, Fr. Louis "said he preferred the man of passion, Abelard," (*SMTM*, p. 285). This is a statement which needs to be kept in context; for if it is taken to mean that, *in general*, Fr. Louis preferred Abelard to Bernard, this is one damn fool statement. Bernard, indeed, was no less a man of passion than Peter Abelard. But it was Abelard with his penchant for getting himself into hot water by his brashness, his lack of conformism, his readiness to take risks, who wins the sympathy of many of us. If the choice be between the Establishment and the marginalized, the disenfranchised, who of us would opt for the Establishment? And Bernard, for Fr. Louis, came in time to mean the Establishment. It is unlikely that he would have written in 1963 what he had written a decade earlier to the Abbot General about Pius XII's encyclical *Doctor Melifluus*: "The reading of the encyclical has done me a lot of good, and I want with all my heart to become a son worthy of our Father Saint Bernard. . ." (*SC*, p. 65. Letter to Dom Gabriel Sortais, Aug. 13, 1953).

Still, just the year before his death, in answer to a query from an Italian correspondent about the major influences on his life and thought, Fr. Louis included among the European thinkers and religious who had most influenced him: St. Bernard, alongside Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Augustine, St. Gregory the Great. (Mystics formed a

separate category, and included Tauler, Ruysbroeck, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux.) (*RJ*, p. 349. Letter to Mario Falsina, March 25, 1967).

I suggested earlier that the contents of Frater Louis' box in the novitiate could well stand as an image depicting the essential Thomas Merton. It would be closer to reality, however, were we to add to the volume of St. John of the Cross and Gilson's *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* a few other books to suggest the later sweep of Fr. Louis' interests: the Sufi mystics, Lao Tse, Confucius, Hasidim, Zen masters...; and besides letters from John Paul and Bob Lax and Mark Van Doren there should be letters from grade-school girls, popes, peace activists, folk singers, prisoners on death row, composers... But whatever the additions to the original contents of that private box, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* has got to remain part of the picture. Definitely.

Here in my own hermitage (of sorts) I keep a set of the four volumes of St. Bernard as edited in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, volumes 182-185. They were bound by Fr. Lambert in sturdy but ugly blue library cloth, and are not particularly attractive. Any really serious reading of St. Bernard should be done, of course, with the help of the fine critical edition by Fr. Louis' great friend and correspondent, Fr. Jean Leclercq. But those four volumes of the *P.L.* have a special meaning for me, and I have them frequently open on my desk. These are the volumes of Bernard Dom James gave Frater Louis for his personal use, with permission to underline the texts and annotate them as he wished. I can see the pages of Bernard which meant the most to Fr. Louis, and I often profit by his ever helpful underlining and marginal glosses to deepen my own love for Bernard and his doctrine.

In 1990 I was at Lyon and Dijon for the St. Bernard colloquy organized under the auspices of the editors of the series *Sources Chrétiennes*. The days were jam-packed with conferences by preeminent scholars who treated of every possible aspect of the saint's life and teaching. The final conference was to be a fifteen-minute summation by Fr. Dominique Bertrand, S.J., of all that had preceded. Clearly an impossible task. In making his presentation, however, Fr. Bertrand accomplished the impossible by drawing on a young writer who, during the 1953 St. Bernard centenary, had ventured to define the essential Bernard:

Like every other saint...Bernard is a man who, plunging to the depths of his human nothingness, comes back to us resplendent with the divine mercy. There is nothing left for us to see and praise in him but God.

God transforms souls in Himself in order to satisfy the infinite exigencies of His mercy. The soul that is fullest of God's mercy gives God the fullest glory.

Bernard of Clairvaux was plainly conscious of the fact that his own life was to serve as evidence of the outpouring of God's mercy upon the world . . .

This outpouring of divine grace through the apostle sent by God is a manifestation of the inexhaustible love and mercy within God Himself—a fecundity which cannot contain itself but must pour itself out into the hearts of men in order to inebriate them with the wisdom of sanctity.²⁴

24. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), pp. 281-282. This is the original English version of the Preface to the collection of Bernardine studies referred to above, note 19.