

## Daughter of Carmel; Son of Cîteaux: A Friendship Endures An Interview about Thomas Merton with Angela Collins, O.C.D.

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*Conducted by Michael Downey  
Edited by R. Andrew Hartmans*

Sister Angela of the Eucharist (née Collins), O.C.D., was born in 1917 in Irvington, New Jersey, and entered the Carmelite Monastery in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1937. In 1957 she was elected Prioress of the Louisville Carmel and served in this capacity for three years after which she became Mistress of Novices. It was while serving as Novice Mistress in 1965 that Mother Angela went to the Carmel in Savannah, Georgia, to serve as Prioress. She has served the Savannah Carmel as its Prioress for the majority of years since her arrival there.

It was while Prioress at the Louisville Carmel that Mother Angela first came in contact with Thomas Merton. Some of his letters to her are published in *The School of Charity*, the third volume of Merton's letters, edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. She is currently Prioress of the Carmelite Monastery in Savannah. This interview was conducted there in January 1995. M.D.

*Downey:* How did you come to know Thomas Merton?

*Sister Angela:* Before I became Prioress, Thomas Merton used to come into Louisville for medical treatment. He went to the hospital and he would also see his doctor at the same time. But because his visits to the hospital did not consume that much time, and because

he was brought into Louisville by lay brothers as they distributed bread, fruitcake, and cheese to stores in the Louisville area, he asked if he could come and spend that interim time at the Carmelite Monastery chapel in prayer.

Sometimes the brothers would take longer than anticipated and he would ask if he could speak to the Prioress who was Mother Seraphim. She used to speak with him in our "speak room" in the old house on Park Avenue. The speak room had grates that crisscrossed, plus spikes that pointed outward and a heavy black curtain inside. She never opened the curtain. She just talked with him through it.

Now as far as myself, at this early period I had developed a rather negative attitude toward Father Merton, because of things that I had heard about him. It wasn't scandalous. Maybe I was a perfectionist. I was deeply rooted in our tradition as Carmelites. I didn't understand his situation and I felt that he was not giving a good example of contemplative life. We had heard stories of different nurses with whom he had come into contact at the hospital. Sometimes he would be waiting for the brothers to pick him up at the hospital, and the nurses would gather around him and they would talk with him. This might have been okay, but I didn't feel that way. I felt that he should not have involved himself in that kind of petty conversation while he was out of enclosure for the specific reason of taking care of his health.

*Downey:* Are you saying that within the setting of the Carmelite Monastery you had the impression that Thomas Merton had been interacting with the nurses and perhaps that there may have been a little bit more of this sort of thing? And this as early as the 1950s?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. Shortly after I became Prioress in 1957 he came to visit our Carmel. He asked if he could speak with the Prioress. He was told that we had a new Prioress, named Mother Angela, who was just elected. The Sister added that she would have to ask me if I had time to talk to him in the speak room. She came and told me that he was there and I said to her: "I really do not want to continue this. I'm just against these elongated conferences with this Trappist monk." She thought that this was terrible, and begged saying: "Please. What would Mother Seraphim ever think?" And I replied, "Well, she's in heaven now!" She kept pleading. Finally, I gave in and told her she could go and tell him that I would have only about fifteen or twenty minutes to talk with him in the speak room. So he came back to the

speak room and we talked. But the atmosphere was very frigid. I was very cold and just listened to what he said and gave brief answers.

*Downey:* If I understand correctly, you did more of the listening and Thomas Merton did more of the talking. It seems as though he was looking to you as a sounding board. It does not seem to have been a conversation between peers.

*Sister Angela:* That could be. Yes. I like the term "sounding board," because he didn't know me at all. We had our fifteen or twenty minutes. I told him that I would be praying for him, and the other nuns would too, because we knew he was having health problems, although we didn't know what they were.

About a month later he came back to Louisville to see the doctor, and he came to the monastery again. He asked if he could speak with me. The Sister said, "Father, I'm very sorry, but we're in retreat now, and the Prioress doesn't usually have visitors during this period." And Father Merton said, "Oh, I understand. I didn't realize that you were in retreat. Maybe the next time I come I will be able to talk with her." Sister made no promises and said that she would give me the message. But while he was there, he wrote a note to me. It was just scribbled on yellow paper. It said, "I'm so sorry that I missed you because you were in retreat. Possibly the next time I come I can talk with you." I thought to myself, "Well, we will see." I didn't really want to start something that would become a regular thing.

After that note, he came to the monastery a month or so later. He asked if he could speak with me again. This time I was a little warmer. I was still very opposed to the idea that this would become a regular program, and that I would have to talk to him all the time. However, he kept coming to visit and asking for me, so I began to talk more kindly to him. All I can say is that our relationship grew from there as time moved on. I came to know him very intimately from the things he would share with me. He would tell me about various problems that he was having at the monastery, at Gethsemani, and, particularly, the problems with Dom James Fox. He would be all over the place. He would talk about Vietnam and the monastery and the problems with the Abbot. All different topics, including the scruples he suffered from continuing to be a writer, even in the monastery. He was involved in many things. I didn't know much about Vietnam or any of the political situations.

*Downey:* That being the case, what do you think he was looking for from you?

*Sister Angela:* I never felt that he was looking for something from me. He just instinctively felt that I was someone he could trust. He felt that right away. He felt that it was very freeing for him to talk to me about the problems he was having at the monastery and many deep issues as well. I think he felt a sense of trust. He told others, "I have always had a deep affection for Mother Angela." And I, myself, didn't know that affection was involved. But it was a very good kind of affection.

*Downey:* Did he write to you while you were Prioress in Louisville?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. Many of the letters and notes that I would receive from him were given to me during my term as Prioress in Louisville. And they were in the packet that I burned before I came to Savannah.

*Downey:* But you kept the ones that you received while you were in Savannah?

*Sister Angela:* Pretty much. Except for these top three. [Sister Angela had a stack of letters at hand during the interview, M.D.] These three I received in Louisville. The rest of the letters that I received while in Louisville, I burned. Some of the information that I now have came through John Howard Griffin. It was through him, after Father Louis' [Merton's] death, that I learned some things about Merton, in connection with me, that I did not know at the time. They were excerpts from Merton's diary and not intended for publication.

*Downey:* Would you care to say something about your reasons for letting the letters go? Why did you burn them?

*Sister Angela:* One of the reasons was detachment; probably not the right kind of detachment. I recalled that the Carmelites, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila did the same thing. They burned each other's letters during the Inquisition for reasons of safety. Once I knew that I was going to Savannah to another Carmel, and that it was open-ended—for three years and possibly more—I thought about what I would do with the letters. I didn't want to bring them with me and I didn't want to just leave them there in my old cell. They prob-

ably wouldn't have been destroyed, but I just didn't want someone else to read them. Others wouldn't understand to begin with. So I decided that the best thing to do was to burn them. Part of the reason for burning them was detachment and part of the reason was for privacy. I also burned a number of letters from Abbot Fox. You see, both Thomas Merton and Dom James had been writing to me; each on a very personal level. In addition, each one had been *speaking* with me at various times about very *confidential* matters.

*Downey:* So you knew Dom James Fox as well?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. Abbot Fox used to come in to Louisville occasionally on business or for other reasons. He sometimes stopped at our monastery and would speak with the Prioress.

*Downey:* Recognizing and respecting the confidential nature of your conversations with these two men, is there anything you might say that would throw light on the nature of their relationship?

*Sister Angela:* There is not much I would add to what is now generally known through various publications. It is fairly well known that their relationship was strained. I might add this, however. It seemed to me that there was a certain element of jealousy on the part of Abbot Fox in respect to my relationship with Father Louis. Abbot Fox did some mean things to Father Louis, and Merton would talk to me at times about these things. He was deeply hurt and angry—justifiably so. My heart went out to him fully. I felt the depth of his suffering and shared it with him.

*Downey:* You were in an intriguing position in that you did not initiate the conversations with Merton. Rather, he initiated conversations with you. It is striking to me that Merton is a kind of a spiritual guide for so many people. Many would think that he was coming into Louisville to listen to Mother Angela, when in fact it was the other way around. The priest or the monk is usually thought to be the confessor to the nun. And so this is a new twist on what many think about Merton. It was not that you were going to him. He sought counsel from you.

*Sister Angela:* Well, not counsel, but sharing. He was suffering so much; from Dom James particularly. He had an immediate sense of trust in me. There were times in our conversations when he would

upbraid the Abbot and get really worked up. His voice was shaking. Later I learned of many more or less trivial things that Dom James was responsible for. Some of these were very funny to me. One time he said that Dom James tweaked his hair as he walked by him. Father Louis, it seems, was typing and Abbot James came into the room and, as he went by, he tweaked Father Louis' hair. Merton said that he just wanted to swear, but instead he kept silent. In relating this he said to me, "Aren't you proud of me?" This was a real conflict for him. I came to feel that Abbot James was, perhaps, somewhat jealous of the relationship that he sensed existed between Thomas Merton and myself.

*Downey:* Was that because of the trust that Merton placed in you? Perhaps Dom James thought that such trust should have been in the context of the relationship between Abbot and monk. Would that be fair to say?

*Sister Angela:* It would be reasonably fair. There were times when Thomas Merton was very upset about various other matters that would strike me as funny. One time he was close to tears and I burst out laughing. He questioned why I was laughing and I said, "Well, Father, it's so funny what you're saying." He replied, "It is funny, but he's driving me nuts." Another time the brothers came into Louisville, and John of the Cross [one of the monks of Gethsemani at the time] brought me a letter from Father Louis saying that he wanted to apologize for upbraiding the Abbot. Merton explained in the letter that he was sorry for losing his cool and that the Abbot must have had his good reasons. Father Louis was truly very humble. There were many experiences where I was witness to his humility. Many people don't connect humility with him, but he *was* very humble.

*Downey:* You talk about his humility as being, in some ways, exemplary. What did you gain from the interchange that you had with him? Obviously, he was not the spiritual guide for you that he has become to so many others. But in the course of your interaction did you learn something about the Christian life or the spiritual life?

*Sister Angela:* That is very hard for me to evaluate. I know that at one point I wrote to him with the feeling that much of what we were sharing was of deep spiritual value to me, and I asked him if he would ever become my spiritual director. He wrote back and said that I could

try but if he knew anything about Dom James, Dom James would never let something like that go through.

*Downey:* Do you think that was because of the jealousy you speak of?

*Sister Angela:* I don't think so. I think at that point Thomas Merton was getting more and more known. And it's not their [the Cistercians'] tradition to have their priests giving spiritual direction outside their own community. Thomas Merton was growing so fast. He couldn't help it. Because of the books he was writing, hundreds of people were writing to him and all wanted special relationships and favors. I thought that was so comical.

*Downey:* So did he become your spiritual director? Or your confessor?

*Sister Angela:* Well it would have been more in the area of spiritual direction for me. Questions like: Where was I at in this stage of my life? What was I experiencing in prayer? Was it "for the birds" or was it a development in growing closer to a union with Christ? That's where our conversation was. I did seek his guidance and gifted knowledge in spiritual matters. He would know instantly if someone was genuine or phony!

*Downey:* Even though you considered him something of a spiritual director, it never came to pass that he served in this capacity in any formal way, let's say with the approval of his Abbot. Is that correct?

*Sister Angela:* Yes! We had been sharing anyway, but it wasn't a spiritual director relationship. And anything he would say to me that wasn't in specific connection with my own spiritual development was in our own mutual sharing with one another. There was a sharing on both sides. He would tell me things such as that he felt like he was so engulfed in God's presence that he just wanted to dance. They weren't things that he would just tell anybody, I don't think. It was more in connection with his own prayer development and union with God. Sometimes he would express these things in amusing ways, but I always knew what he was saying. For instance, one time he spoke of spiritual delights in this way: "All day I was experiencing soft punches in my heart."

*Downey:* What other kinds of things did you share with him?

*Sister Angela:* After I was no longer Prioress, I didn't have the freedom to visit with him. So most of my communication with him was by letter.

*Downey:* So most of your conversations with him were exclusively when you were serving as Prioress.

*Sister Angela:* Yes. And then whatever letters I wrote when I was still in Louisville and not Prioress. These were not simply on a spiritual level, but also concerned with problems that I saw in the community. I asked him how to deal with them.

*Downey:* Did he give you some tips on dealing with problems?

*Sister Angela:* He really did. Some of that is in this letter. [Sister Angela held up one of three of Merton's letters written to her while she was still in Louisville, and which she had saved. M.D.]

*Downey:* Did you find him insightful?

*Sister Angela:* Oh yes. Very much. Father Louis and I were talking about education for the nuns. He said perhaps there would be a way for some of the nuns to attend a conference or symposium outside the community. However he said that we would have to be careful. That's what I liked about him. Some people felt that he was *avant garde* about things and that nothing mattered. But it did matter to him that we wouldn't go out on any and every occasion in order to get educated. He told me that we would have to be very discreet about letting people go out of the monastery. To a question about whether one of our nuns should be permitted to go to a music festival in Miami, he responded that it was one thing to go out for education, but it was quite another thing to go out for a musical event. He said, "I don't go for that. And besides," he said, "I've been in Miami and it's a dump."

He didn't just go along with everything I said. Sometimes he said, "I think that's a mistake." Thomas Merton was very practical and that's why I could always trust him.

*Downey:* You and Merton were both trying to live deeply contemplative lives. Did he help you to understand the contemplative life better?

*Sister Angela:* I don't think he really did. He was immersed in a spirituality that was wholly Cistercian and I was very immersed in

mine [Carmelite]. We were each deeply rooted in our own tradition. There are some differences, but not a great deal, between the two. They are both traditions of silence, solitude and prayer. We [Carmelites] had built-in recreation times following in the Teresian charism. I don't know if they [Cistercians] did. The one thing that Father Louis and I focused on the most, what we found the most resonance on, was the hermit life within Carmel. I felt that there could be some addition to our Constitutions that would allow some of the nuns to spend some time in complete solitude. They [Cistercians] did eventually let Thomas Merton become a hermit, so I congratulated him. He was concerned about other areas like education, as well. The monks there at that time were—I can't find the word he used—totally uneducated.

*Downey:* Do you mean illiterate? Or, perhaps, uneducated in theology and spirituality?

*Sister Angela:* Something like that. It seemed from what he said that many remained at an immature stage and they never grew beyond it. But as far as Merton himself influencing me to live a deeper prayer life, we just never really discussed that. Our traditions were basically the same. They were calls to contemplative living.

*Downey:* The call that you both felt—one Cistercian and one Carmelite—you both saw as the same type of call?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. The minor difference: Saint Teresa was a very practical woman and she thought that women needed to have a period of recreation. She felt that the Sisters needed to break that total solitude. The Trappist monks didn't. They might now. I don't know. What I feel is that basically Father Louis and I felt that this was God's call to us and we responded to it where it was. The Cistercian for him and the Carmelite for me. But we both felt that there should be a provision for a hermit-type life within these traditions.

*Downey:* You suggest that you were each called to a different place. It seems to me that you are happy as a result of your response to that call. In your judgment, was he happy in his walk of life?

*Sister Angela:* I really think he was.

*Downey:* Even with all the conflicts that he experienced?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. I believe he was. It was only after he died, and through John Howard Griffin's book *Follow the Ecstasy* that I found

out more. There Griffin talks about how Merton would have picnics out in the woods with different people. The names are people that I knew about in Louisville. I didn't have direct contact with them, but they were familiar names. One of them was a psychiatric doctor who would even invite his wife and other friends to the picnic. They would have these picnics out in the woods. I would just cringe inside when I was reading that. A lot of that was going on while we were still in touch in Louisville. And then that whole affair with Margie came out. That I learned about later through my reading. Now *that* truly devastated me.

*Downey:* Could you say a little about that?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. When I first read it, I was in a state of shock. It was like someone you thought highly of had betrayed you. How could he ever, ever have followed along with that?

*Downey:* Are you saying that he followed along with that and at the same time had such a trusting communication with you and did not give any indication about what was going on?

*Sister Angela:* Yes. He never spoke of this. I felt such a sense of betrayal, although he didn't owe anything to *me*. He mentions in one of his letters that he was very fond of Mother Angela and he said, "I have shared with her the very deepest aspirations of my soul and she has with me."

How could he say that and then do what he was doing? And some of that was in 1966, shortly after I left Louisville to come to Savannah Carmel. It really devastated me. I earnestly prayed to God. For a month I was like a zombie. I couldn't lift the tragedy off of me. I kept praying to God to help me understand it. And of course Merton was dead when I found out the story about him and Margie.

Then the thought came to me that this was perhaps sinful on his part. But only God is the judge. I also thought of other great sinners. I thought of St. Augustine, for instance. He was in sin, but he became a great saint. And I thought of the Old Testament, of Abraham. God tested him. God told him to kill his son. He went up the mountain to obey. And when he was about to slay the child, God stopped his hand. Abraham's faith proved him worthy of God. At that time it came to me that possibly it could be a test that God sent to Thomas Merton to test *his* fidelity. And he came through it. It was a

terrible struggle, but he did come through it. So then I felt a peace about it. Nobody knows the judgments of God. Here on earth we look at the externals. And we can be very rigid in our expectations of how people are living out their commitments. I felt that I, myself, could not judge it. I was sorry that it happened. I only knew that in some way he proved his fidelity to God through that, because he certainly loved the woman tremendously.

The other thing that connects with that is a strange thing. There are pictures of us [nuns from different contemplative religious orders] all around a table when we attended a series of Merton's lectures at a retreat at Gethsemani.

*Downey:* What was the purpose of that conference?

*Sister Angela:* It was to try to bring out our common spiritual and contemplative ground. It was to show that various contemplative Orders still had a common ground.

*Downey:* What did Merton understand that to be? Did he listen to the Sisters, or did he do more of the talking?

*Sister Angela:* He talked. But he also wanted feed-back. The nuns would say what they thought. They had questions about his lectures and he would explain what he meant. One thing that struck me much later was that, in the course of one of those talks, he began to talk about passion. He said that passion was one of the most devastating things that a person would ever have to grapple with. He went into such description about the pain and the struggle of passion. I felt uncomfortable almost.

Years later, I was talking to Carmelite nuns who had also attended that retreat at Gethsemani. In the meantime we had heard about the affair with Margie. They said to me: "Sister Angela, Do you remember a lecture that Thomas Merton gave that was kind of surprising?" I said, "Do you mean the reference to passion?" They said, "Yes!" We all had funny vibrations about that, but nobody surfaced it. He put so much stress on the struggle of passion. Now we know why.

I thought about this and the great sinners who had been converted. Some said that he should have known better, but we don't know what he knew. He was just enthralled with that woman. It came about from a simple association in a hospital. She was his nurse. She spoke more intelligently than the other nurses taking care of him. It

was just one of those freak meetings where two people click. They weren't meant to click in the sense that he would leave and get married to her. But he had to go through that and he proved himself. Thomas Merton must have written it all down. In John Howard Griffin's book Merton is quoted as to what he was thinking at the time. That helped me a great deal to realize what a struggle he was going through. Now I am peaceful on that. I think that it is in God's hands and it was a test and Merton made it.

*Downey:* I am interested in going back to that conference of contemplative superiors. You said that he tried to get people to talk about a common ground. Do you remember what he focused on?

*Sister Angela:* What he focused on most was that we were basically too isolated and needed some form of communication among us all. We needed some form of association or some approved body that we could all meet in. For example, the Carmels were all autonomous houses or monasteries. We communicated with other Carmels to a small extent, but this was on a social basis. There was no official bond or meeting place so to speak. He felt that the isolation was unhealthy. We were stagnant in mind to some extent. We weren't being stimulated at all.

*Downey:* It seems to me that, in his mind, this conference would have been a kind of springboard for "ongoing formation" in the contemplative life. On one hand he was deeply rooted in the tradition, and on the other hand he was encouraging creativity.

*Sister Angela:* Yes, but with great discretion! The big fruit of that meeting is that we realized that we were so bound by our rules that we could not even grapple with the subject of change in order to get it started. We thought someone should write a letter to the Holy See. A Sister suggested that he write the letter. Later he said that he would write something down as a rough copy for the next conference [which never happened, M.D.]. He did send a petition to the Holy See requesting some minor changes and diversity in living out our charisms.

*Downey:* This was at least one small effort at renewal. In many ways he was at the forefront of renewal. What did he mean by the renewal of religious life?

*Sister Angela:* He meant that we should come to terms with the age in which we were living. He felt that since much of the legislation was written four or five hundred years ago, it could not be applied literally in our day and age. Some of the things were archaic. That was the word he used: "archaic." He felt that the legislation needed to be translated into current spirituality and that it needed to be in touch with the times in which we live. He also felt that we were not provided with enough education.

*Downey:* Could you say a little more about that?

*Sister Angela:* At that time most of us had no kind of formal education within the monastery, except for retreats with priests and periodic conferences. There were great advancements that had been made in theology, philosophy, and psychology. He hoped that somehow we could tie into those gifts to bring a greater fullness to our own life within the monastery.

*Downey:* While he didn't necessarily support sending people away for studies, he was firm in his conviction that contemplative superiors did need to provide for some educational formation.

*Sister Angela:* Right. Either in the monastery itself or, on occasion, somewhere else.

*Downey:* You mentioned theology, philosophy and psychology. Did he see anything helpful in the "new" theology?

*Sister Angela:* Very much so. He felt you couldn't send everyone in the monastery away for their education, but he said occasionally it would be helpful to send one individual. He also encouraged us to bring in speakers who were very good and well known for their knowledge and their expertise and their ability to give lectures on various subjects. It was then that we began to have someone come to the monastery at least once a year here in our community.

*Downey:* You spoke of Merton gathering contemplatives together at Gethsemani. How did he understand the contemplative life?

*Sister Angela:* Well I think that he would have understood it as we all do; that is, the *ideal* of contemplative life. The giving of yourself totally to God without too much external association with people—which in his own particular life was not possible. This withdrawal is

not in a selfish way, but in a way that you feel drawn to give yourself totally to God in prayer and to a life distanced from the world, but still very much in the world.

*Downey:* Some people say that toward the end of his life Merton had a wide understanding of contemplation. Some would say that one of his great contributions to the history of Western Christian spirituality is that he introduced the notion of contemplation to people living "in the world." Some interpreters say that he believed that one could live a contemplative life in the world and that there is a contemplative aspect of everyday living. Would that ring true to the Merton you knew?

*Sister Angela:* Yes it would. It really would. Even in a contemplative community in which you have every opportunity to give yourself totally to God, many times people who are living in the contemplative life are not growing spiritually.

*Downey:* He was aware of that, was he?

*Sister Angela:* Yes he was. There were those who would just go through the motions. He told me about Sundays at Gethsemani when they would have certain hours that were free. He always wanted to go to the chapel [church] to pray. It struck him how few of the other monks ever came to the chapel. He said he wasn't saying that they weren't praying. Maybe they were somewhere else. But he mentioned that it was something that he found painful. They all had an opportunity to have more quiet prayer and there were so few who seemed to want that. He would also speak of their strict silence and their sign language. He said that a lot of people using sign language made more distraction than if they just said a word. They would go through all these complicated signs when all they wanted to do was simply say, "Pass the bread!" It was very distracting. He said that it became a fetish—if that's the right word—of following these things externally, but they weren't lived internally.

*Downey:* Increasing numbers of people see in Merton someone who invited them to believe that there is a contemplative dimension to every walk of life beneath the external differences. Would you agree?

*Sister Angela:* I would agree with that definitely.

*Downey:* Let me ask a related question. It seems that in every life there is a central image that expresses a particular spirituality. Is

there any image that, in your view, is the central feature of Merton's spirituality?

*Sister Angela:* It seemed to me that he was very focused on Christ. He had also become very attracted to Eastern spirituality, and there was a lot about it which he found wonderful. He just loved it. He had many friends like the Dalai Lama and other people. I remember one time—in a book or in one of his letters—he said something along the lines that the Eastern methods of meditation and discipline impressed him deeply. The methods by which they strip themselves and give themselves totally to God. But for Merton I come back to the inexplicable, unbelievable, wonderful figure of Christ. Nothing comes close to that. To me, Merton really had a very deep focus on the figure of Christ. He believed that total redemption came to us through Christ.

*Downey:* Was there a particular dimension of Christ's life or the Christian mystery through which Merton would have sought meaning?

*Sister Angela:* I think that would probably be the Cross. I think that the Cross revealed to him the meaning of suffering. In it we identify with Christ in our own suffering. Other people might think differently, but this is the Merton I knew.

Our relationship was very special. It was very simple. It probably seems trite, but I can compare it to young innocent children running through fields of daisies with great joy. There was always a carefree joy in our being together. It was so innocent and so pure. I didn't think of it that way at the time; it just was. We spoke of love, but there was no aspect of love like in a sexual or physical way. Not at all. It was a really spiritual love.

*Downey:* But in the beginning you found him to be something of a nuisance!

*Sister Angela:* I did! I did! In the very beginning. At first I got involved out of a sense of duty as Prioress. But in speaking with him I really began to see the type of man that he was. He was humble, simple, honest, direct and he was willing to expose his own weaknesses and limitations. He wouldn't even mind saying that he had had a terrible day. He would say that he was hateful with some of the monks. He would say that it wasn't their fault. It was because he was in a bad mood. I would try to be supportive and say that we all have bad days.



*Downey:* What was most memorable about him? Some people say that he had wonderful crystal blue eyes. Others say that he had a great big laugh.

*Sister Angela:* You know, I am at a disadvantage for that because I always spoke to him through the grate and curtain. I had no direct face to face contact with him. The only time I really saw him personally was when he had the meeting of contemplative superiors at Gethsemani not long before he died so unexpectedly.

*Downey:* What do you remember most about him? What were his strengths and weaknesses?

*Sister Angela:* What I remember most of all was his total love of God. That came through most strongly for me; especially in the person of Christ. His weakness was his love of people. It was a clash; more so when he was in Gethsemani. A close friend of Merton was very against his affair with Margie. He told him that it was really wrong to hide this from the Abbot. It was a struggle for Merton, because he loved people so much. And he enjoyed people. But he also liked simple people—I, myself, am a very simple person. Whatever it was that attracted him—ours developed into a very intimate friendship. I feel that his love for God and love for people were both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. There was always something of a clash between his love for people and his commitments to the monastery. I perceived this conflict within him, but I never made any comments about it. There was always a great pull between his genuine love for God and his love for people.

*Downey:* What leads you to say that his love of God was so full?

*Sister Angela:* From my experience with him I think he was a friend of God. For example, he talked about his own prayer. Its hard to remember thirty years ago, but I always remember that he had a forceful drive to give himself to God in deep unity. I can't say whether this was a mystical state or what. I remember one time that someone asked me if Thomas Merton was a saint. I am not in any place to judge. I think that he was a very holy person, but he had many complications within his being. Sometimes he would just go out into the woods and dance. He was so filled with the love of God. Maybe it was just an emotional surge. Maybe he just felt happy that day. Other days

he was plunged into doubt about himself. No one can judge. He really did love God, yet he was pulled in many other directions that weren't part of his life. But I thought he needed to find this out for himself. He had a natural gift to love people. His love for God and people was in conflict to some extent.

*Downey:* Would you see his insatiable desire to write as compatible or conflicting with his contemplative life?

*Sister Angela:* I don't know. He wrote so many books. He gave me some of his poetry once. I suppose there are many people who love his poems, but many of them just didn't make sense to me. Only one poem appealed to me and that was "The Quickening of John the Baptist." I did read several of his books, but far from all of them! He, himself, sent me some—others came from Abbot Fox.

*Downey:* Let me ask you more about the renewal of religious life. You said that his vision of renewal went beyond the external. Has the renewal of contemplative life following the Second Vatican Council been in step with what he envisioned?

*Sister Angela:* I can't say what he would have said about renewal. But in my own experience of renewal I think that we have lost a lot. In other ways we have come full circle. We tried many things, but we realized that this was not it. The big thing at that time was to be outgoing. We would welcome anyone as visitors to the Carmel. We did not want people to think that we were more special to God than they were. This was Thomas Merton's feeling too. You don't have to be in a monastery to be a contemplative. But we learned from our mistakes. This was not the way to get that message across to people. Renewal now has gone beyond even what Father Merton sought.

*Downey:* What do you think he would have thought renewal should entail?

*Sister Angela:* I think that it was much more of an interior thing with him. I feel that he was strong on going back to the sources. I don't think that he implied that we should go back to the customs of four hundred years ago with St. Teresa. The essence of the renewal is not in externals. It is internal!

*Downey:* What do you think was Merton's greatest gift to the contemplative life?

*Sister Angela:* I don't know. I have so many mixed feelings about him. Much of what he worked for has come to pass. But I don't think that I can credit him as being the source of *all* that, although I love him deeply as a friend. I could identify with him, support him, and understand him. I love truth, so that even if Thomas Merton would say something that didn't ring true to me, I would tell him.

*Downey:* What would you say was Merton's greatest gift to you?

*Sister Angela:* I guess that it was affirmation. I could talk to him about the hermit life. In these pursuits and others he did really affirm me very much. Most of them have come to pass. When I went to Gethsemani, it was the first time that I had laid eyes on him personally. I went up to him and introduced myself and we almost hugged each other, but we were restrained. I think his greatest gift to me though, was affirmation.

*Downey:* You were a good friend of Merton's, but are you a great fan of his writings?

*Sister Angela:* No. I'm really not. I find a great deal of it to be beyond me. However, I don't mean to imply that I didn't read his books. But perhaps I could say, for me, that they were somewhat sophisticated. One of the ones he wrote, *The Sign of Jonas*, was most like the person I knew him to be.

*Downey:* It's very intriguing that Merton's writings don't have great appeal to you, because many people who read him find that no matter what their walk of life, he really speaks to them.

*Sister Angela:* His words and his presence spoke to me. And part of that was our common love for the hermit life. We wanted to bring that into our traditions. He was allowed to do this. They built a hermitage for him. But I was never able to realize this desire in my own life. One time I gave a five-minute talk on the life of solitude within the Carmelites at a national meeting, but it wasn't well received. It wasn't accepted. But almost everything that I said then is now in practice thirty years later.

*Downey:* Did he ever talk to you about St. John of the Cross?

*Sister Angela:* He spoke to me about St. John of the Cross a lot. I'm not sure what it was that he felt about him. He spoke of him often.

I can't remember. Maybe it was in one of Merton's books. He loved St. John of the Cross' writings. He was astonished by all that he had to suffer and was amazed that a great deal of his suffering was inflicted by his own Order—the Carmelites themselves!

*Downey:* Do you think that Merton identified with St. John of the Cross because of his own sufferings?

*Sister Angela:* It could well be. It didn't occur to me. It seems to me that Merton said when we were speaking that he, himself, was an upsetting figure to some of the people in Gethsemani. Maybe it was the things he said or did or wrote. Or maybe it was because he wanted to be a hermit. He often spoke of the criticism, but he didn't say exactly what it was about. I did pick up that there were a few who thought that he was given too much leniency to do things and go places that monks should not do or go to.

*Downey:* He must have been a very strong person to endure this.

*Sister Angela:* I can't really say. But he loved St. John of the Cross and he loved Teresa, too. She was a strong woman and determined. He admired this greatly. I was very surprised one time when John Howard Griffin wrote to me that Father Louis had written in his diary that I was a woman of great femininity and a woman of great courage. I think he also liked St. Teresa for her determination. And he liked Joan Baez. I don't know her, but he thought very highly of her. He also seemed to respect Mother Luke Tobin highly, but I don't know what he felt for her.

*Downey:* In general, then, he liked strong women?

*Sister Angela:* He liked women who had accomplished things in their lives. I have this letter here from John Howard Griffin. Would you like to read it?

*Downey:* Would you mind reading it to me?

*Sister Angela:* No, I don't mind. This is what Thomas Merton wrote in his diary on July 2, 1965; that was the year I came here to Savannah. He says [according to Griffin's transcription],

This morning I had a long morning up in the hermitage. The main event of the morning: Mother Angela my friend in the Louisville Carmel, who I have not seen much of since she was Prioress, wrote

the other day that she was going south to Savannah to be Prioress at the Carmel there. I was expecting her plane, for the south-bound planes out of Louisville—at least the ones to Atlanta and Florida—go right over here fairly low. The ones from Chicago are very high.

*Sister Angela:* He had all these things figured out!

I walked on to the pines and soon the plane appeared on time and went over very fast. It was a beautiful big new jet with wings almost as far back as the tail. It was really a beautiful sight. And as I had told her to look out for us, I suppose she saw the monastery and perhaps even picked out the hermitage as I told her where to look.

*Sister Angela:* He told me all that, but I never could see it!

I was happy for her up there in the sky and was even very moved. I was always quite fond of her. She was one of the few people I could talk to absolutely freely about my ideas and hopes for the solitary life, which, to a great extent, she shared and which she completely understands. She was very frank about some things I needed to know about Dom James and very much of a support. I felt that she was very much of a sister to me and I am grateful for her. I will miss her and I hope she will write.