

## Learning to Live: Merton's Students Remember His Teaching

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Merton once said that the great thing in his life was his love of truth, by which he meant wisdom as opposed merely to knowledge. He maintained that nothing was more precious than "communicating and sharing the truth."<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that he felt his vocation was to be not only that of a hermit and writer, but equally important, to be a teacher. Indeed, when we look at his life, we immediately see the centrality of the latter. Most of his life was devoted to teaching, first in colleges (Columbia, 1940-1941, and St. Bonaventure, 1941) and in the monastery where, from 1951 through 1965, he was Master of Students and later Novice Master. Currently, there is notable interest in Merton as teacher. In some measure this interest is traceable to the research being published on holistic education and the place of the intuitive, the spiritual and the ethical in liberal arts study. Merton himself as a person, is, to be sure, our primary source if we wish to investigate his spirituality of education and pedagogical strategies. In unpublished material (his orientation notes for lectures, conference tapes and the like) as well as in published works (*Love and Living*, *The Inner Experience*, and *The Seven Storey Mountain*), we find comments about his educational background, philosophy of learning, students, and the two teachers who played a decisive role in his own formation: Mark Van Doren and Dan Walsh. But any real understanding of Merton as teacher must also turn to the practical effects of his instruction on students. And yet, understandable as it may be, it is

1. Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990) 165.

still astonishing that, with the notable exception of Thomas Del Prete and Victor A. Kramer, scholars have paid little attention to this side of Merton's teaching.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to learn more about the responses of Merton's students to his abilities as teacher, I asked Brother Patrick Hart for permission to conduct one-hour taped conferences with seven of Merton's students at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Brother Patrick granted my request and on May 9-10, 1992, I engaged in interviews with Brothers Paul Quenon, Harold Thibodeau, Columban Weber, Fathers James Conner, Michael Casagram, and Matthew Kelty; as well as Abbot Timothy Kelly. Brother Patrick served as my host, and I had ample opportunity to talk informally with him also. Because all these monks had come to the monastery in the 1950s and 1960s, they attended Merton's conferences.<sup>3</sup> The subjects they studied under Merton were many: the thought of St. Bernard and the Desert Fathers; the monastic vows; spiritual direction; and mystical theology. Though all of those interviewed attended Merton's conferences on monastic and theological subjects, only some had regularly attended Merton's Sunday conferences. These Sunday afternoon lectures, presented during 1965-1968 while Merton was living in the hermitage, were frequently on literary figures: Rilke, Hopkins, Blake, T.S. Eliot, Camus, and Faulkner.

Preparing students for life in the monastery was challenging for Merton because their backgrounds were so diverse. Matthew Kelty described the novice group in the 1960s, for example, as a frustrating

2. Del Prete, 169-170; Matthew Kelty, "Looking Back to Merton/Memories and Impressions: An Interview," interviewer, Victor A. Kramer; ed. Dewey Weiss Kramer, *The Merton Annual*, vol. 1, eds. Robert Daggy, Patrick Hart, Dewey Weiss Kramer, and Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1988) 55-78; Flavian Burns, "Merton's Contributions as Teacher, Writer, and Community Member: An Interview," interviewer, Victor A. Kramer; ed. Dewey Weiss Kramer, *The Merton Annual*, vol. 2, eds. Robert Daggy, Patrick Hart, Dewey Weiss Kramer, and Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1989) 71-92.

3. Brothers Columban and Paul and Father Timothy attended conferences as novices under Merton. Fathers James and Michael attended these conferences as junior professed. Father Michael came to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1964 from another monastery and, along with other juniors, was allowed to sit in on the novices' sessions. Father Matthew also attended the sessions; however, he was already a priest. Brother Patrick was not actually a student of Merton's, but he did attend Merton's conferences on occasion and did listen to the talks Merton had given the day before to the novices as he, along with the other brothers, prepared vegetables in their workroom.

mixture of young high school boys, college graduates, businessmen, and priests.<sup>4</sup> Brother Paul entered the monastery in 1958, just out of high school, while Father Matthew came to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1960, at the age of forty-five, as an ordained priest. Few had had Merton's rich and rigorous liberal education which helped him to develop a certain self-reflective stance toward his intellect, his senses, his feelings and spirit.

By drawing upon his deep spiritual and intellectual strengths, Merton found himself able to teach this widely divergent group of students. With commitment and passion, he sought to enable these students to discover their true selves in their religious study, believing that the general goal of education was to discover "in the ground of one's being, a 'self' which [was] ultimate and indestructible."<sup>5</sup> Patiently, carefully, reverently, he instructed them in monasticism; and because he valued a humanistic education, he also chose to introduce them to literature, music, and fine art, particularly in the later Sunday conferences. Through these encounters with philosophers, theologians, and artists, Merton believed that students could discover their inner or real selves. In using their imagination, intuition, and senses in these studies, they could begin to approach wisdom, a wordless perception of the unity of self, nature, and God. In this kind of experiential, participatory study involving intellectual rigor and, more importantly, meditation, prayer, and contemplation, students could come not only to acquire surface understandings but to understand deep and abiding truth. Merton served his students not merely as a sage and task master, but as a guide, a fellow student, a monk sharing a spiritual journey with his brothers. Kindly and gently, he suggested a cognitive and, ultimately, an affective path to active and profound learning about self.

In my series of interviews with the monks, they related experiences with their teacher and fellow sojourner. I listened quietly as these monks revealed what the tapes of the conferences cannot fully reveal, namely, how students interacted with Merton in class and in private conference; how they learned best in his conferences; what they remembered and why; and how they applied what they learned in their

4. Kelty interview with Victor A. Kramer, 57.

5. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam, 1979) 3-14.

lives as monks. Clearly, in formal conferences and informal private sessions, they learned not only from what he said, but so often from how he said it. Conscious of the tone he used, watchful of his gestures, and aware of his asides, his jokes, and his repetitions, they formed strong impressions about their mentor and friend. Together they told their invaluable story about Merton and the deep spiritual source of his teaching. Thus this commentary on Merton is *their* commentary. They talked and taught; I listened and learned.

## I.

All the monks stressed that Merton established a clear and appropriate goal in his conferences that he shared with his students at the outset and adhered to through the course of study. This goal, as Brother Patrick noted, was to enable the students to move through the four classic stages: from *lectio* (reading) to *meditatio* (meditation), to *oratio* (prayer) and, finally, to *contemplatio* (contemplation). Brother Paul elaborated about Merton's purpose in the conferences:

Father Louis was in pursuit of wisdom. His teaching was not a matter of imparting knowledge, but was aimed at the formation of the whole person, a mature monk. Thus, it did not have an academic style, but was basically monastic and sapiential. Wisdom, *sapientia* in Latin, has the same root as "to taste," *sapere*. The purpose of education is to get a taste for truth and to taste it continuously, which in fact is meditation.

You know the four steps of spirituality in medieval monasticism are reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. One leads to the other, and monastic education is a leading upward on that path. Conferences have a limited value, limited mainly in moving us into reading, and from reading to thought and understanding. Understanding in this case is mainly through experience. Father Louis kept this goal in mind: to start with the Word of God and go on to understanding it through experience. Ultimately, the goal is something only God can impart, and formal education is only the beginning.

In addition to being clear about objectives, Merton was also clear and precise about the structure of his lectures. As Father Timothy noted: "As a teacher, he was always well prepared, a capable person, well organized. He knew exactly where he was going and how he was

going to get there. . . . As novices we had to learn a certain amount of nuts and bolts and some specifics relative to the obligations for vows. He was very exacting in those areas, very precise. Yet, he could make the dry text come alive. He taught with a lot of respect—always.”

It was essential for Merton to present material in a tight, clear, and organized manner. The conference periods were short—a half hour for the conferences on monasticism and an hour for the Sunday conferences on literature or subjects of contemporary interest. Also, students were not expected to take notes or write papers or take examinations. Most learned by listening, as the monastic style of teaching was based on the oral repetition of main points. Though they spent time reading in their cells and in the library, they did not have assigned texts, nor even required or recommended reading lists. (Today, in contrast, the novices do have a specific reading list, an addition to their course of study for which Merton is to receive credit.)

In stating that Merton’s teaching style was both structured and organic, Father Timothy emphasized Merton’s flexibility, his ability to improvise and move inductively. He found that in Merton’s many well-organized yet creatively extemporaneous presentations, there was new and liberating space for student and teacher to explore and question. In the end what impressed Father Timothy the most was Merton’s ability to experiment and, subsequently, to initiate a new style of teaching in the abbey:

I would say that his basic presentation on the spiritual life and the spiritual journey was a kind of whole new approach, a much healthier, broader approach. In the older traditions, the monk was a penitent, making reconciliation to the Lord so that the sins of humankind and his own sins would be forgiven. So there was a whole mentality that created an environment that was somewhat lugubrious, to say the least. Merton was anything but that. Coming with a real respect for the whole life of discipline and asceticism, he taught from the aspect of a way to freedom. He was a joyous, delightful person.

Along with Father Timothy, Father James appreciated Merton’s ability to be “flexible and open,” to change an agenda and even his opinions quite spontaneously. Yet, as Father Matthew observed, that spontaneous playing with ideas bothered some:

He could say one thing today and tomorrow he would contradict it. Not that he would say the opposite, but he would look

at it from the other side of the street. . . . It used to rattle people a little, but you needed to know that he was not to be taken literally, that you had to interpret what he had to say.

Brother Paul noted that sometimes he would change his topic simply because he saw that his students were not motivated to listen. If students stopped listening because they were seemingly uninterested in the topic for the session, Merton would simply scrap that class topic and go on to a new one. As Brother Paul recalled:

He knew how to diversify, how to keep it lively, perhaps how to change pace. I remember his stopping and saying after two conferences on Blessed Gueric of Igny, one of our twelfth-century Cistercian Fathers, “You guys do not seem too interested in Gueric.” I do not think he went on with that. He shut that off and went on to something else.

Merton’s classes were lively in part because there was necessary change of pace and even of topic, and also because there was a good deal of laughter. The monks found Merton to be genuinely humorous, as the tapes of his conferences reveal. Brother Columban mentioned the good humor in the conferences:

Father Louis once asked me how things were going—class-wise—and I responded that I was enjoying them very much. I commented that his sense of humor surprised me and he said, “If you have a sense of humor, you should use it.” He would often poke fun at various things we did around the monastery in a way that we could see the wisdom of it. Someone should do a study of Merton’s sense of humor.

Yet Merton’s humor occasionally revealed a darker side. For example, though Father Matthew agreed that Merton was witty, he pointed out that occasionally Merton’s wit could be caustic. He observed, “He had the British gift . . . , to—what do you call it—put someone down with wit, to make an understatement. You do not lose your cool—oh, no—but in elegant language you make the guy look bad. You would not do that often. That would catch up with you.” He also pointed out that Merton liked to add humor, but was less receptive to students doing so. To illustrate, he told a story that reveals a part of Merton that was rather controlling and close-minded:

One time we were studying the *Beguines*, and this wit from Detroit raised his hand and in seeming innocence asked, "When did these *Beguines* begin?" There was a lot of laughter. Merton didn't think it was funny because that was referring to a popular song, "Begin the *Beguine*." That was typical of him. If he didn't initiate the joke, if he wasn't in charge of the thing, it would rattle him a little.

In his carefully conceived conferences, filled often with spontaneity and surprise, it is clear that Merton succeeded in allowing a healthy kind of organic flow of ideas. He was able to infuse life into the conferences in part because he engaged students in Socratic dialogue. He was skillful in asking thought-provoking questions and in encouraging students to discover their own answers to those questions. No doubt, he had learned a great deal from Mark Van Doren about leading discussions while attending Van Doren's course in English literature at Columbia University in 1935. In recalling that class in eighteenth-century English literature, Merton concluded that Van Doren's "questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before. He had 'educated' them from you by his question."<sup>6</sup>

On balance, the monks found that Merton carried on useful discussions, even though some of these oral exchanges were quite short and were abruptly terminated. They talked, in particular, about his effective use of questions. Their responses to this verbal interaction through questions are significant. After all, as they were the recipients of his queries, they are the only ones who could attest to the effectiveness of these questions. Yet their reactions were rather surprising. In listening to the tapes of his conferences, I felt that Merton often rushed through a host of questions and bombarded his students with too many questions. However, the monks, Brother Harold for one, did not remember feeling frustrated when Merton attempted to get them involved by throwing questions at them. In recalling Merton's presentations, he observed:

It was not a dry lecture. He was aware of his audience. If you were falling asleep or not paying attention, he would say,

6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948) 139.

"Well, what do you think of that, Brother so-and-so?" If you gave the wrong answer and everyone would laugh, he would say, "Do you really think that?" And then he would like to interrogate for a while. Often if you might say something that was not really on target, he would weave it into his next theme and make it sound all right. If it was not far off, [but] not complete enough, he would even fill it out for you.

Brother Paul agreed, adding that Merton often used rhetorical questions effectively:

He was good at asking questions. He got us thinking. He would sort of probe us to get some kind of response, to get our minds in gear, and then he would go on developing it. He would ask questions as a preparation, and then at the end, we would be asking the questions.

However, the monks were quick to point out that Merton was always intent on getting through a substantial amount of material and often did not really encourage a lot of questions from them. As Father Timothy remembers:

He could be very curt. He would answer your question very specifically and was clear in his body language that he wanted no more; that is, time's up. Of course, our style was not open to much dialogue and questioning, so he really did not open classes up to questions. It was also foreign to his style. He sometimes asked questions to get the answers he wanted.

Brother Columban also found Merton short and sharp and noted:

I often got the impression that if he liked a particular person . . . then this student's question was okay. Merton would even maneuver the issue to the student's advantage. But if he didn't like the guy, he could shoot him down pretty fast, and often did. Merton, like all teachers, had his fair-haired boys—those who were heavily into the monastic fathers or were writing in the French monastic journals, etc. [Most] of them are not around today!

Merton could be especially abrupt if he did not like a question or comment. Father Timothy recalled a class on the Book of Jonah:

I remember on this day he gave this very beautiful conference on Jonah, a favorite of his, and there was this young monk

who kept raising his hand while he talked and Merton finally accepted his question. At the same time, we had a Scripture professor coming once a month, and it was just at this time when a lot of scriptural scholarship was changing, and this professor had given us a conference a month or so before on Jonah as a midrash. He said that Jonah was more of a symbolic figure. He was not a true person. Well, Merton had just given this conference on personifying Jonah as a type of spiritual person, and this guy raised his hand all the time and said that this professor had characterized Jonah completely differently, which, of course, was a poor understanding of what the professor had said and what Merton had said. Well, Merton closed his book and did not give us another talk on Scripture for another year.

Though interchanges in class were sometimes controlled, abrupt, even aborted, on balance it is fair to say that the monks agreed that Merton wanted all his students to question, to challenge, to probe—sometimes in class, always in their private study and meditation. He wished for his students to be independent not derivative thinkers. As Father Timothy said: “He gave me the impression that he really did not want disciples. If novices became interested in quoting Merton to Merton, he was very quick to cut them off and to distance himself from them.” It would have been very easy for Merton, a strong-willed, fluent thinker, placed in a position of some authority, to have persuaded his students to think and feel as he did.

Though class discussions were sometimes strained, Merton’s students knew that he had an ability to engage in genuine dialogue. It was in his private conferences with his students that Merton was able to establish a more equal and intimate exchange. In these one-on-one meetings, Merton revealed his well-developed listening and interpersonal skills. This ability to relate perceptively to individual students is invaluable to a teacher. Merton knew that it is in quiet discussions outside the classroom where the best teaching often occurs—for both teacher and student. The monks frequently talked about their private conferences with him, in which they had their most productive and memorable exchanges. Though it is clear that Merton was certainly a persuasive, eloquent lecturer, it was in his private encounters that he was probably the most charismatic.

Because Merton was Novice Master, novices also had special opportunities for such private conferences. Brothers Columban and

Harold remembered some of their conversations well. Brother Columban recalled:

On a one-to-one he was marvelous. He reminds me a lot of the great communicators of our time—John Paul II, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Matthew Fox, etc. These people are great actors, and are able to attune themselves to the particular audience at hand. You feel as if you are the only person in the world and that for them, you are. Merton fit right into this.

Brother Harold spoke about one conference in particular:

One day I was not saying much—and this is what was amazing. Suddenly the bell rang for Compline, and I went toward the door and Merton said, “Well sooner or later you will have to stand on your own two feet.” Well, that hit me like a bomb. I didn’t know where that came from, because we were not even talking about me. Only later did I realize that I was really very dependent upon him and I needed to be standing on my own two feet.

Ironically, in his talk in Bangkok before he died, he read this story about a Tibetan monk who was exiled, and Merton asked what you do when you get booted out of your monastery. The Tibetan monk answered that you move on. He said, “Well, you have to cross the river and stand on your own two feet.” I remembered that when I read the paper later, and I remembered how true that would be because now Merton would not be coming back. I felt it more deeply then. The truth has never left me. That gives you a certain sense of your own freedom when you make your own decisions. It is still a big help to me and I tell it to people.

Because of his ability to relate to the monks on an informal basis, it is not surprising that a goodly number of the monks vividly remembered the first time they met Merton. Father Timothy’s experience was typical:

My first encounter with Merton was at the guest house. I did not know Merton was the Novice Master, and so I was just told I would meet the Novice Master in my room. And so the Novice Master came in and asked the usual questions. I introduced myself, and in conversation he asked what I knew about the monastic life, and where I had obtained my information. I said I really had read all of Merton. He asked, “What did you think?”

I said I thought he was very romantic. He said, "Yes, you have to be awfully careful of what you read." Together we laughed.

The students found Merton in those first meetings to be very unassuming. That view of Merton was underscored in Merton's manner in the classroom. As Father James said, "He was just such a totally human person, so alive and so down-to-earth and not artificial. This was not always the case with some of the people I was exposed to in my early years. I was never really in awe of him." As one of those young men who had come to the monastery at age sixteen, and who by his own admission was not very sophisticated, this assessment is especially noteworthy.

That Merton was so approachable and unassuming in manner is particularly impressive given the fact that he was a well-known literary figure. Father Matthew had an intriguing insight about Merton and his handling of his notoriety:

Merton had a sense of his importance. He was extremely aware that he was a servant for the cause and all that, and yet he was detached from it. I always compare it to a woman who is a model. She is expected to be beautiful—shockingly beautiful—and yet she has to convey the impression she does not know [this]. Or it is like a child who is very pretty. When she is unconsciously beautiful, it is charming. Well, he was like that. He had an amazing capacity to lose himself in whatever he was doing and pull it off, and that is not very common. It is hard to do. I would put that pretty close to holiness.

Merton was able to engage his students in lively conversations about the conference material in large measure because he was able to convey his love of learning in general and his fascination and respect for his subject matter in particular. Perhaps this was his greatest gift. If a teacher communicates a fascination and delight in the study at hand, it is quite likely that the students will also have a positive mindset toward the subject matter for the rest of their lives. Fortunately, for him and his students, Merton had the opportunity to teach what he passionately cared about. The monks talked in poignant detail about Merton's love for monastic and literary study. As a preface to a couple of anecdotes, Father Michael talked about Merton's love for literature:

The Sunday conferences reflected his love for the literary world. He encouraged us to read novels. He said, "you are going

to learn things in novels you are not going to get out of a spiritual book. You are going to learn a dimension of your own humanity. . . ." The other thing I would add is that I felt that what Merton said in the conferences and what made him so effective as a teacher was that he experienced the things he talked about in his own heart, in his own life. He loved literature. He loved the mystery of our humanity.

When Father Michael went to the Taizé community, he met a monk named Mark, a potter, who asked to speak with him because he read Merton's work. Father Michael asked him what fascinated him about Merton and he said: "There is no part of our humanity that he didn't explore and didn't face. He was just so honest about his own human experience." Father Michael agreed, adding that in a way Mark's comment summed up the students' lives with Merton:

He was just so honest and unafraid to talk about his own deep human experiences, and I think what helped him to do that was his familiarity with the literary world. That opened the world to him. A basic dimension of his philosophy was that if you go deep enough to human experience you will find God. He speaks of God as the ground of our being. I think he sensed that if you really face your own humanity, then you are going to find God. So in those conferences, what they said to me is that he tried to communicate experience. I mean he read poetry and would pick out some idea and talk about it, and you left the conference with the sense that this was really good stuff, not something you put in a package and just carried around with you. It addressed your life . . . and you knew what he told you was something that he had already experienced within himself to some degree. He tried to make you aware of your own human experience so that it might be a channel for self-knowledge and a way of opening to the life of the Spirit.

Merton saw similar spiritual possibilities in all the arts. On occasion, he brought the arts into discussions in the conferences, dedicated as he was to interdisciplinary study in the humanities. Father James pointed out that Merton "felt that the novitiate and the community needed a more well-rounded background to guard against their becoming too enclosed in the pejorative sense." He remembered, in particular, Merton's love for music:

Once in a while on a Sunday afternoon, he would bring his little phonograph player out which was completely unheard of in the monasteries in those days. Not only was he very emotive about music—he may talk about that in the journal—he got very excited about Bob Dylan and had a whole series of his records. Joan Baez, of course, came to visit him. Though he did not talk a lot about music, he had a real appreciation for classical music and also for Gregorian chant. He was somewhat subdued on that because he thought, well, he was just more likely to step on somebody's toes.

Father Matthew also noted Merton's interest in good music, particularly jazz.

Merton admired artistic persons as well as their works. Brother Harold recalled something Merton said in a class that stayed with him, "Truth often comes on the wings of beauty." Then he shared his story:

Being a florist I was always decorating the novitiate with things. Well I thought the place needed sprucing up for the Feast of the Little Flower. So in the Fall I brought in some bittersweet and put it around the statue. It was a wooden statue that came from South America. So Merton said, "Why did you do that?" Well, no one ever asked me why I did that. I said, "Well it represents the fruit of virginity." He did not ask me any more questions after that. Then one day he said, "You really should ask for permission before you start putting things around." I said, "O.K."

That rather upset me. If you are a creative person, I do not see the point in asking somebody if you can be creative. If I get the right flowers and use them, I just bring them in; it is something that happens spontaneously and creatively. After a month, however, he said "It's O.K. You can put flowers in the novitiate. You can do it any time you want." I think he knew himself that you do not get permission to write a poem. It just comes out of you.

Brother Harold went on to talk further about Merton and the sense of beauty that Merton found not only in the artistic but the spiritual:

I remember one time when I was serving Mass, he came in from the hermitage. We took turns as priest and server in giving the responses at Mass, and that particular day everything clicked. Everything was in Latin and everything was so beautiful. It was just downright mystical. I can not put it any other way. I think

that something that was present in Merton's beautiful presentations was his Christ-centeredness. That was essential. I think that answers a lot of questions. Everything focused on that for him.

All the monks agreed with Brother Harold that Merton's central love upon which "everything was focused" was his love for God. For example, in discussing Merton's relationship with Dom James, with whom Merton had both a difficult and good relationship, Father Matthew said, "They admired each other and they heard each other's confessions. Merton himself told me that he needed him and Dom James said he had no more obedient monk than Merton." Then he went on to explain what he meant by this steadfast devotion:

I suppose the key lies in commitment, I mean the deeper commitment. He committed himself to a way of life, to a submission to a pattern of rules under the direction of an Abbot, for Christ's sake. And in a showdown, he would make it work because he saw it in terms of faith. That is the spiritual journey with Christ, and it is the game he played and he played it very seriously and the game is real. The stakes are for life.

## II.

In this exploratory study based on interviews with Merton's students, four characteristics about Merton as teacher have been suggested. He was: (1) clear about his conference goals; (2) organized and articulate in lecture; (3) effective in informal discussion; (4) enthusiastic about his subject matter. Yet, Merton was thought of as more than just a good teacher; he was remembered as a teacher *extraordinaire*. As Father Timothy concluded, "Merton was just in a different league."

It can be argued that what made Merton such a powerful teacher was the beautiful unity and simplicity in the way he wove these characteristics together. One flowed into and strengthened, completed, complemented the others. In a word, the whole of his integrated and focused style was greater than the sum of the good parts. Merton's work with students issued from his true self. He taught what mattered most to him not only with clarity and structure but with passion and joy, honestly and courageously revealing himself in all his vulnerability and imperfection.

Merton's *persona* was the integrating and electrifying force. Admittedly, the Merton revealed in his conferences was complex. He was not only brilliant, playful, well meaning, but also abrupt, private, even mysterious. "Deep" is the adjective Father Matthew used to describe Merton. Complicated he was, but clear and integrated in purpose and direction he was also. Merton can be described as a centered teacher who reverently explored interrelated spiritual and aesthetic subject matter, inviting his students to join him in humility and trust in a contemplative study which all knew would lead them into eternity.

As we ended our interview, Father Matthew spoke of Merton and his search with his students. He mentioned that in preparation for our conference he had reread Merton's well-known prayer that speaks of this unending contemplative journey into the unknown. The prayer begins: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. . . ." Father Matthew said that the prayer is perfect Merton—the man, the teacher. It expresses his spirituality perfectly, "that sense of childlikeness, of not being exactly sure of where he was at, where he was coming from, where he was going to, and yet having a pure trust in a good God who would watch over him. . . . Yeah, he was very childlike, very compassionate . . . very fragile and very clear-minded."

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## Notes on the Monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani

- MICHAEL CASAGRAM, O.C.S.O., grew up in New Philadelphia, Ohio, as a Roman Catholic. In 1955 he entered a minor seminary run by the Capuchins. After graduating from St. Fidelis Seminary in 1961, he entered Holy Cross Trappist Monastery in Berryville, Virginia. In 1963 he transferred to the Abbey of Gethsemani where he attended Merton's conferences. After studying theology at San Anselmo in Rome for three years, he was ordained in 1982. At Gethsemani, he has served as printer, tailor, cook, guest master, and vocation director. He is presently living in a Cistercian monastery in Venezuela.
- JAMES CONNER, O.C.S.O., entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1949 at age sixteen and studied with Merton between 1951 and 1955 when Merton was Master of Students. After he was ordained in 1957, he was appointed Undermaster of Novices under Merton, and worked with him in that capacity from 1958 to 1961. His articles have appeared in such scholarly journals as *The Merton Annual* and *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*. Currently, he is Abbot of Assumption Abbey in Ava, Missouri.
- PATRICK HART, O.C.S.O., was born in 1925 in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame and after a brief teaching career entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1951. He served as secretary to Abbot James Fox for ten years prior to his assignment to the Cistercian Generalate in Rome. After his return to Gethsemani, he became Merton's full-time secretary in 1968. He served in this capacity until the time of Merton's death. He is the editor emeritus of *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* and one of the four editors of the first five volumes of *The Merton Annual*. He is also editor of the first volume of Merton's journals, *Run to the Mountain*.
- TIMOTHY KELLY, O.C.S.O., was born in Amherstburg, Ontario. He graduated from Assumption University of Windsor in 1958 and in that year entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was a novice under Merton from 1958 to 1960 and served as Merton's assistant between 1964 and 1965,



the last year of Merton's tenure as Novice Master. Immediately following this service, he left for Rome where he studied for three years. In 1973 he was elected Abbot of Gethsemani. He continues to serve in this capacity.

**MATTHEW KELTY, O.C.S.O.**, was born in South Boston, in 1915. He began his religious life with the Society of the Divine Word in 1935 and was ordained in 1946. He was sent to New Guinea in 1947 and returned to the United States in 1951 to edit the Society's magazine. At age forty-five he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. From 1969 to 1973 he lived in a small experimental community in Oxford, North Carolina. In 1973 he returned to New Guinea to live as a solitary. He chose to return to Gethsemani in 1982, and has lived there ever since, serving as tailor, Mass office secretary, and retreat house chaplain.

**HAROLD THIBODEAU, O.C.S.O.**, was born in 1936 in Royal Oak, Michigan. He entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1960 and was a novice under Merton. In 1968 he took his solemn vows. For the past thirty-three years he has served in a number of capacities—including working in the library and in the infirmary. He is a horticulturalist and church decorator. He has also assisted in the making of the abbey's products—fruit cake, cheese, and fudge. Currently, he works with the staff of the *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, assisting with subscriptions and mailing. In 1992 he made a pilgrimage to India, the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. In India, he had rare opportunities to talk with Tibetan monks.

**COLUMBAN WEBER, O.C.S.O.**, has been a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani since 1964. He was a novice under Thomas Merton and has published extensively on Merton's life and work over the past two decades. His articles and reviews have appeared in such popular and scholarly journals as *American Ecclesiastical Review*, *Bardstow Standard*, *Catholic Weekly*, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, *Cîteaux*, *The Merton Annual*, and *The Merton Seasonal*. Currently he is in Rome in the Cistercian Generalate where he does culinary and secretarial work.

## Acknowledgment

The author thanks the monks interviewed at the Abbey of Gethsemani for allowing readers to come to know them and Merton better.