

Merton's Teaching on the 'Common Will' and What the Journals Tell Us

Michael Casey, OCSO

This article argues that Thomas Merton was not a typical member of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance and that his interpretation of the 'common will' changed dramatically as his personal relationship to his own Community changed.

It seems scarcely fair to begin a discussion of an aspect of Merton's life and thought by examining a passage in such an early and relatively unimportant work as *The Spirit of Simplicity*.¹ This is especially so when we remember that this book was dismissed by the author two years after writing it as 'confused and weak',² and was not even

1. A Cistercian Monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani, *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* (Trappist: The Cistercian Library No. 3, 1948). For convenience I cite the more accessible reprint of Part II of the work above to be found in *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard* (Cistercian Studies Series, 9; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 107-57. I usually retain the original style although sometimes suppressing his generous use of italics.

2. In a letter to Jean Leclercq printed in Patrick Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 25. In a journal entry for 12 August 1964 (p. 135), Merton notes, '[I] even tried to find a copy of the *Spirit of Simplicity* for him [Dom James] to read but could find none anywhere'. For the journals I simply quote the date of the entry together with reference to the volume and page number of the published edition. The Journals of Thomas Merton appeared in seven volumes under the general editorship of Patrick Hart. They are as follows: *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939-1945; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (Journals, 2; 1941-1952; ed. Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (Journals, 3; 1953-1960; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); *Turning*

included in the 1967 graph evaluating his various writings.³

The OCSO General Chapter of 1925 issued a report on the external aspects of Cistercian simplicity—expressed in buildings, lifestyle and liturgy. Dom Frederic Dunne had Merton translate the document and add a section of his own on 'interior simplicity', based on the teaching of Bernard of Clairvaux. The whole was published in 1948 and quickly forgotten.

The Notion of the 'Common Will'

In presenting St Bernard's teaching on interior simplicity, Merton reached the point where he needed to elaborate on the practical means by which this desirable state is attained. Holiness demands a simplification of the state of interior conflict in which the will of God has constantly to do battle with alternatives. This confusion or inconsistency will remain until self-will, the *voluntas propria*, is somehow neutralized. That much is obvious. We need to emancipate ourselves from inner tyranny by submission of our wills to a higher authority. Wilful autonomy needs to be replaced by docile submission to the will of God. In practical terms this leads straight to monastic obedience. Thus far Merton's thought progression is boringly predictable. 'The perfection of simplicity in obedience is to do things in the precise way that the superior wants them to be done.'⁴ The 1948 Merton is a maximalist when it comes to obedience. There is a tone of aggrieved moralism underlying the following observation—emphasized in the original version but not in the reprint: 'The greatest curse of the monastic life is the monk who not only has wrong ideas about the

toward the World: *The Pivotal Years* (Journals, 4; 1960-1963; ed. Victor A. Kramer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals, 5; 1963-1966; ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals, 6; 1966-1967; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

3. The graph appears as Appendix 2 in Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Crossroad, 1989). M. Basil Pennington takes the work seriously. See his 'Father Louis' First Book: *The Spirit of Simplicity*', in *idem, Thomas Merton my Brother: His Journey to Freedom, Compassion and Final Integration* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1996), pp. 65-78. See, however, John E. King, 'A Small Disagreement with Fr. Basil Pennington ... What Is Thomas Merton's First Book?', *The Merton Seasonal* 21.4 (Winter 1996), pp. 7-11.

4. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 138.

spiritual life, but clings to them with belligerent stubbornness and even tries to force them on others.⁵

He offers no criterion of how an idea may be judged 'wrong'; its danger, however, consists not in its wrongness but in the fact that it is 'inseparable from pride'.

So far there have been no surprises: what Merton wrote about obedience could have come from the priggish pen of any smug young man who has managed to land on his feet in religious life.⁶ At this point, however, the young Merton deviates from the conventional. He gives to obedience a horizontal thrust; it is 'integrated in the common life'. Since obedience is a means of diminishing self-will, it is not merely a matter of due subordination to God's various representatives. It is also involves submission to a community. Merton here broaches the topic of 'mutual obedience' to which St Benedict, at the end of his life, devoted a chapter of his Rule, but which has never received much attention since.

When St. Bernard treats of the destruction of self-will, and the substitution of God's will for it, he speaks very often, not of *voluntas Dei*, but *voluntas communis*: and this common will is indeed the will of God, but with an important added note: *that the will of others, the will of the community with respect to the common good of the community, the Order, etc., is God's will, and to submit to our superiors and our brethren is to submit to God and become united to Him.*

This, it must be noted, is irrespective of whether our ideas may or may not be better than those of others. In all matters that do not clearly involve a fault, even when the community is wrong and the individual is right, he can best keep united with God by following the *voluntas communis*, for the sake of peace and charity.⁷

To substantiate his claim, Merton quotes at length from a section of Bernard's *Third Sermon for the Resurrection*.

Our own will (*voluntatem propriam*), I call that which is not common to us and God and other men, but is ours alone. That is, when we carry out our will, not for the honour of God, nor for the benefit of our neighbour, but simply for ourselves alone. Self-will means to will things that are intended not to give pleasure to God or to be of use to our brethren, but only to satisfy the selfish promptings of our own minds. Diametrically

5. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 138.

6. Later, of course, his views changed. Asked by W.H. Ferry about his vows, he replied, 'Poverty, that's a cinch. Chastity, well, that takes a little getting used to, but that's manageable. Obedience, that's the bugger.' Quoted in Paul Wilkes (ed.) *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 89.

7. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 139.

opposed to this evil is charity: and charity IS GOD.

Self-will, then, is ever in a state of implacable hostility to God and constantly wages the *most cruel warfare against Him*. What is there that God hates or punishes except self-will?

If self-will were to cease to exist, there would be no more hell. For what fuel would there be to feed those flames if there were no self-will? Even now in this life, when we feel cold or hunger or other such things, what is it that feels the suffering if not self-will? For if we bear with these trials our will becomes the *common will*. What may be called our own will is really a kind of sickness and corruption of the true will: and it is this corrupt element that will continue to be the subject of every kind of suffering until it is totally consumed.⁸

Merton's commentary expands the text. Self-will is indicated whenever conflicts arise with rules, superiors, the wishes of others or providential circumstances that 'destroy our peace of mind, cause us to rebel, to get excited, to lose our tempers, or to become depressed, despondent or, finally, to override the will of God and man alike to get our own way'.⁹ He regards the subjective reaction to the situation as a useful pointer to its moral character because, 'lack of peace is identified with a certain lack of simplicity, a lack of union, of harmony with circumstances and events'.¹⁰

How accurate is Merton's interpretation of Bernard? Despite his claim that it occurs 'very often', the expression *voluntas communis* is not a technical term and it is used only once by Bernard.¹¹ The idea that *voluntas communis* refers to a collective or general will is difficult to reconcile with what Bernard wrote. It seems, rather, that Bernard meant by this term a will that was not locked inside its own *singularitas* and, as such, was free for relationship with God and others. In fact the best indication of the presence of a 'common will' is the willingness to live a 'common life'. Conversely, it is in rejecting the details of the common life that self-will is most clearly manifested.

This collectivization of the *voluntas communis* is continued by Abbot Thomas Davis of Vana, who had Merton as his Master of Scholastics

8. Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Third Sermon for the Resurrection, 3', in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1968), pp. 105-106. The translation is Merton's (*Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, pp. 140-41), as are the various emphases.

9. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 143.

10. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 144.

11. As verified by the CETEDOC concordance. See Irénée Rigolot, 'Contribution au "vocabulaire cistercien": Voluntas propria—Voluntas communis', *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 55 (1993), pp. 356-63. Edith Scholl, 'A Will and Two Ways: Voluntas Propria, Voluntas Communis', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 30 (1995), pp. 191-203.

and heard Merton speaking in this vein around 1953. He accepts that 'common will' means primarily the human will united with the divine, but proposes as a secondary meaning the *unitas consentanea* that exists in a community brought to unanimity through charity. This leads to the conclusion that 'participation in the common will of an earthly community reflects personal participation in an expression of the divine will'.¹² There is no doubt that Bernard recommended 'integration in the common life of fraternal charity'. Whether this can be rephrased as 'willing integration into the common will of a community' is another question.

In this perspective, the *voluntas communis* is no longer inherent in persons but belongs to the collectivity; it is like a *sensus fidelium*. In this there is a danger of automatically identifying 'what the community decides' with 'the will of God'—at least with the permissive will of God. In an extreme situation this could lead us back to positivism, a denial of intrinsic rightness or wrongness in favor of a majority vote. The 'common will' that Bernard envisaged is not something democratically engineered by the community itself with respect to a particular issue or project.¹³ This is a modern notion and is useful especially in post-conciliar monasticism, where many issues are decided thus. There certainly is an asceticism involved in accepting gracefully a conscientious community discernment or a majority decision about practical matters, when it goes against our personal (and enlightened) choice. I have no argument against the rightness of the notion itself, which I consider highly relevant to contemporary cenobitism, but I query the accuracy of attributing it to Bernard.

Furthermore, the way in which Merton expounds this doctrine is imprudent in its absoluteness. 'The operation of the *voluntas communis* (common will) and the operation of the Holy Ghost are one and the same thing'.¹⁴ St Benedict recognizes that a community need not necessarily act with integrity even in major matters, such as its choice of abbot (RB 64.3-6). The whole purpose of regular visitations and general chapters is to provide a measure of supervision not only over

12. Thomas X. Davis, 'Cistercian *Communio*', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 29 (1994), pp. 290-329 (314); see especially the section about the common will on pp. 314-17.

13. Although in 'Epistola 10', in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1974), p. 173, Bernard demonstrates his willingness to submit his own actions to the judgment of the community: 'I held my own judgement as suspect because of the feelings of the flesh, and so I gave the case to all the brothers for judgement.'

14. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 150.

the abbot's governance but over the orientations assumed by the Community. It is asking for trouble to say without any qualification, 'The will of the Community with respect to the common good of the Community, the Order, etc., is God's will, and to submit to our superiors and our brethren is to submit to God and become united to him'. The consequence Merton deduces from this is that the monk 'can best keep united with God by following the *voluntas communis*'—in other words the path to contemplation is through conformity to the Community.

The culmination of Cistercian simplicity is the mystical marriage of the soul with God, which is nothing else but the perfect union of our will with God's will, made possible by the complete purification of all the duplicity of error and error. This purification is the work of love and particularly of the love of God in our neighbor. Hence it is inseparable from that social simplicity which consists in living out the *voluntas communis* in actual practice. This is the reason for the Cistercian insistence on the common life.¹⁵

Sanctified by this participation in the common will which is God himself working in men and in the Church, the individual monk is prepared for the graces of infused contemplation.¹⁶

This rather unrealistic enthusiasm, typical of inexperience, glosses over the difficulties inherent in reconciling an individual vocation with the inevitably limited character of a given community. Merton was later to experience this commonplace conflict with remarkable drama and intensity. He was not the first or last to attribute such difficulties to the dysfunctionality of the community; the question is how well did he integrate this teaching into his own life.

An Uncommon Life

Merton was not a typical member of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance nor of the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was a rich personality with an unusual history. He was extraordinarily gifted as a thinker, a reader and a writer. His lifelong advocacy of solitude went beyond the common interpretation of this monastic value. His success as an author guaranteed a ready audience for even his most ephemeral writing. His social criticism carved out for him the sort of prophetic role that usually embarrasses the host community. His

15. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 150.

16. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, p. 152.

death was sufficiently dramatic to secure international coverage, even in the secular press.

Most of this could have been accommodated, especially in a community as large as Merton's Gethsemani. In fact the evidence from his journals indicates that he lived a relatively privileged existence for those times. He had access to an astonishing array of books whether obtained from the monastery library, purchased on one of his outings or received from outside contacts. What was more unusual was the fact that he had the opportunity to read them. 'I become anxious to keep up with all that is being said and done, and I want in my turn to be "in there" ... to play my own part and contribute my own words'.¹⁷ He was given employment that suited him and conferred a certain status. Letters and visitors were unusually frequent for those times, and there is no doubt that he enjoyed more excursions than the common run of Gethsemani monks. To these privileges were added many concessions for health reasons which, although involuntary, protected him from some of the irritations inherent in an austere monastic existence, and gave him a measure of elbow room to pursue his own destiny. Dr Zilboorg was probably right when he told him, 'You are afraid to be an ordinary monk in the community'.¹⁸

The journals reveal that Merton remained ambivalent about his relationship with the Gethsemani community and especially with Dom James Fox, its abbot. It would be agreeable to affirm that with the passage of time all these difficulties were solved, but it would be a hard case to argue. There are moments when he became aware that it was his own unaffirmed negativity that he projected onto others, 'admitting my own confusion and self-contradiction',¹⁹ but his resolutions to do better did not last long. There were many fluctuations in his attitude to the community, with dramatic reversals sometimes triggered by tiny events—but these do not indicate a shift in perspective. Reading the journals sequentially reveals no steady march towards reconciliation: only the extremes of attachment and rejection, with little in between. Perhaps the decision to leave behind for eventual publication many small-minded diatribes reveals an unpleasing vindictiveness in their author. It is almost as though he intended to settle a few scores posthumously.

There is something petty and spiteful about many of the entries, as if the community could do no right. 'How angry I am and resentful

17. 12 November 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 33).

18. 29 July 1956 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 59).

19. 14 August 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 281).

interiorly, and spiteful in my criticisms.'²⁰ By the time Merton got what he wanted, it was no longer enough, and recriminations began again. It is almost as though he did not want to be content and quiet, but kept moving the goalposts so that he could indulge his sense of being a victim. 'I have not tried hard enough to be content in community. In fact I have almost refused to let myself be content, as if there were danger in it, something to lose by it.'²¹ He often accuses the abbot of playing games, but it seems that he himself was a willing participant. His letters to Dom James in *The School of Charity* display exactly the saccharine flavour he deprecated in their recipient. Throughout the journals there is an adolescent quality in the alternation of deference and rebellion, that amounts to complicity in his own disturbance. In one entry, after saying 'I am not going to be bitter about Dom James', he launches into a scathing description about how the abbot tried to get him to meet the Governor and how he refused to play his game—meanwhile playing one of his own.²²

The specifics of his complaints against the community are well chronicled in his various writings. At times he became aware that what he was rejecting was the 'American' quality that Dom James tried to infuse into Gethsemani: 'The happy, comfortable life, serene, joyful, expansive'.²³ The cruellest insult that Merton, the perennial outsider, could offer, was that the monastery reproduced all the worst features of the society it claimed to have left behind.²⁴ This is why his social criticism manifests a certain symmetry with his monastic invective—both come from a deep sense of not belonging.

Reading the journals, especially those that cover the years that Merton was officially living in community, provides many examples of Merton's trenchant sarcasm directed at the community and its concerns. As Abbot Bamberger has noted, 'Merton probably grumbled more than just average ... It was part of his mystique [*sic*] to be outspoken, to say very strongly what he felt, but it's important to note that he didn't believe everything he said in the heat of passion ... But, as he said later, he was taking things out on the community that were

20. 11 June 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 126).

21. 2 February 1960 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 373).

22. 14 October 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 303-304). Monica Furlong notes about Merton and Dom James: 'The two sometimes seemed to be colluding in some disastrous compulsion *à deux* that both hated and that neither could break out of' (*Merton: A Biography* [London: Collins, 1980], p. 281).

23. 10 August 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 6).

24. 'Certainly the American myth dominates monastic labor, which is seldom "sacred" ...' 13 August 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, pp. 150-51).

conflicts within himself.²⁵ Notwithstanding this disclaimer, the catalogue of complaints against the community is extensive. Some of the particular areas of disagreement to which Merton returns often are the following.

1. He could not identify with the economic aspects of Gethsemani, which he refers to as 'this immoral and hypocritical mess of a cheese factory'.²⁶

2. He hated heavy machinery, the excessive din it produced, and the fact that it seemed to create in the monks an affinity with noisiness. 'The infernal clatter and hullabaloo, the continual roar of machinery, the crash of objects falling from the hands of distraught contemplatives—all this protests that we hate silence with all our power because, with our wrong motives for seeking it, it is ruining our lives.'²⁷

3. He was affronted by the level of monastic teaching, particularly in the case of Dom James. 'Every time I go to Chapter such ties as still bind me to Gethsemani are weakened still more.'²⁸ 'I missed Chapter and was not downcast, for the Sunday Chapters are awful.'²⁹ Meanwhile by virtue of his extraordinarily wide reading, he exposed himself to influences that had no direct impact on the general community and so, not surprisingly, he began thinking thoughts that were different from what filled the minds of his confrères. 'The mentality, the rigidity and suppression of all freedom, which is the conservative policy and that of Dom James, simply stifles genuine life.'³⁰

4. He did not appreciate Dom James' abbatial style. Indeed, many of his criticisms of Gethsemani might be regarded as implicit criticisms of its abbot. Sandwiched between statements of Dom James' good qualities, he includes the following:

Underneath which one gets sudden glimpses of cowardice, ignobility, hypocrisy, vengefulness, of which he is *entirely unconscious*, and which therefore he can exercise quite ruthlessly against people, thinking it is 'for their good' and with what self-righteousness.³¹

Merton experiences a profound antipathy for his abbot. 'I suppose the real root [of my misery] is my deep distrust of Dom James ... and my

25. Wilkes (ed.), *Merton*, pp. 120-21.

26. 15 November 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 343).

27. 20 September 1956 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 71).

28. 2 November 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 339).

29. 13 September 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 145).

30. 10 September 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 293).

31. 30 November 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 269).

profound disagreement with him, my inability to believe him.'³² 'Personally I believe Dom James Fox, in his obsessive refusal of everything like this [simplified foundation in Nicaragua] is stifling the Spirit.'

Many panegyrists were at pains to point out that despite these difficulties Merton continued to practice monastic obedience. He says as much himself. 'I was angry and bitter about this [restriction on traveling], but in the end, especially yesterday I was able finally to see not only that obedience is the only practical thing, but is really best for me.'³³ Yet he exults that one of the fruits of the solitary life is 'liberation from automatic obedience into the seriousness and gravity of free choice to submit', as if to say that as a hermit he is able to submit to God without the charade of 'formal and trivial ... obedience to the rules and Superiors where demanded'.³⁴ He had theoretical reservations about obedience as well.

This shows the ambivalence of monastic obedience considered as a justifying 'work' which makes me 'something' and thereby makes me a prey of death in making me a prey of ambition. But obedience in the monastery is customarily presented as a holy 'work' that is pure, that justifies, that is totally disinfected of self. Is this true? What obedience are we talking about? Obedience to a collective will to power? To collective self-assertion? To collective might? To collective complacency, ambition, self satisfaction, self justification? He who seeks to justify himself by a secret and surefire method is locked in despair and does not know it!³⁵

It is clear that there is an abiding resentment of the concrete demands made on him by his vows, especially when superiors attempt to 'interfere with and "direct" their subjects'.³⁶ 'I wish religious life were less of a cold war between superiors and subjects—and usually over nothing except niceties and proprieties and nuances of "who is boss".'³⁷ Not for us to judge whether Merton's acquiescence in the orders he was given was purely 'supernatural', as was said in those days, or whether it was part of an elaborate game, in which he was not fully conscious of all the operative components. 'I protest by

32. 12 July 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 268).

33. 15 September 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 296).

34. 9 April 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 226-27).

35. This is the version published in *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 36. The journal entry (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 91-92), omits the parts in bold type.

36. 9 March 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 215).

37. 10 October 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 255).

obeying.³⁸ 'Hence the infinite ways in which I permit myself to protest and complain—without being obvious to anyone. At least so I think, because I do not see it myself.'³⁹

To complicate matters further, it seems that throughout most of the period when Merton was sounding off about his abbot he was acting as Dom James' confessor. He was entrusted by him with the charge of Novice Master and given many privileges. He even served on the Building Committee. The one thing that Dom James would not countenance in any way was that Merton would leave Gethsemani: as abbot of another community, on one of the foundations or by transferring to a different Order—even on a trip. His resistance to Merton's solitary bent ceased as soon as a solution was formulated and cleared by higher authorities, that kept Merton at Gethsemani.

Beneath a polite exterior, it often appears that they were in constant feud, in which discord was kept on the boil by their having to meet regularly and work together. Merton found it impossible to communicate with his abbot.

For twelve years I have failed to establish a real rapport, an understanding in which these things can be faced. There is just *no* meeting of minds; except on a superficial level. Only our 'well-meaning' efforts to communicate, which break down because we speak different languages. The only meeting is in the realm of perfectly acceptable clichés. Not cliché words but cliché *ideas*. A real idea has to be emptied of its content and turned into a stereotype before one can use it in a conversation with him. And yet he is so earnest about all those stereotypes! As soon as you say anything that does not fit with a completely commonplace and familiar category, he goes on the defensive, and retreats with a suspicious silence; he no longer thinks you are 'practical'.⁴⁰

Though the invisible weapons each used were different, they were meant to wound. Merton admits that some of his more ill-considered statements were 'motivated by some obscure desire to protect my own heart against wounds by inflicting them myself'.⁴¹ They were an odd couple, as the journals attest, and no third party will ever be able

38. 12 June 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 256). It is only fair to give the full quotation: 'I protest by obeying, and protest most effectively by obeying in an obedience in which I am not subject to arbitrary fantasies on the part of authority, but in which both I and the abbot are aware (or think we are aware) of a higher obligation, and a demand of God. That my situation has reached this point is a great grace.'

39. 24 January 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 197).

40. 8 September 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 160).

41. 18 April 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 232).

to catch the nuances of the relationship that ended, on Merton's part, with a particularly unctuous and mendacious statement in his last letter to Dom James, six weeks before his death. 'I never personally resented any of your decisions because I knew you were following your conscience and the policies that seemed necessary then.'⁴²

5. Merton was intolerant of simple community pleasures, particularly the way Christmas was celebrated. And so he stood apart. In 1963 he wrote, 'As usual, Christmas was a kind of spiritual crisis for me'.⁴³

Interiorly I have been aloof and resigned in all the community nonsense... Christmas—the usual mad and silly decorations, and the carols in which I did not become involved at all. Played some austere Ambrosian and Byzantine chants to the novices and went for a walk in the darkening woods alone.⁴⁴

For him this was all part of 'the *vanitas monastica* of the community life'.⁴⁵ Sometimes, however, he seemed aware that his behavior was elitist: 'I have a natural tendency to become an escapist, a snob, a narcissist. . . Certainly my solitude has not been *tolerant*'.⁴⁶

Christmas Night—all the fuss and ceremony in the stuffy Church meant little. I had to make an effort to penetrate *through* all that and find the Mass. Christmas Day—(Novitiate cluttered with decorations)... I deliberately avoided the carol singing in the library, though at moments I was tempted to give in and 'please' the community people. It would have been a silly weakness.⁴⁷

Even when human decency begins to generate mild remorse at his intolerance, he is quickly caught up in a renewed movement of resentment and dismissal.

First of all it is useless and profoundly stupid to judge those with whom I live, I mean of course those whose anguish and insecurity impose on all the rest absurd and futile burdens...⁴⁸

Once in the hermitage some of the bitterness evaporates: 'I did not get the awful depression that I have had a couple of times at Christmas in recent years'.⁴⁹ It seems that absence does make the heart grow fonder

42. Letter of 20 October 1968, in Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity*, p. 405.

43. 25 December 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 49).

44. 26 December 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 362).

45. 22 August 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 319).

46. 5 June 1960 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 8).

47. 26 December 1960 (*Turning toward the World*, pp. 78-79).

48. 25 December 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 279).

49. 25 December 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 326).

since he wrote from Asia two days before his death, 'Also with Christmas approaching I feel homesick for Gethsemani'.⁵⁰

6. He hated pontifical ceremonies, especially when he was assigned an active role in them. Because Dom James enjoyed such occasions, Merton detested them, scoffing at 'the pompous absurdity of Pontifical Mass'.⁵¹

The less said about the Easter celebration the better. Pomposity, phoniness, display, ultra-serious, stupid. Interminable pontifical mummering, purple zucchetto, long train, Mexican novice as train bearer (he always manages to get a Mexican or a Philipino [*sic*] or a Negro to carry his tail), all of course for the 'glory of God'. The Church was morally, spiritually stifling with solemn, unbreathable realities. It was the plush, the ornamentation, the mummery in Church that struck me as secular. The spring outside was sacred.⁵²

Note how he ups the ante by adding to the charges of stupidity and secularity, the implicit accusation of racism.

7. As in many other areas, Merton was ambivalent about the liturgy—seeing it sometimes as an enterprise that worked against the contemplative life. '[The liturgy] is probably the biggest project of all, a huge, worried, complicated, time devouring project, mobilizing the ceaseless concern of experts in chant and the anxiety of every monk in the community, whether he can sing or not'.⁵³ He favoured liturgical change in theory,⁵⁴ but was resentful about particular changes introduced at Gethsemani: 'My difficulties are not with the principle [of concelebration] or the idea, but the way we do it'.⁵⁵ His approval was never unqualified. He hated 'liturgical vaudeville' and resented being subjected to a 'propaganda barrage' from 'zealots'.⁵⁶ Over the years he fired many broadsides.

The new changes in the Liturgy seem to me to be in many ways bewildering and senseless—a matter of juggling with words and manipulating the rubrics rather than a real vital adjustment.... This is the mouse

that our mountain brought forth. We are all wrapt up in our liturgical red tape.⁵⁷

The changes constantly made seem to me to be foolish and irresponsible—and evasions of real action. Instead of doing something valuable and important they [the members of the General Chapter] do silly things—abolish the Lenten curtain which could perfectly easily be kept ... What a lack of liturgical sense!⁵⁸

As for the liturgy of Holy Week ... In many ways there has been a tendency to substitute light and superficial rites for things that were deeper and more symbolic and more moving.⁵⁹

On Palm Sunday—everything was going well and I was getting into the chants of the Mass when suddenly the Passion, instead of being solemnly sung on the ancient tone in Latin, was read in the extremely trite and pedestrian English version that has been approved by the American bishops. The effect was, to my mind, disastrous. Total lack of nobility, solemnity, or even of any style whatever. A trivial act—liturgical vaudeville. I could not get away from the impression of a blasphemous comedy.⁶⁰

Often enough, the changes meet with his approval and everything is running to his satisfaction. Suddenly he adverts to one (maybe relatively unimportant) element that is not so good. This triggers memories of similar affronts and suddenly we are confronted with a disproportionate and generalized rage.

The midnight Mass, concelebrated, was decent, and I was glad to be there (we shouted a great carol as recessional hymn). I felt the community was fully *in it* ... They [the musicians] always overdo a good thing. And the whole community celebration is still spoiled for me by the sense of a certain falsity and willfulness (instead of faith) which some infect into it. As if there were a kind of perverse and intense determination to make certain self-deceptions come true and as if that were faith. (This of course in conjunction with, supported by, real faith. The parasitism of willful consolation and self-imposed meanings, forced upon simple faith. Monstrous or potentially monstrous mental gavottes.)⁶¹

Merton was critical about liturgy because he appreciated its potential. Perhaps he approached it too exclusively from the viewpoint of the individual's experience, and did not appreciate its role in expressing and reinforcing the community's life. 'The longer and more difficult

50. Letter of 8 December 1968, in Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity*, p. 417.

51. 20 August 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 11).

52. 16 April 1963 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 313).

53. 'The Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 19 (1984), pp. 267-82 (274).

54. He regarded Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* as 'remarkable': 15 December 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 44-45).

55. 12 July 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 269).

56. 28 September 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 150).

57. 12 January 1958 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 154).

58. 28 September 1958 (*A Search for Solitude*, pp. 219-20).

59. 25 March 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 271).

60. 13 April 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 227).

61. 25 December 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 326).

the offices are, the less it is possible to experience them as a dialogue with God.⁶²

One who lives on the margins of the community needs closer spiritual direction than somebody content to 'run with the herd'.⁶³ From my reading of the journals, it seems that there was no one in the community whose counsel he habitually sought and respected—at least during the middle years. This meant that no one helped him go beneath the contradictions to find his own identity, no one was permitted seriously to challenge his wilder assumptions, assuage his disappointments or affirm his strengths.

Sometimes Merton confided something to the like-minded in the community, but often it seems that he overpowered prospective counsellors, without much hope of their influencing him or giving him the sort of pastoral otherness one expects from a spiritual director. Those he willingly consulted seemed all to be outside experts of one kind or another, who were never in a position to demand from the famous author the kind of integrity to self that he was so adept in extracting from his own clients. Perhaps Dom James was the only one who insisted that Merton practice what he once preached—and we know how little appreciated was this intervention.

Submission to the Common Will?

To some extent Merton rejected the all-accepting piety of his early days at Gethsemani. His opinions changed radically and he resented those, like Dom James and many readers, who expected him to embody the values he described so eloquently in his early works.⁶⁴ It is not unlikely that he would begin to have some reservations about the advisability of conformity to the 'common will'—at least in his own case.

In the section of his 'unpublished' 'The Inner Experience' dealing with infused contemplation Merton summarizes his teaching in eleven points. The final point is as long as the previous ten; it begins with the statement, 'The testing of the individual may perhaps be intensified by institutional circumstance' and continues with a self-indulgent

tirade against institutional interference with the contemplative aspirations of individuals. It is not difficult to perceive elements of autobiography in the text.

Even where the contemplative is not expressly forbidden to follow what he believes to be the inspiration of God (and this not rarely happens) he may feel himself continually and completely at odds with the accepted ideas of those around him. Their spiritual exercises may seem to be a bore and a waste of time. Their sermons and their conversation may leave him exhausted with a sense of futility: as if he had been pelted with words without meaning. Their choral offices, their excitement over liturgical ceremony and chant, may rob him of the delicate taste of an interior manna that is not found in formulas of prayer and exterior rites...

Whenever there is conflict between the interior and the exterior, the exterior must always win. One must always, and above all conform to the collective idea. Now it is true that this can be a very meritorious sacrifice, but it is equally true that short-sighted minds have turned the religious life, by this means, into a procrustean bed on which potential saints and contemplatives have been so pulled apart and crippled that they have ended their lives as freaks. And this is why there are few or no contemplatives. That is why, very often, men of character and interior delicacy are repelled by the atmosphere of these monasteries, once they have spent a few months inside them, and leave in great discouragement, renouncing the interior life altogether.⁶⁵

In this text 'conformity with the collective idea' is no longer a virtue, but a monstrous institutional imposition that frustrates the call to contemplation—at least for 'men of character and interior delicacy'. Earlier he had accepted such frustration as 'the cross', a necessary purification.

If it were merely a question of satisfying my own desires and aspirations, I would leave for Camaldoli in ten minutes. Yet it is *not* merely a question of satisfying my own desires. On the contrary, there is one thing holding me at Gethsemani. And that is the cross. Some mystery of the Wisdom of God has taught me that perhaps, after all, Gethsemani is where I belong because I do not *fit* in and here my ideals are practically all frustrated... It seems to me that if I stay at Gethsemani all that St. John of the Cross demands for the purification of a soul can *easily* be fulfilled.⁶⁶

Six years later, he doubted this reasoning—perhaps because it had been espoused by the abbot.

65. *Inner Experience V*, pp. 6-7 (= 'The Inner Experience: Infused Contemplation (V)', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* [1984], pp. 62-78 [67-68]).

66. October 10, 1952 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 20).

62. 10 August 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 6).

63. A phrase of Dom James to which Merton objected strongly. 12 September 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 144).

64. As he himself notes in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 12: 'They [his critics] demand that I remain forever the superficially pious, rather rigid and somewhat narrow-minded monk I was twenty years ago ...'

To stay here is no real sacrifice, no progress, no real virtue, only inertia, acceptance of mediocrity—The pernicious doctrine, which R. Father preaches with such strength and conviction, that the acceptance of this absurd and mediocre existence is a 'crucifixion'.⁶⁷

Merton's attitudes were rarely simple or consistent. At times he demonstrates an acute awareness of cenobitic values.

This is a valid intuition for monastic community life also. The realization of these two things, that each individual monk, or each individual member of any Christian community, becomes himself only on condition that he functions with others to help them become themselves. In this interaction there is no refuge in solitary tranquillity. One is exposed to constant dissatisfaction and suffering by the fact that this process is frustrating and *always incomplete*.⁶⁸

Yet his feeling towards the Gethsemani community varies from month to month. He experiences a love for the monks, but seems to despise the system. The following entry is interesting because it shows how quickly a momentarily felt tenderness gives way to a seething, habitual resentment.

Walking to Prime in the grey cloister, realized that I have paid too little attention to a great reality—my love for the monastery and the love of the community for me. (I hate to admit it, for it may mean that I must stay!) But not love for or interest in the stupid superficial concerns of the community as an official body. That is it, though. What is said, what is planned, what is achieved, is not really the community's real concern, though many may think and hope it is. Resentment toward those who try to convince themselves of the reality and significance of their lives by making the community adopt and carry out their plans.⁶⁹

There is a dark side even when he appears happy and cooperative in community.

Meanwhile I have a hard time appearing cheerful and sociable. I can't say I tried too hard either. Complete disgust with the stupid mentality we cultivate in our monasteries. Deliberate cult of frustration and nonsense. Professional absurdity. Isn't life absurd enough already without our adding to it our own fantastic frustrations and stupidities?⁷⁰

Merton repeatedly confesses himself unable to understand the mentality of the Community. Perhaps this is because he was reluctant

67. 21 July 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 308).

68. 26 January 1964. This gloss of Karl Jaspers is not included in the journal (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 68) but is found in *A Vow of Conversation*, p. 20.

69. 11 September 1960 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 46).

70. 13 October 1960 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 58).

to admit the limitations of his own competence and unwilling to enter into serious negotiation with those who approached matters from a different angle. This is his response to a meeting of the Building Committee:

I am helpless in articulating anything when I come into contact with the mind and convictions of our community—practical, unimaginative, pragmatic, communal, obsessed with the new, the straight, the slick, and in love with a kind of secure definiteness, a pretense of order, at the extent of anything savoring of spirit or of character. Where I am most helpless is that I do not know the names and natures of new materials, what they are, what they are for, what they cost, what one does to them, what they do to people. I have no technical language, only a few hopeless spiritual intuitions.⁷¹

Christmas did nothing to improve his moods and still another entry confirms Merton's rejection of the common outlook.

Utter madness of all life even here. Ferocity and desperation of Father Andrew's silly sermon, attacking everything, querulous. How our community life seriously maintains a flaming contagion of noxious and perverse thought! Cramped, violent, desperate, because always clinging to opinions of right and wrong in every smallest thing where no 'certitude' is possible except by force, by doing violence to the truth.⁷²

After he went into solitude he states baldly that 'the common life distracts you from life in its fullness'.⁷³ He is relieved to be quit of its petty concerns and free of the pressure to accept its delusions as reality. 'Far from missing the community I find the artificiality of the community life almost incredible, from the perspective of my solitude.'⁷⁴ The next day he continues the thought.

I do not have the 'official' space—sanctified, juridically defined, hedged in with elaborate customs—of the monastery as my milieu. To be out of that is a great blessing. It is a space rich with delusions and with the tyranny of willful fabrication.⁷⁵

At other times he glimpses the possibility that he is being too hard on ordinary monks and too unyielding in his idealism. Among his New Year resolutions for 1961 he includes the following:

Nor to be so quick to resent all the frictions of community life, but to accept them peacefully. Nor are they all such frictions. And they have

71. 20 November 1960 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 68).

72. 27 December 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 51).

73. 28 May 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 251).

74. 10 September 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 292).

75. 10 September 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 293).

their place. I do not waste time comparing community and solitude (though there is such an immense difference!).⁷⁶

In April Merton demonstrates that he is aware 'of my interior depressions, gloom, rebellions, bitterness—of my very real inadaptability to the rigid form of cenobitic life which is here conceived as an ideal'.⁷⁷ He notes that he has to be excused from many duties and so feels that he does not do his full part in community life.⁷⁸ He returns to the theme in a retreat at the beginning of the following year.

I have not handled the community situation properly. Undoubtedly I have shirked sacrifices that would have helped me to be truly free. What blocks me, however, is I think a genuine sensibility to wrong motives and emphasis in the community itself and in the Abbot. These are inevitable, and perhaps quite small, but I make too much of them, as if God could not use them precisely to free me.⁷⁹

The retreat of 1964 returns to the 'problem of my resentments, my frustrations, sense of being unfairly treated, cheated in fact and to some extent exploited' and makes again the appropriate resolutions.⁸⁰ To little avail. His review of 1965, however, concludes: 'Gethsemani too has to be fully accepted. My long refusal to fully identify myself with the place is futile.'⁸¹

At times his attitudes are more mellow: 'Once more I feel like a member of this community'.⁸² His feeling for individual monks is mostly positive: 'I discover that I was very fond of this crusty, simple, rude old man [Fr Alphonse]'.⁸³

In short the only things that really keep me where I am (at Gethsemani) are first of all the community (least of all the Abbot; though he is the one who exerts the most pressure) and secondly my responsibility toward those who have read my books, though this also is ambiguous. Especially love for and appreciation for the novices, realization of Christ's love for them: these are important to me, sometimes makes all the difference.⁸⁴

The following year he reflected on 'the mystery of my monastic

community as my place of salvation and encounter with God'.⁸⁵ After a spell in the hospital he records that he is

glad to get back, especially to the novices. This is surely a much more rational life than anything to be found outside. Here at least there is a kind of order and tranquillity, and though there is plenty of noise, still in the novitiate everything is quiet and serene... was happy that everyone really seemed so glad to have me back. And probably they were so because they could see I was glad to be back with them.⁸⁶

About his personal standing in the Community he is able to write, 'It is certain that I am very much respected by the majority of the community'.⁸⁷ This is a judgment confirmed by his surviving contemporaries. He was respected and understood and loved—in different ways—by his confrères and they felt their affection was reciprocated. Some were aware of his struggles and inner hurt, but the full extent of his alienation from the Community is only revealed in the journals between 1952 and 1965. The pious press releases that became possible after his withdrawal from community life may have been sincere, but they scarcely reflected what he was feeling during those years. It was easy enough to write sweet words from Asia two days before his death.

I have not found what I came to find. I have not found any place of hermitage that is any better than the hermitage I have, or had, at Gethsemani, which is after all places, a great place.⁸⁸

By this stage it must be clear that whatever Merton thought about the spirituality of the 'common will' in his earlier years, he had shaken off any attachment to it very quickly. In one sense, his pursuit of solitude stymied any hope he ever had, or thought he had, of being able to settle down quietly as one of a crowd. This solitariness was more than a hankering after the hermitage. It also had its dark, uncreative elements. There are four aspects of his solitary preoccupation that probably brought Merton more pain than anything the community did or failed to do.

76. 8 January 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 86).

77. 29 April 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 112).

78. 9 September 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, pp. 159-60).

79. 24 January 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 197).

80. 23 January 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 65-66).

81. 30 December 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 328).

82. 1 January 1960 (*A Search for Solitude*, pp. 365-66).

83. 24 April 1963 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 316).

84. 16 November 1962 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 265).

85. 21 July 1963 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 342).

86. 28 September 1963 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 20).

87. 29 June 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 261). However, the thought of being elected abbot fills him with depression, despair and disillusionment. 'How could I handle all the misfits and malcontents?'

88. From a letter to John Howard Griffin quoted in his book *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983), p. 206.

The Solitude of the Lingered Grudge

Not having known Merton personally I cannot tell how adept he was in the art of forgiveness and in his capacity to let go of his grievances. The picture conveyed by the journals is that he was not brilliant in this area. Even the fact that he did not destroy the journals but instead gave permission for them to be published 'in whole or in part' 25 years after his death,⁸⁹ meant that he envisaged the possibility that some of his denunciations would be immortalized. Refusing to relinquish individuating memories and interpretations isolates. It generates feelings of not being understood by those around, who see matters differently, and it colors and inhibits relationships with them. It seems clear enough that at least some of Merton's incapacity to feel at home in Gethsemani was linked with his inability to let go of his active resentments. Having uncritically identified 'Gethsemani' as the cause of his pain, he was absolved from examining more closely and coming to terms with the potential traumas in his notably unusual early life.

The Solitude of Infallibility

Two strong impressions come from a sequential reading of the journals. First, an astonishing array of thoughts passed through his mind, many of them self-contradictory. Secondly, he rarely disavows anything—especially if monastic politics are involved. The unassailable infallibility of the journal-writer relieves him of any need to retract or recant. In private life this can be a relatively harmless delusion. In community life it is very destructive. 'At one point in writing about the General Will, Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that for democracy to work, citizens must be willing to say, "I was mistaken". This is not something most of us are willing to do ...'⁹⁰ Not having lived with Merton I do not know how often those magic words 'I was mistaken' passed his lips. They are certainly not the leitmotif of the journals. He is much readier to confess weakness of will or mixity of motives than error of intellect.

The Solitude of Unresolved Sexuality

On the vigil of his fiftieth birthday, Merton reflected on the half-century of his past life. 'One thing on my mind is sex, as something I did not use maturely and well, something I gave up without having

come to terms with it.'⁹¹ In such an extensive interior journal, and one so frank about feelings, there is surprisingly little reference to any difficulties he may have experienced with chastity or celibacy—at least during the years of his Community existence that are my focus here. Perhaps he had none. Even so, it is permissible to wonder whether the extremes of intensity he experienced in attachment and detachment from persons and from the community do not reflect both an unfulfilled need for intimacy and a fear and flight from it. Maybe his war with 'community' was in some way an external manifestation of an inner struggle with unresolved relationship issues. Once Merton and the Gethsemani community parted company (for all practical purposes), a more explicit resurgence of such basic needs might have been expected. From March 1966 this is exactly what happened. But that is another story.

The Solitude of Disappointment

In 1952, with unconscious irony, Merton wrote about a temptation assailing those who aspired to sanctity.

First they imagine a sanctity which they feel to be appropriate to themselves. Then they imagine themselves (and contemplate) themselves striving for it in ways which they deem fitting and efficacious. Finally, if they are sufficiently stubborn, they carry the story to the end and imagine they have achieved what they wanted.⁹²

There is at least a possibility that Merton isolated himself by such unreality. 'What I find most in my whole life is illusion. Wanting to be something of which I had formed a concept.'⁹³

His lifelong pursuit of solitude raises a few questions. Did Merton believe that writing beautifully about solitude was equivalent to a vocation to it? Did he begin to accept as real some of the more romantic assertions made in his earlier books? Was solitude a genuine attraction or merely an escape? How did he see his books, correspondence, visits and publicity as compatible with solitude? Why was the most intense rancor provoked by Dom James' refusal to let him travel? And finally, how long would he have lasted in the hermitage? A suggestion of Abbot Bamberger leads to the conclusion that part of Merton's rage was due to his being unable to forgive himself for not living the solitude he kept proposing as an ideal.

89. Thus Patrick Hart in his preface to *Run to the Mountain*, p. xi.

90. Andrew Hacker, 'Twelve Angry Persons', *New York Review of Books*, 21 September 1995, p. 46.

91. 30 January 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 198).

92. 12 November 1952 (*A Search for Solitude*, pp. 23-24).

93. 30 January 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 198).

When Merton became a hermit, it was very important to him because he was gifted for prayer and solitude and silence. But I myself believe that he was not quite suited to be a hermit. He was never able to face that, and I believe that instead of facing it he took it out on the community.⁹⁴

This is close to what Dr Zilboorg told him in 1956: 'Your hermit trend is pathological'.⁹⁵ In a second interview, in the presence of Dom James, the psychiatrist bombarded him with the same assertion: 'You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying, "HERMIT"'.⁹⁶ The sentiment contained elements of a truth which Merton was too vulnerable to receive. To some extent he went into denial. Three years later Merton records Dr Zilboorg's death without comment.⁹⁷

At one point Merton recognizes that his anger at the community comes from perceiving in others the same lack of authenticity that he finds in himself, embracing instead a 'false paradise which is the self, enchanted with its own illusion'.⁹⁸ Elsewhere, after listing all the external sources of his impatience, he comes to the point of admitting, 'At the root it is all a mean and childish impatience with myself and there is no way of dignifying it as a valid "protest". It is just idiotic and self-seeking nonsense.'⁹⁹

Merton apparently did not practice the asceticism of the 'common will' that he proclaimed so unequivocally in his monastic youth. Over the years he progressively dissociated himself from the common mentality of Gethsemani, he went his own way. The common life was viewed as an imposition. The cenobitic practice of mutual obedience was effectively neutralized by both the creative and the uncreative elements of his search for solitude and further complicated by elements in his personal history and by his frequent forays into monastic politics. Thomas Merton was an uncommon man and—although he may have wished it otherwise—a decidedly uncommon monk.

His life is, no doubt, a cautionary tale for us all. Now, at least he is beyond being pained by our stumbling attempts to make sense of a life notoriously beset by contradictions.

94. In Wilkes (ed.), *Merton*, p. 120.

95. 29 July 1956 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 60).

96. Thus Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 297-98: 'Significantly, while there are pages on the first interview in the journal, it contains no record of the second'.

97. 4 October 1959 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 334).

98. 30 July 1963 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 351).

99. 10 March 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 216).