

The Context of Thomas Merton's Letter Concerning "The Jesus Prayer"*

Thomas Francis Smith

In the spring of 1963, with the first session of Vatican II completed, but not yet having sent shock waves through the Catholic Church regarding liturgy, morality, doctrine, and many other aspects of Church life, I myself was in a period of stagnation with regard to my spiritual life. At that time, Cistercian monks already had a full spiritual program. As a Trappist monk we had several hours a day of the Divine Office, all recited in Latin, while urged to supplement that with spiritual reading, meditation, the rosary and Stations of the Cross. I allowed myself to read J.D. Salinger's novel, *Franny and Zooey*, and while enjoying it very much, became introduced to this Russian form of prayer, called "The Jesus Prayer." The author mentions that it comes from the book, *The Way of the*

*Editor's Note:

June 29, 1963, Letter of Thomas Merton: Continuing Insight into Contemporary Spirituality.

Chosen for inclusion in Volume Three of Merton's Selected Letters, *The School of Charity*, this letter by Merton to Father Thomas Fidelis (Francis) Smith, O.C.S.O. is included as an "obscure" Merton publication for this volume. It is an answer to a specific inquiry about usage of the "Jesus Prayer" yet reveals Merton's wide-ranging interests in prayer.

Fr. Thomas, Retreat Master at Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, GA, is an example of a fellow monk of Merton's generation who has both profited from exposure to Merton's writing and example and who also stands today as an excellent example of a Cistercian monk, like Merton, who has remained open to a wide variety of spiritual practices. Fr. Thomas already spoke about Centering Prayer and *lectio* at an Atlanta Merton Conference on February 28, 1980. He has long been an enthusiastic commentator on subjects as diverse as the contemporary Church, the importance of angels, Eastern religious practices, the Holy Trinity, as well as yoga as a spiritual discipline. His retrospective words place Merton's reply in context both to 1963 and as well in terms of the continuing evolution of spiritual practices in the contemporary world by a Cistercian monk.

Pilgrim. So after finishing the novel, I went to the library and signed out that book.

Immediately I became fascinated with this new method of prayer, and adopted it to my already overloaded schedule of vocal and liturgical prayer. This kind of prayer, however, grew on me, and so I started to decrease in the other areas and spent more time on the constant repetition of this prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner," saying it several thousand times a day. I was even saying it unconsciously while listening to public readings and while milking cows! Eventually I got to feeling a warmth about my heart, and at night the prayer came on. I mentioned all of this to my confessor, and he suggested I write to Thomas Merton for his advice.

Since I was a bit scared of becoming either a mystic or maniac, I took his advice and wrote Fr. Louis (Merton). His reply came shortly afterwards, and I must admit, it was not what I was wanting to hear. I ignored his advice and continued in my imitation of the prayer of the Pilgrim. But within a few weeks, I felt the tension developing, and slowly cut back on the method and repetition, till after a few weeks, I dropped it completely.

I have never regretted this "Jesus Prayer" period because it was actually a prelude to a more contemplative type of prayer I soon learned from reading *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But I do suggest to persons who ask me about the "Jesus Prayer" to try the prayer as described by *The Way of the Pilgrim*. I do tell them, however, to be cautious within and repeat to them the sound advice about flexibility that Thomas Merton gave to me in his letter.

Thomas Francis Smith, O.C.S.O.