

A MONASTIC CORRESPONDENCE

by **Thomas Merton & Jean Leclercq**, O.S.B.

Edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In a foreword to Bruno Scott James's volume of selected letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Merton writes what could be an autobiographical statement: "The whole Bernard is not to be found in his letters alone: but the whole Bernard can never be known without them." Merton concludes his foreword with these equally revealing words: "... let us at least gather from St. Bernard that letter-writing is an art which has been forgotten, but which needs to be re-learned..." (Foreword to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953).

The following exchange of letters between Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq shows us that the art of letter writing had not been completely abandoned by monks of our time. Included here are the earliest letters between Merton and Leclercq, spanning the time frame of 1950 to 1954. This is but a small sampling of the vast correspondence between these two monastic writers, one a Trappist-Cistercian monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, U. S. A., and the other a Benedictine scholar of the Abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg, who spent a quarter of a century working on the critical edition of the writings of St. Bernard.

Not surprisingly, these early letters deal in large part with the twelfth-century Abbot of Clairvaux (France), whose writings were to have such an influence on all future generations of monks, including both Merton and Leclercq. The first extant letter we have of this exchange is dated April 22, 1950, and deals with filming one of St. Bernard's Sermons from the Obrecht Collection housed at that time at Gethsemani. These manuscripts and incunabula were later transferred to the Library of the Institute of Cistercian Studies at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, where they are on permanent loan.

An occasional phrase in Latin or French has been translated into English and is indicated with brackets [...]; these are supplied by the editor. But only a minimum of editing has been done in preparing this exchange of letters for publication in The

Merton Annual 3. Merton's side of the correspondence will be published in the third volume of the Merton Letters titled *The School of Charity*. It was not possible at this time to publish both sides of the letters, but it is hoped that at some future date such a publication may be possible. Meanwhile, we have this early exchange of letters between Merton, the American Cistercian, and Leclercq, the Benedictine from Luxembourg: an engaging correspondence.*

It is appropriate that this correspondence which deals so much with St. Bernard of Clairvaux should appear in 1990, the year in which the monastic world commemorates the ninth centenary of Bernard's birth, also known as "The Mellifluous Doctor" of the Church. We are indebted to Sister Bernard Said, O.S.B., Jean Leclercq's English-speaking secretary, for preparing the transcriptions of most of these letters, and translating where required. Actually, the majority of both sides of the correspondence was written in English. An occasional use of brackets provides a fuller editorial explanation of a term or name as seemed necessary in the context of the letters.

Although the correspondence began on the subject of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, as the years went by, these two monks explored many other related fields of mutual interest, such as renewal in the monastic orders, and the eremitical ideal of a more complete withdrawal from the world for certain monks who experienced this special vocation. Merton felt drawn to a more solitary way of life, and often wrote to Leclercq for counsel and advice as these early letters reveal. Leclercq's responses were also helpful and encouraging though prudent and cautious.

In the late 1960s Leclercq would encourage Merton as he entered the hermitage, a small cinderblock cottage on the property of the Abbey of Gethsemani. When visiting America he would frequently visit Gethsemani and was able to evaluate Merton's solitary vocation at close range.

After Dom James Fox resigned his abbatial office, and Father Flavian Burns was elected his successor, Leclercq would continue his contacts, and was instrumental in arranging for the invitation to participate in the conference of Asian Monastic Superiors in Bangkok, Thailand, in December of 1968. Leclercq and Merton met there for the last time before the latter's accidental death. It was especially fitting that the last meeting of these monastic friends should be in the midst of Asian monks and nuns gathered to explore monasticism in the Far East, and to take advantage of the wisdom of other non-Christian monastic traditions of Asia for the sake of a revitalized monasticism in the West.

It is hoped that this sampling of a unique monastic correspondence will help us all to understand the meaning of this radical response to the Gospel, incarnated so well by these two gifted monks, and how we can in our turn live it more authentically in the years to come.

* For a more complete treatment of this relationship, see our essay, "A Monastic Exchange: Leclercq and Merton," in *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 91-109.