

A Passionist Friendship: Barnabas Ahern and Thomas Merton

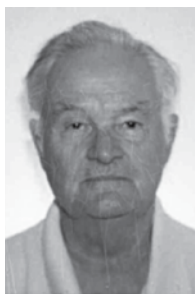
By **John Collins**

Passionist Father Barnabas M. Ahern was one of the most significant American Catholic scripture scholars of the mid-twentieth century, during the years leading up to and following the Second Vatican Council. Through correspondence and occasional encounters, Thomas Merton and Father Ahern developed a mutually beneficial relationship in which Ahern provided Merton with valuable advice not only on scripture but on his works in progress and even his personal life, while Merton was enlisted for a time by Ahern to contribute his literary expertise to the project of the new American Catholic translation of the Bible. The extant correspondence between Merton and Ahern is one-sided; only a single letter from Merton to Ahern survives, from January 22, 1953;¹ a total of twenty-one letters from Ahern to Merton, from April 10, 1950 through April 8, 1956, are preserved in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.² During the period when Ahern was teaching seminarians at the Passionist monastery in Louisville, KY, from 1959 through 1962, he also gave lectures on scripture at the Abbey of Gethsemani, where he and Merton would meet on occasion.³ An examination of the Merton/Ahern correspondence and related materials provides significant insights into Merton's concerns and interests during the period, though much of the information has to be inferred from Ahern's responses; while the relationship was not an intimate one, and continued to be marked by a certain formality on Ahern's part throughout the correspondence, it was an important one for Merton during a period of his life marked both by spiritual restlessness and spiritual growth.

James Ahern was born on February 18, 1915 in Chicago and received the name Barnabas when he professed his vows as a Passionist in Louisville, KY on July 30, 1933.⁴ After his ordination on June 7, 1941, Ahern received a Licentiate of Sacred Theology in 1943 from the Catholic University of America, and in 1947 he went to the École Biblique in Jerusalem to study scripture; in 1958, he was granted a doctorate from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. According to his official biography:

He taught Passionist seminarians in Chicago during the mid-forties and early fifties. Scripture came alive in his classroom. Students learned the modern biblical scholarship of the 1943 encyclical "Divino Afflante Spiritu." A popularizer, Ahern applied preaching, personal holiness, devotion, and intellect to help create the post-World War II religious workshop culture of the 1950's. With Fr. Myles Bourke, he worked on the New American

Bible translation sponsored by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. . . Priests, sisters, and educators throughout the United States learned from Barnabas that Scripture offered the opportunity for a personal relationship with God. . . . In 1962, he was appointed peritus at Vatican II (1962-1965) serving on the Theological Commission, Secretariat of Christian Unity.



John P. Collins

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During the council, he prepared interventions for Cardinal Albert Meyer of Chicago. “No individual, perhaps,” writes Vatican II journalist Fr. Vincent Yzermans, “did more to promote biblical scholarship among the American hierarchy at Vatican II than Father Barnabas Ahern.” . . . Between Council sessions, Ahern to the point of exhaustion, engaged in a world-wide promotion of the Council’s message: Catholics ought to study and to pray the Bible. (Passionist Archives)

Ahern taught and lectured in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland and Africa, as well as at Regina Mundi and the North American College in Rome; he taught scripture at St. Meinrad’s Seminary in Indiana (1966-1968) and the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (1968-1969), as well as for the Apostolic Religious Communities Program in Rome, and in Nairobi, Kenya (1987-1989); he was the first non-Jesuit to teach at the Gregorian University in Rome. He served on the newly established International Theological Commission (1970-1983) and was a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the Pontifical Vulgate Commission (1966-1973) as well as a consultor to the Congregation of Saints (1981-1988); he was one of two priests appointed by the US Bishops in 1971 to represent them at the Synod on the Priesthood in Rome; he received the Order of St. Augustine of Canterbury from the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury. “Queen Elizabeth had approved the honor, recognizing Barnabas as an original member and only Scripture Scholar of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue (1969-1975)” (Passionist Archives). Ahern was the author of several books and pamphlets including *New Horizons: Studies in Biblical Theology*; *Men of Prayer, Men of Action: Christian Spirituality Today*; *The Formation of Scripture*; *The Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans*; *Life in Christ*; and *The Power of His Resurrection and Fellowship in His Suffering: An Exegetical Study of Philippians 3:10-11*, his thesis submitted to the Pontifical Biblical Institute. He also authored many articles appearing in *The Bible Today*, *The Passionist*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* and *Cross and Crown*. Barnabas Ahern died on January 9, 1995 in the Passionist infirmary in Chicago.



**Barnabas Mary
Ahern, CP**

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There is a formality evident in the Ahern/Merton correspondence from the first letter to the last without exception. Merton is consistently addressed as “Dear Father” – “Dear Reverend Father” in the initial letter (4/10/1950); “Dear Father Louis” (2/1/1954) is as personal as he becomes.⁵ The greeting to Ahern in the one extant letter by Merton is “My Dear Father Barnabas Mary.”⁶ Ahern closes his first letter to Merton with the lines “Sincerely yours in the Passion of Christ and the Sorrows of Mary, Fr. Barnabas Mary, C.P.” (4/10/1950), while the extant letter from Merton to Ahern is signed, “Devotedly in Jesus.”⁷ Although Ahern’s letters can be characterized as formal, there is definitely a fraternal tone evident in most, and the word “Fraternally” was used on occasion in closing a letter (2/27/1951). However, on two occasions a paternal tone was more apparent, when Ahern was concerned that Merton might be leaving the Trappists and spoke to him in the tone of a “Dutch uncle” (1/14/1953; 1/29/1953). Merton’s response to Ahern shows a certain impatience with some of his statements about change and transfers being related to emotion: “all transfers,” he declares, “are surely not a matter of emotion” (SC 50). (The chronological proximity of these three letters between Merton and Ahern point to the intensity and concern on the part of both men about this particular vocational issue.) Overall, however, the tone of

Ahern's letters was respectful toward Merton, and at times even reverential. As one reviews the letters, it is apparent that Barnabas Ahern was a deeply spiritual man who often solicited prayers from Merton while at the same time readily offering his prayers in return.

Journal entries and published letters from Merton to his wide range of correspondents demonstrate his respect for Ahern's scholarship and friendliness. He writes in his journal for January 31, 1960, "Fr. Barnabas Mary came and gave a good short conference on the Bible as a general background to the Psalms. I liked it and was moved by it. Especially Jeremias 45."⁸ In an October 14, 1962 letter to Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr, who were planning to lobby on behalf of peace at the Second Vatican Council, he mentions that Fr. Ahern is in Rome and "will be very nice and friendly," though he adds, "I don't know what he can do for you."⁹ In a November 16, 1967 letter to Sr. Margaret Mary, who was looking for advice on a retreat for her religious community, Merton recommends Fr. Ahern as the "kind of priest who could do a good job on this," but adds, "of course he is terribly busy."¹⁰

Testimony from former Gethsemani Abbot Timothy Kelly lends additional insight into Merton's relationship with Ahern as well as Merton's view of scriptural scholarship at the time. Kelly recalls an incident at one of the classes for novices and juniors that he was auditing at the time he was serving as an assistant to Merton:

In my experience, he did not like questions in class and handled criticisms of conferences rather poorly. An example stands out related to modern biblical exegesis as it was referred to in the early 1960s. After Sunday Vespers we had about an hour long conference, generally on the scriptural readings of the day. At one of these he was presenting a profound and sensitive interpretation of the prophet Jonah, who was one of his favorites. Throughout the conference one of the brighter novices was continually raising his hand, but was only acknowledged at the end of the period. The novice remarked at some length on the scripture conference given to the community by Father Barnabas Ahern, C.P., in which he referred to the Jonah story as midrash. Father Louis' simple response was: "Oh!"; He closed his notes, left the room, never to give another extensive scriptural conference for some years.¹¹

Kelly further explains that Merton was critical of the current scriptural work in English during the early 1960s. Since "[h]is heart was patristic, his emotions responded to the beauty and order of the high middle ages" and therefore disdained the usefulness of "modern biblical exegesis" for the spiritual life (Kelly, "Epilogue" 292).¹² In a later interview Kelly recalls the same story in which he claims Merton "took a very grave umbrage" over the incident, but further states that Merton "never condemned" Ahern and, in fact, he was "the last person who would negate scholarship" (Kelly, "Honesty" 198). In this same interview Kelly underscored the deeply spiritual nature of Barnabas Ahern when he referred to him as not only as a gifted teacher but a "truly holy man" (Kelly, "Honesty" 198). Overall it is apparent that the Merton-Ahern relationship was cordial and respectful. Kelly states that Ahern and Merton spent time together when Ahern came to Gethsemani to give lectures and he surmises that Ahern helped Abbot James Fox better understand Merton (Kelly, "Honesty" 198). While the evidence does not support the fact that they were, in fact, close friends, it is evident from Merton's journals and letters that he respected Ahern as a biblical scholar, which Merton admitted he himself was not (*DWL* 287).

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As one would expect, much of the correspondence between Barnabas Ahern and Thomas Merton

is focused on scripture. At the outset of their correspondence Merton had evidently asked Ahern for some assistance with scriptural matters for the courses he was giving, which Ahern agreed to provide, but without attribution: “mum’s the word on whatever little help I give.” He praised the teaching, “so simple and yet so luminous,” of Pope Pius XII’s encyclical of 1943, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and expressed concern that some scholars were not sufficiently following the pope’s instruction (12/19/1950).

Two months later (2/27/1951), he sent an extensive outline entitled “Senses of Scripture in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*” that provided a thorough grounding in the current state of Catholic biblical studies. He began with some background for the encyclical by reviewing the struggle among scripture scholars concerning the literal sense relative to the “spiritual meaning” of scripture, noting that the “Holy Office” has asserted “that no Scriptural exegesis is worthy of the name unless it rests solidly on an established literal sense.” The encyclical itself, relying on Aquinas, provides a clear explanation of the senses of scripture, which Ahern summarized: “The interpretation of Scripture involves three questions: A-1 (Factual literal sense) – What does the text say factually to every reader (contemporaries, ourselves, rationalists)? A-2 (Theological literal sense) – What spiritual principle, what teaching of faith and morals, underlies and is expressed in the words of the text? B (Spiritual sense) – Does the text contain also a divinely ordained type of some reality to come?” Evidently Merton had particularly inquired about this topic, for Ahern went on to elaborate: “Scripture is only one source of Faith; yet it is also a source of Faith that we shall never exhaust. . . . [We] must not read into the Scriptures our own meaning; we must press out God’s meaning.”

All scriptural analysis must begin with the factual literal sense, for a failure to understand this sense is a failure to understand divine revelation as it appears in a particular passage; this literal meaning, rooted in text and context and milieu, should win agreement even from a rationalist scholar. Since the factual meaning of a text is often obscure, both Pope Leo XIII, in his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, and Pius XII emphasized the need for research and study to determine the sense of many passages in scripture. The important point, Ahern continued, is to be sure of this factual meaning before suggesting a theological or spiritual sense; otherwise the latter senses will rest on thin air. While it is true, he noted, that many of the Fathers delighted in using scripture without this careful attention to the exigencies of the factual literal sense, they were frequently concerned chiefly with the teaching of *sacra doctrina* (that is, the whole corpus of faith) in popular sermons, and with this prime purpose in mind, they used scripture as a sacred and convenient vehicle of expression for divine truth, even though it was not the particular truth revealed in the passage under discussion.

The theological literal sense depends upon and springs from the factual literal sense; while many texts contain only a factual literal sense, a host of other texts do yield rich doctrinal teaching. In the encyclical the pope “[p]raises those who pass from factual discussion to theological analysis.” Ahern explained the necessity of searching for the “theological contribution of [scripture]” and emphasized that the “theological sense beneath the factual is the truth that all men live in a supernatural order.” He continued, “Once the theological principle is grasped, then the application to ourselves is simple.” For example the journey of “the Saints of the O.T.” from sinfulness to purification and “intimate friendship” with God must also be our journey. The effects of sanctifying grace in the lives of these biblical figures are the same today, for the “grace in the human soul of Christ is the grace of all men. . . . Grace in our own souls – and in the souls of the Old Testament saints – does the same; for grace is the life that is in Him.” Ahern pointed out that Merton’s own discussion of the Psalms in his article in *Orate Fratres*¹³ “rested on this principle.” With regard to the spiritual sense, Ahern noted that in the encyclical, “Besides this overall-presence of Christ



Msgr. Alfred Horrigan, Fr. Barnabas Ahern and Bp. H. Speltz (Winona, MN) at the Second Vatican Council

in the Old Testament, the Holy Father points out that, by special divine ordination, certain parts of the O.T. typify Him in a special way. This element he calls the Spiritual Sense.” Ahern concluded his notes with reassurances to Merton that his approach of teaching scripture to his students “as a living book, full of truth for themselves” was in concert with the doctrines of the Holy Father (2/27/1951).

A month later, Ahern began his next letter by expressing happiness about Merton “launching” into his scripture course, and then offered “a few suggestions.” He supported Merton’s idea of giving his students a digest of three papal encyclicals related to scripture, with special mention of Pope Benedict XV’s *Spiritus Paraclitus* of 1920, on St. Jerome as a model for scripture study. Ahern also mentioned the importance of the August 1950 letter of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the teaching of sacred scripture. He recommended that in the general introduction to the course there should be an emphasis on inspiration and interpretation and that the students should know about the various texts, including the Masoretic, Septuagint and Vulgate (Hebrew, Greek and Latin, respectively) “and their relative value in getting to the original,” which would be helpful in understanding Pope Pius’ words about the condition of the text in the first half of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Regarding the Old Testament,

Ahern stressed the importance of providing a preliminary history that would include an outline of the books that belong to each period, along with a theological orientation with a stress on God’s love (found especially in Deuteronomy 1-12, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Canticle of Canticles). Concerning the New Testament, he recommended perhaps “two lectures on the relation of St. John to the Synoptics” and suggested various resources.

In a letter more than two years later, Ahern asked Merton, “Father, have you seen [André] Robert’s translation of Canticle in the Jerusalem Bible?” Ahern noted that Robert had been working on this project for years and that “[t]he Introduction is very well done; and the footnotes are almost a commentary.” Ahern recommended that this translation be supplemented by “A. Feuillet’s *Cantique des Cantiques* in the *Lectio Divina* series of Editions du Cerf” (5/17/1953). In his next letter, Ahern responded to a query by Merton on the question of the authorship of Isaiah: “One cannot make definitive assertions on Deutero Isaiah. The Biblical Commission Decrees of 1908 do not contain compulsory positive decisions.” Ahern discussed the pros and cons of a second Isaian authorship and cited the growing majority of Catholic scholars who “attribute the second part to an exilic author” and noted that in fact there was sound evidence for a third author, “trito-Isaiah (55-66).” Ahern concluded that he believed “the Biblical Commission will rarely intervene again in these literary problems, unless they actually touch on the Faith” (11/10/1953).

While Ahern was serving on the translation team for the new Confraternity of Christian Doctrine scripture translation (which eventually became the New American Bible), undertaken in response to Pius XII’s encouragement of translations from original languages rather than from the Latin Vulgate,

he apparently recruited Thomas Merton to serve as a literary consultant.¹⁴ In a letter of May 12, 1954, Ahern reassured Merton that his work for the translation project was not running late, writing: “Please . . . do not feel under obligation to hurry your own work for the Confraternity. I am still behind schedule on the translations; so, no matter how slowly you work, you will certainly keep ahead of me. However, I do believe Fr. McConnell wanted Fr. McCool (if he accepts) and myself to edit the Captivity Epistles some time this summer. It would be a great help if you had already looked them over.” Ahern expressed his appreciation of Merton’s suggestions for improvement in the translation:

Father your corrections are splendid. My only regret is that you did not make more; for the English sounds cumbersome even to me. So please continue to use the pencil wherever you can improve the text of introduction, translation, or notes. As for suggestions, they are very welcome, too; for it is just this kind of criticism that the editorial board (Fr. McConnell, McCool and myself) will rely on for the final draft. I myself am delighted with the turns you have given to many of the phrases.

Ahern then added, “Your general observation on the ‘conservatism’ of the text requires an explanation,” which he went on to provide: he described at some length the internal struggles of the Confraternity committee regarding the translations, specifically of the Epistles of St. Paul, noting that conservative voices on the committee, led by Bishop O’Hara, tended to dominate the discussion. Ahern encouraged Merton to continue with a less conservative approach, keeping an “eye to Knox and the Jerusalem Bible”¹⁵ because, Ahern confided, “we may be going over too far to conservatism.” Merton brought a certain freshness to the task, and his fluency in French allowed him to gain insights from the *Jerusalem Bible* that “we lack.” Ahern observed that Merton’s work, together with that of other less conservative translators, might demonstrate the weakness of a “conservative” policy that worked to the detriment of the translation (5/12/1954).

More than a year later Ahern wrote Merton to let him know that he had moved from Chicago to New Jersey because of the resignation of Fr. John F. McConnell, MM “from the board of N. T. translators and editors.” Ahern was scheduled to become chairman of the board, which also included Father Myles Bourke and Father Eric May OFM Cap, with Merton as “English editor.” Ahern was hopeful that Merton could remain on the board and expressed his willingness to write whatever letters might be necessary to achieve this purpose. He went on to explain that a clear-cut editorial policy had finally emerged and described the new guidelines at some length, summing up: “Our ideal is a reasonable translation, with as close adherence to the original as possible.” He stated, “The translation must stand comparison with the Kleist-Lilly Bible [a 1954 New Testament translation from the Greek by James A. Kleist, SJ and Joseph L. Lilly]; it should be more correct yet quite as readable.” He also noted that the committee had regularly consulted the *Jerusalem Bible* but “often rejected its rendering of the original” as too free, but added that Merton’s fluency in French might lead him to a different opinion. Once again he expressed appreciation to Merton for his contributions: “Though Fr. Bourke and I do our best to prepare a correct and fluent translation, we just do not have the ability to polish off our work with a smooth and fluent English style. Please, then, try to take the ‘wood’ out of what we send you, and polish off every sentence into correct and smooth English.” Merton was advised by Ahern to take his time with his work so that the product would be “a finished literary piece,” which Ahern and his colleagues would review only to be sure that the changes square with “the underlying Greek text” (7/24/1955). Unfortunately, no documentary evidence has been located that provides information on Merton’s specific suggestions for improvements in the

translations, and it is not known whether any of Merton's language found its way into the published New American Bible. Apparently Merton's association with the project ended when Ahern himself left the committee a short time later.

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While Barnabas Ahern thought highly enough of Thomas Merton's writing style to involve him in the biblical translation project, he also provided, early in their correspondence, what is arguably the most pointed constructive criticism ever rendered of Merton's writing. The context of the critique is Ahern's letter telling Merton that he was returning the manuscript or galleys of *Bread in the Wilderness* that Merton had sent him. Ahern explained that he had checked and circled typographical errors and assured Merton that he also checked for any doctrinal errors. He then went on to make the following specific suggestions:

Father, has anyone suggested greater carefulness in your writing? As I read, I sensed a certain looseness in the development of your thought. You create a definite impression that lasts; but your thought does not always develop consecutively. Personally, I would like to see greater neatness in fitting part into part into part. 1. More frequent use of topic sentences near the beginning of a new section, so that the reader knows what you are going to develop; 2. One definite point to be explained and finished off in a given section; 3. Consecutive progress from section to section; 4. In other words, greater unity of conception and plan: all this, I believe, will make your writing more powerful and more lasting. Your style can always remain what it now is – fluent, colorful, and impressionistic; but once you tackle a serious theme, like the Ascent to Truth or the present introduction, the development of your thought must fit together very compactly. Otherwise, Father, it may seem to some that you are content merely to give a brilliant impression of your theme, without taking the time to fit the cameo of your impression into the carefully wrought filigree setting that it requires. So, too, Father, with your sentence structure. I do like your easy, flowing style; however, it must never lapse into negligence. There is some – though not much – in your introduction. When I read some of the sentences aloud, they sounded awkward to me because of heaped up clauses that confuse the thought. I know you do not mind these criticisms, Father; and that is why I make them. With your books coming so swiftly, critics are going to work on the principle that rapidity in production means imperfection; and so they will begin to whittle away. But that is the least reason for urging perfection; the real one is greater carefulness will insure *lasting* value. (9/4/1952)

Other critiques by Ahern were somewhat softer in tone but still very much to the point. For example, in an earlier letter Ahern had replied to Merton's apparent concern about criticism of his writing more along doctrinal lines than regarding writing style. Ahern asserted: "I have never noticed any Jansenism in your writings." After assuring Merton that some of the criticism of *Seeds of Contemplation* was probably taken out of context because "[t]hat kind of writing is always done in a special psychological context" and when a passage is taken "out of this context" charges of "Nihilism, Quietism, Jansenism etc." could be leveled, and that the same problem occurred with "St. John of the Cross, Tauler, and Suso [who] were taken over the coals," he went on to add an admonition about Merton's style of writing with this kind of subject matter:

However, Father, if you do any more writing in this style, try to watch the correctness even of the least parts; all your readers will not be acquainted with Father Lagrange's comparative study of the terminology of St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas; hence, they may be prone to criticize and to condemn what they consider a false over-statement. The theology of *Waters of Siloe* and *What Are These Wounds* was very well handled, as also those magazine articles that involved theology. (12/19/1950)

In reviewing a Merton book manuscript,¹⁶ Ahern had some very specific recommendations for "a definite policy" regarding the use of quotations. After describing Merton's use of passages in foreign languages, Ahern added: "The ideal would be, I think, to give the original in the text and its translation in the footnote," but noted: "I have always thought it would be more wise, Father, if you were to quote the Scripture only in English; Latin stymies everyone – even priests." While admitting that Merton's "use of foreign languages does have a real asset," Ahern went on to say that people who considered themselves intellectual would favor the use of foreign language passages but other "good simple folk" would consider it "a drawback." Ahern concluded by remarking, "I certainly would not care to resolve the problem myself" (8/25/1952).

Despite his criticism, Ahern evidently had admiration for Merton's overall writing ability. After the galleys of one manuscript had arrived, he responded, "I have already begun to read it, and like it very well. The shift from serious to casual is refreshing – and makes for easy reading." Later in the paragraph, Ahern declares: "[T]he touch is authentic. You have put into the language of concrete experience the directives of the best spiritual masters. I am sure that many a good soul will understand this language much better than they would grasp the directive itself" (8/19/1952).

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As a priest-professor with experience in training young men for religious life, Barnabas Ahern was also a helpful resource person for Merton as teacher, Master of Students and Novice Master. Ahern often commented in his letters to Merton about the spiritual direction of the scholastics and novices, and recommended journals and books. In one of the early letters, Ahern expressed gratitude for a copy of Merton's Monastic Orientation notes and stated that he had already read much of it. He reassured Merton that the students would benefit from the notes: "It is well fibred with sound principle and very practical in its applications." Ahern also commented that Merton "struck a true note" when he emphasized "the need for knowledge," and cited the Apostolic Letter *Unigenitus Dei Filius* of Pope Pius XI (issued March 19, 1924) as a document that emphasized the necessity of "well-directed study, especially in the Sacred Sciences" for religious communities that are progressing with contemplative prayer. "Therefore, Father," he continued, "I do believe that you have struck a true secret of monastic orientation in highlighting this feature [knowledge] of spiritual development," and assured Merton that the notes would be helpful in the training of Passionist seminarians as well. To show his gratitude Ahern said he would send Merton his own scriptural notes on the prophets, taken largely from non-Catholic authors, information that Ahern conjectured might not be available in the Gethsemani library (12/4/1950). Ahern also suggested in this letter that Merton share with his students the works of several recently canonized saints, including Nicholas of Flue, Anna Maria of Jesus Paredes, "and now the Lebanese hermit, Father Charbel." According to Ahern these saints lived their lives "deeply hidden with Christ – even to the point of eremitical solitude" (2/27/1951).

A few months later Ahern congratulated Merton on his appointment as Master of Students; while

he no longer had that role himself due to his increased workload, he passed on his own discovery through experience “that the whole function of a Master is simply to put the Students in contact with our Lord and our Lady, Holy Mass and the Liturgy.” Ahern devoted most of the letter to recommended reading material for the students, including *Unigenitus Dei Filius*, with its stress on the need for religious to “form their spirit according to the spirit of their Holy Founder,” as well as to study scripture along with “Benedictine and Cistercian sources” to enhance the monastic observances of “psalmody, sacra lectio, recollection etc.”; in his judgement St. John of the Cross should be not be read prematurely lest there be some confusion on the part of readers, but St. Teresa could be read by anyone wherever they might be in their prayer life; after asking whether Merton was familiar with the new *Bible de Jérusalem* with its “highly technical and rather inconsequential notes” but “very fine . . . introductions,” he mentioned a commentary on the *Summa Theologica* printed in smaller pocket volumes, which would be attractive to Merton’s students; he stressed that “your work with the Students will be completely successful if you make them Cistercian through and through in their love for Our Lady,” and particularly recommended *True Devotion* by St. Louis de Montfort (6/2/1951).

After receiving another volume of the Monastic Orientation notes, Ahern again thanked Merton and assured him that the students would benefit from being put in touch with their Cistercian sources. He recommended the sections of the *Summa* on temperance and prudence as creating a firm foundation for the spiritual life and maintained that spiritual direction could be best “implemented” by reading the works of St. Thomas as a safeguard against emotionalism, which reinforces immaturity (1/16/1952). Ahern continued to recommend various readings for the scholastics in subsequent letters, such as *Wisdom of Faith* by Msgr. Journet (12/30/1952) or *The Doctrine of the Divine Indwelling*, by Mother M. Amabel, OCD, about which he commented: “Your students will probably derive great good from it” (11/10/1953). As Merton continued to pass on subsequent volumes of the Monastic Orientation notes, Ahern encouraged him to organize them and “work them into a unified whole.” He continued: “There is some excellent matter gathered there; and it would be of great help to others if it were turned from conference notes into consecutive readable pages. Even as they are, they are of great help; but they would be even more beneficial, for all if you edited them in a manual or literary style” (2/1/1954). In his next letter Ahern expressed pleasure that Merton was “again teaching S. Scripture”; he was confident that through the course, on “The Spiritual Life according to St. Paul,” the students “shall come to true Trappist solitude when they have centered all their desires in Christ alone” (5/12/1954). In his final extant letter, written from Rome, Ahern remarked that he has heard that Merton was now Master of Novices and added: “It is really wonderful the way our Lord treats each one. He gives just what He knows best” (4/8/1956).

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This comment relates to the final topic that is found in much of Ahern’s correspondence with Merton, the question of vocation. At times Barnabas Ahern had questions about his own religious vocation. In his letter of August 19, 1952, he “presumes” to propose a question: “What must one do practically when he has come to distrust his human concepts of the realities of the Faith?” Ahern quickly reassured Merton that this distrust “does not create a problem in one’s inward life,” but wondered about the effect of his spoken words in “earlier sermons, conversations, directions etc. . . . Is this true or just some more of [his] own mouthings?” In a later letter, reflecting on his interior life, Ahern asserted that his “misery” was balancing him “that there is a level deeper than a creature’s nothingness” but he was able to maintain his balance within his vocation by knowing “that the truths of faith are true, and that one has them to cling to” (7/24/1955).

Thomas Merton's vocation as a Trappist monk was, in a sense, revered by Barnabas Ahern even though he preferred the active life for himself. It was, in fact, Merton's vocation and hints that he might leave Gethsemani that alarmed Ahern and stirred him to write the following remarks in his letter of January 14, 1953: "A sentence in your letter has worried me: 'The road is opening up and I hope He will give me the strength and the integrity to travel it.' Does this mean you are contemplating any form of radical change? . . . You have no idea of the upset a radical change on your part would cause." Ahern then listed five reasons why Merton should not make any form of change in his vocation or the location of his religious life. The reasons include the fact other religious would be encouraged to make a change, vocations to the Trappists would decrease, Merton's writing would lose credibility and be viewed as emotion-based rather than written from conviction, many religious would be made uneasy and would lose confidence in their own vocation, and once more contemplation and contemplative prayer would become suspect within the Catholic Church. Ahern then stressed the importance of stability in this day and age, whereas, in centuries past such change would not cause "commotion," as the examples of St. Romuald and St. Bruno demonstrate.¹⁷ Ahern equated change in the religious life with the affect of emotion and maintained that one is not living "by faith" when it occurs, using strong language to make his point: "So, Father, I think that God's will rivets you to Gethsemani, as he [*sic*] was riveted to His cross." Ahern asserted that God's will is "manifest" and if Merton were to change his vocation or location he would "tear from [his] written works the seal of Him who never changes." Finally, Ahern claimed that Merton could not leave Gethsemani "under any condition" and in fact is "wedded to it until death – for better or worse." He wrote in his own handwriting on the side of the letter this note: "In return for my 'time and labor' (!!!), you may offer Holy Mass for the Passionists on your 90th birthday at *Gethsemani*." Ahern closed the letter in a lighter tone by declaring, "By this time you are probably roaring with laughter at the crazy idea that has come into my mind. Most likely I am all wrong" (1/14/1953). Fortunately, we have Merton's response to this letter, in which he replied:

If a cryptic sentence of mine led you to believe that I was contemplating a "radical change," I owe you some clarification. No, I am not changing to another order. I agree with the reasons you give for not doing so, although I think that in some respects you are too absolute: for after all, *all* transfers are surely not a matter of emotion. My limited experience with the scholastics shows me that a lot of them really do not belong here and that God's will surely seems to be that they try something else. . . . On the other hand, there are men here from other Orders who did well to come, and whose presence here is no indication that the time spent elsewhere was wasted. (*SC* 50)

After making his point that not all change is a matter of emotion but can be due to a sound vocational decision, Merton explained his situation that had evidently been misunderstood by Ahern. He stated that according to "one director" his Carthusian vocational leanings may have been willed by God, and a "step . . . is being taken" with the blessing of his abbot and through the graces of the Holy Ghost. Merton stated that the "step" was, in fact, a gradual move into the hermit's life as recognized by the Cistercians. The cenobitic life of the Trappists, according to Merton, is limiting and he was searching for a more eremitical way of life within the Order. He added:

Quite simply: the perpetual motion of exterior exercises, the constant presence of a lot of people and also often of a lot of machines, instead of helping me to pray and liberating me from myself, tends to get me tied up in myself to a point that is really

harmful. To be alone, with real silence, real solitude without material responsibilities, and able to really sink into God, straightens everything out. . . . In effect, I am a part-time hermit. This began recently and it has cleared up almost everything. . . . I hope, in the future, to be able to live completely as a hermit. (SC 51-52)

Merton assured Ahern that the eremitical life within the Cistercian Order is in accordance with the “monastic tradition” and “some theologians (Dom Anselme Stolz, Dom Jean Leclercq – both Benedictines – and others) feel [it] *ought* to be brought back into its rightful place in the monastic setting” (SC 52). Upon receiving Merton’s letter, Barnabas Ahern responded to express his happiness regarding the clarification, but he made a number of additional points to affirm his previous position. He cited a recent article on Merton by Aelred Graham, OSB in the *Atlantic Monthly*¹⁸ and claimed there would be a “judgment” rendered upon Merton and his work if he were to radically change his way of life. Although Ahern was aware of “the provision for eremitical life” within Merton’s “Holy Rule,” he cautioned that application of such provision should be made “only with consummate prudence,” and contrasted the life of the hermit Fr. Charbel¹⁹ with Merton’s, in effect stating that Merton’s situation differed because he had written extensively about the monastic life. Ahern questioned whether Merton was in the proper mental state or “condition” to make the decision to become a hermit, citing Merton’s voluminous writing and other pressures as contributing factors to this mental condition, and recommended that Merton take a “sabbatical year” to follow the usual Trappist life, away from the pressures of writing for publication and turning out “notes for the Students.” Merton, according to Ahern, should give the old life a chance before he plunged “into something new.” He declared that whether as a “hermit Trappist or an ordinary Trappist – the real things for both are the same: God in our souls, and we in Christ’s Mystical Body”; Ahern pressed Merton with his final point, “live your Trappist life as you did before you published your first volume” (1/29/1953).

In a letter written later in the same year Ahern responded to Merton’s apparent continuing struggle with his vocation, noting that “one has a sense of disillusionment in everything when God is giving his light”: when one receives divine light everything human is spoiled, and in fact, “God’s light would spoil even a Charterhouse; and even in a hermitage – if He continued to give His light – you would still have the feeling of being ‘fed up’ with emptiness and artificiality.” Again Ahern stressed that a change would do Merton “no good” (11/10/1953). However, seven months later, in a more supportive response to Merton’s desire for the hermit life, Ahern ended his letter with the acknowledgement of Merton’s happiness about the encouragement from the abbot general and his own abbot for more solitude within his vocation at Gethsemani (5/12/1954).

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Although there is only one extant letter from Thomas Merton to Barnabas Ahern, it is clear from references in the Ahern to Merton correspondence that there were numerous other letters from Merton. On a number of occasions, it is evident that Ahern was responding to a Merton query or commentary. The letters from Ahern are, indeed, spiritually rich and there is ample evidence of Ahern’s scriptural scholarship. Although Ahern respected Merton’s fluent writing style and ability to capture the attention of a wide audience of diverse readers from many religions and others who might not be believers, he was candid in his remarks to Merton regarding the thought, organization and development of his writing. However, there is evidence, especially within the Biblical translation work, that Ahern had high respect for Merton’s facility with languages and his ability “to turn a phrase.” Perhaps the most intense exchange

of letters were the three within the January 1953 time period regarding Ahern's concern about Merton leaving Gethsemani for another religious order; however, Merton's only extant letter reassured Ahern that he was only making a gradual change into a more eremitical life within the monastery grounds. Throughout the correspondence, including the single Merton letter, there are references to solitude and Ahern would counsel Merton, occasionally, that finding the solitude of Christ can happen anywhere. Of course, Merton felt that he needed to be away from the community and he found part-time refuge in St. Anne's tool shed and eventually became a fulltime hermit at the "hermitage." Both Merton and Ahern found a common brotherhood within their teaching program and Ahern was especially grateful to Merton as each volume of the Monastic Orientation notes arrived. Merton, certainly, must have benefited from the many scholarly references that Ahern shared with him and it is noteworthy that Ahern was very mindful that Merton's students should stay close to their "Benedictine and Cistercian sources."

While their correspondence apparently ended in the mid-1950s, the direct relationship between Ahern and Merton extended into the early 1960s with their occasional encounters at Gethsemani, and sporadic references to Ahern and his work continue to occur in Merton's journals and correspondence almost to the final year of his life. We may conclude, therefore, that this was an important, though not an intimate, friendship for both men, who differed significantly in their personalities and talents, but who shared a deep love for Christ, for the Church, and for the Word of God.

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 50-52; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text.
2. Twenty-six items are listed in the Ahern correspondence file at the Merton Center, the last three of which are Merton Center and Merton Legacy Trust correspondence with Ahern dating from 1973; in addition to the single Merton letter (item 13) and the twenty-one Ahern letters, item 21 is an Editorial Policy statement on the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine biblical translation project that had been enclosed with Ahern's July 24, 1955 letter (item 20); five pages of notes on scripture sent at the time of Ahern's February 27, 1951 letter (item 4) are not listed as a separate item, nor are the several pages of the censor's report, including typographical corrections and doctrinal suggestions, which Ahern sent with a letter on August 25, 1952, on the manuscripts of *The Sign of Jonas* and *Bread in the Wilderness* (item 8). Of the Ahern letters, three were written in 1950, three in 1951, five in 1952, four in 1953, three in 1954, two in 1955 and one in 1956; sixteen were written from Chicago, two from Union City, NJ, where Ahern moved in 1955 to work on the biblical translation project, and one from Rome; the remaining two are headed "Passionist Monastery" without further location indicated.
3. See Merton's January 29, 1960 letter to Kilian McDonnell, OSB: "Father Barnabas Mary Ahern will be giving us some Scripture conferences here this year, since he is stationed at Louisville. I hope they will be good ones, and think they will" (SC 128). See also "'The Great Honesty': Remembering Thomas Merton, An Interview with Abbot Timothy Kelly, OSCO," conducted by George Kilcourse, Jr., *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996) 198; subsequent references will be cited as "Kelly, 'Honesty'" parenthetically in the text. Father Kelly refers to 1963-1964 as the period when Fr. Ahern gave lectures at Gethsemani, but according to his biography, Ahern was stationed in Louisville in 1959-1962, at which time he relocated to Rome, having been appointed a "*peritus*" at Vatican II, a position he held until 1965 (see Passionist Archives of Holy Cross Province, Chicago, Illinois. Biographies Online; subsequent references will be cited as "Passionist Archives" parenthetically in the text). Merton's references to Ahern in his August 9, 1963 and November 25, 1963 letters to Mother M. L. Schroen, RSCJ (SC 180, 184-85), stationed at the time at the headquarters of her order in Rome, clearly indicate that Fr. Barnabas was also in Rome at the time. The time period 1959-1962 for Ahern's residence in Louisville is corroborated by Roger Mercurio, CP in *A Voice Crying Out in the Desert: Preparing for Vatican II with Barnabas Mary Ahern*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP and Sebastian MacDonald, CP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 6.
4. Robert E. Carbonneau, CP, "Father Barnabas Mary Ahern, CP: Religious Life and Biblical Scholarship," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22.1 (Winter 2004) 93 n.1.
5. Permission to quote from Ahern's letters to Merton has been granted by Archivist Damian Schaab of the Passionist Archives of Holy Cross Province, Chicago, IL; letters will be cited in the text by date.
6. This salutation is not included in the published version of the letter in SC 50-52.
7. There is no signature on the extant letter to Ahern by Merton, which is a carbon copy.

8. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 373; see also Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 205 [2/14/1965] (subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text).
9. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 327.
10. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 199.
11. Timothy Kelly, OCSO, "Epilogue: A Memoir," in Brother Patrick Hart, ed., *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986) 220-21 (subsequent references will be cited as "Kelly, 'Epilogue'" in the text); this article is a slightly revised version of an essay first published as "My Brother Thomas – Merton at Gethsemani" in *Canadian Catholic Review* 3.8 (Sept. 1985) 290-95.
12. For an overview of Merton's developing attitude toward the scriptures, which presents a more positive evaluation of his opinion of modern biblical criticism, see Patrick F. O'Connell's article "Bible" in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 50-52.
13. Thomas Merton, "The Psalms and Contemplation," *Orate Fratres* 24 (July/Aug./Sept. 1950), 341-47, 385-91, 433-40; this material was later incorporated into Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 10-48.
14. See Robert E. Carbonneau, CP, "Piety, Power, and Persuasion: Father Barnabas Ahern, CP, and the Politics of Biblical Renewal at Vatican II," *The Passionist* 33 (1998) 9-10: "[Ahern's] work on the Confraternity New Testament translation project from 1948 until 1955 exemplifies his competent scholarship, collaborative workstyle, and strong spiritual presence. . . . By 1954 Ahern, John McConnell, M.M. and Myles Bourke were collaborating on the translation of the New Testament. Setting a common standard of translation principles was their first task. Ahern was direct yet sensitive in his opinions. Other scripture scholars and Thomas Merton provided editorial help."
15. The references are to the work of Monsignor Ronald Knox (1888-1957), an Anglican convert to Catholicism who produced a translation of the New Testament in 1945 and of the Old Testament in 1955 (both from the Vulgate), and to the *Bible de Jérusalem*, a French translation from the original biblical languages by Dominican scholars associated with the École Biblique in Jerusalem, with extensive notes, published in a one-volume edition in 1956 (revised in 1961) (the English-language *Jerusalem Bible*, published in 1966, was based on this French translation).
16. The original letter, with attached typed and handwritten notes, is located as item 53 in the file entitled "Thomas Merton's Correspondence with Censors" and has been designated as "censor's criticism of *The Sign of Jonas* by Fr. Barnabas Ahern, C.P."; after consultation with Mark Meade, Assistant Archivist at the Thomas Merton Center, I believe these notes refer to both *Bread in the Wilderness* and *The Sign of Jonas* (e-mail exchange: Mark Meade and John Collins, 12/19/08).
17. Ahern is referring to the peripatetic nature of both men who were hermits much of their religious life; St. Romauld was founder of the Camaldolese Order (1012) and St. Bruno of the Carthusians (1084).
18. Aelred Graham, OSB, "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," *Atlantic Monthly* 191 (January 1953) 70-74; see Robert Inchausti's comments in *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 44: "Surprisingly the sharpest criticism of Merton's views came from a fellow Benedictine monk, Dom Aelred Graham, who would later become a close friend of Merton's and author of the influential book *Zen Catholicism* (1963). Graham's biting critique of *The Seven Storey Mountain* published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1953 was titled 'A Modern Man in Reverse.' In that piece, he argued that Merton's 'mysticism for the masses' constituted a retreat from the world at the very moment when what the world really needed was Christian action."
19. Fr. Charbel Makhlof (1828-1898) was a Lebanese monk who lived many years as a hermit near the Monastery of St. Maron. See Merton's journal entry for April 11, 1951: "Feast of St. Leo the Great. Preparing the Scripture course. Finished Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* this morning. . . . Father Barnabas Mary wrote me about Father Charbel who lived as a hermit in Syria. He was a Maronite. Everyone forgot about him. He died. Fifty years later his body was discovered incorrupt and in a short time he worked over six hundred miracles. He is my new companion" (Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 454-55). In a December 30, 1965 letter to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr Merton mentions his delight that Charbel had been beatified just at the time when he was beginning his own hermit life; he adds that he had a second-class relic of Charbel built into the foundation of his hermitage, and that his friend Sr. Mary Luke Tobin had just brought him back a first-class relic from Rome when she returned from the Vatican Council, at which she had been an auditor (Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989] 253).