

Dom Vital at Gethsemani

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By Thomas Merton

Certainly one of the more unusual members of the monastic community at the Abbey of Gethsemani during the decades Thomas Merton spent there, and one who exercised a significant if largely overlooked influence on Merton during his early years as a monk, was Vital Klinski, OCSO (1886-1966). He “*was born in Poland and entered the Cistercian abbey of Achel in Belgium in 1904; he was elected Abbot of Achel on August 29, 1920, but resigned his office in 1927 and entered Gethsemani on November 19, 1927. . . . [He] died at Gethsemani on June 3, 1966.*”¹ Shortly after Dom Vital’s death, Merton wrote the following appreciative memorial essay, prefaced by an introductory note: “This text, written up by Father Louis, contains material furnished by Br. Colman, Fr. Gregory, Fr. Bernard, Fr. Eudes and others. We are grateful for their collaboration.” Dom Vital served as Merton’s confessor for much of his time as a monk in simple vows.² In his brief note of August 29, 1945, accompanying a fanciful drawing made to commemorate the silver jubilee of Dom Vital’s installation as Abbot of Achel, Merton calls him “our ‘Pastor Bonus’ in whom we see only Jesus” and whimsically marks the day’s feast, the martyrdom of John the Baptist, by writing, “in honor of the decollation of St. John Baptist I present you with my own head – that is, judgement and will, on a silver platter” (SC 10). He notes in his journal for December 29, 1946 that in spiritual direction Dom Vital supported his writing, encouraged him to teach his readers that the life of contemplation is actually easy and accessible, and cautioned him about his attraction to the Carthusians (ES 33-34; it is noteworthy that this journal entry concludes with notice of the arrival of the telegram from Robert Giroux accepting for publication the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, almost as an implicit confirmation of the wisdom of Dom Vital’s advice). He subsequently ordered Merton to continue writing his journal “in spite of my own personal disinclination for it” (ES 41 [3/9/1947]). A month later, however, during the April 1947 visitation of Gethsemani by the Cistercian Abbot General, Dom Dominique Nogues, the decision was made that the “Masters of Novices have been forbidden to hear confessions as it keeps them too busy” (ES 60 [4/5/1947]). Since Dom Vital was novice master of the laybrothers this ruling directly affected Merton. Initially he comments, “Nobody is quite sure how things are to turn out, but apparently I can stay with Dom Vital for a while. I’d rather not change, if possible, because he is better able to manage me than anyone I have hit so far, and he has the virtue of telling you your faults point blank without a lot of evasions” (ES 60 [4/6/1947]). But on April 15 he writes, “Dom Vital is holding on to some of his penitents for the time being but, in obedience to Reverend Father, I changed to Father Anthony” (ES 62). While in later years he could express some impatience with the rather conventional monastic piety represented by Dom Vital,³ Merton’s deep respect and affection for the retired abbot are clear from this tribute, originally circulated in mimeographed form and printed here for the first time, with the kind permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and through the gracious assistance of Thomas Merton Center director Paul M. Pearson, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dom Vital. A few explanatory notes have been added to the original text.

On the ninth of November, 1927, Dom Vital Klinski said farewell for the last time to Europe and sailed for America. He was to spend almost forty years – two-thirds of his monastic life – at the Abbey of Gethsemani, where he gave up his soul to God and where he lies buried, awaiting the Resurrection amid the members of the distant, foreign community to which he had retired.

Why did Dom Vital choose Gethsemani? Perhaps this transfer was one of these “graces of exile” which are characteristic of certain monastic lives: graces which mysteriously draw some monks to very distant lands far from their own family and their people, after the fashion of Abraham (Genesis 12:1) or the Celtic monks of the seventh century. In any case, Dom Vital did not come to Gethsemani merely for the trip or for the scenery of Kentucky. His transfer to Gethsemani, as he frankly said in his Golden Jubilee address, was an occasion of humiliation and suffering. But with his characteristic spirit of faith he saw that this exile was a precious gift of God’s love to him; and he always felt that it had brought him closer to God. Yet he was lonely and often homesick for Achel and for Europe. Gethsemani had by this time become an American community, but there were still a few European monks, French, German, Italian and Belgian. Still, it was definitely an “alien land” for the newcomer. The first task of Dom Vital after his entry into the Gethsemani community (November 23, 1927) was to learn English. In order to help him get acclimatized, Dom Edmond allowed Dom Vital to study in a room in the guest house, where – as Dom Vital told the community on one of his jubilees – he was allowed the luxury of one cigar a day. (This caused a slight sensation in the Gethsemani chapter, for since the days of Dom Edmond Obrecht the cigar has been unknown at Gethsemani. Dom Edmond himself, it is said, prepared his chapter talks walking up and down smoking in the interval before prime. This did nothing to make him more gentle in the chapter of faults.⁴)

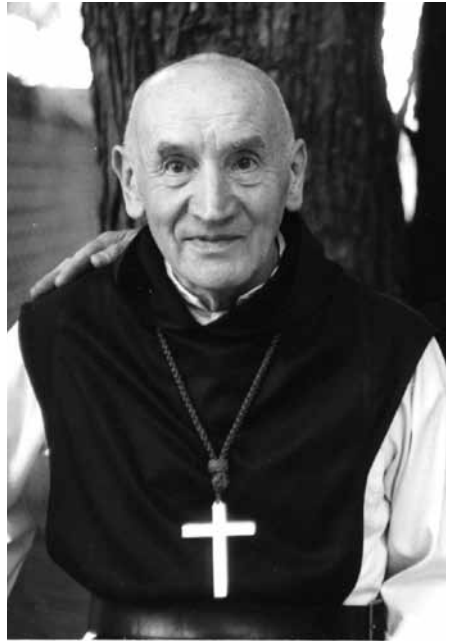
On the whole, Dom Vital was not to find life at Gethsemani easy. The climate of Kentucky is very trying: extreme heat in the summer is almost tropical, and yet the winters are not clement either. Dom Vital accepted the difficulties of his new situation without complaint and quickly adapted himself to life at Gethsemani. Soon he spoke English perfectly and after having made his stability at Easter in 1929, he became master of the laybrothers in 1932. Soon after that he was made master of novices (1933). This was his most important work at Gethsemani. He held this post several times, and when there were two novitiates he was for eight years master of the laybrother novices and for one year master in the choir novitiate. He trained the brother novices at a very important period in the development of the Gethsemani community, under Dom Frederic Dunne during and immediately after World War II when the phenomenal growth of the community began. Most of the senior brothers at Gethsemani and in her foundations were well trained by Dom Vital and doubtless owe to him the solidity and depth of their monastic formation. One of his former novices writes: “In a few words one could sum up Dom Vital’s teaching to the novices in the short prayer which he requested us to repeat often: ‘Jesus be my all; possess my heart alone!’ This would suffice.” The brother adds he is sure Dom Vital’s life “followed this beam.” He goes on to say, “He showed great concern for the health of his charges; every day at dinner and supper he would walk the aisle to make sure we were eating. Another monk, who was one of Dom Vital’s penitents, reminds us that a penitent who on his own initiative would fast – for instance giving up *frustulum*⁵ without asking permission – would be admonished to take this food in humility instead of renouncing it out of pride.

Gethsemani is fortunate to have had such a man as Dom Vital in the community during these crucial years. With twenty-three years of experience of the monastic life at Achel, seven of them as abbot, he always stood out in our community as a mature man who understood and appreciated the

fullness of the monastic vocation. He was one of those venerable seniors who, in their own quiet and self-effacing way, give evidence of a deep and humble wisdom based on long experience of the monastic life and on the deep love of Christ. He always stood out in our community as a monk to be respected for the completeness of his formation and the maturity of his bearing and conduct. Everything he did was an expression of this maturity, and one felt that he was a man who fully realized what he was doing. To the young, such men are an inspiration not only because they exemplify in themselves certain monastic virtues, but first of all because they show clearly that they are guided by serious and deep motives: such monks know what they are in the monastery for.

In guiding and encouraging others, they are able to make the monastic life understandable in those moments when it seems, to the afflicted and tempted junior, to have lost all meaning. As a spiritual guide, Dom Vital, more than anyone else at Gethsemani in his day, stood out by reason of the fact that he possessed a clear and coherent spiritual doctrine of his own. Not that other fathers did not preach good sermons or give sound direction. Indeed, many of them had a “doctrine” but one did not feel it to be distinctly theirs in the sense that they had evolved or developed it themselves. It was rather that they seemed to have found it in the books of others. Dom Vital’s “doctrine” was not of course strikingly original. It was a solid and familiar teaching on abandonment comparable to that of Dom Vital Lehodey,⁶ and based on large measure on Caussade;⁷ yet nevertheless one felt that he had structured his teaching by his own study and experience. His doctrine was the wisdom by which he had learned to live under the guidance of grace, and his conduct was the expression of his doctrine.

The substance of Dom Vital’s teaching was that the monastic life is essentially and before all else a life of faith, and that faith expresses itself in a loving obedience to Jesus our Master and Savior. A truly loving obedience must be motivated by something deeper than mere sense of duty or the desire to make progress: it must proceed from a love which clearly realizes that God’s will is itself pure love. Nothing God wills or permits can harm us, for all that He wills or permits must be for our greater good and it is guided by love. Our obedience is then the surrender of trusting love which seeks nothing but to please Jesus and to give to Him our heart. All the events and trials of everyday life are designed to test our faith and to make us grow in this love. Hence the monastic life is a true life of discipleship and the monk, following the father abbot as the visible representative of Christ, learns by perfect obedience and abandonment to “prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ.”⁸ The doctrine thus outlined is familiar enough: but Dom Vital put into it a great depth of personal fervor and trust, which was characterized by a deep sense that even our mistakes and sins were in reality no obstacle to God’s love, if only the eyes of faith and trust enabled us to turn them to good use.



Dom Vital

Though he was master of the laybrother novices at the time when I made my vows, Dom Vital was hearing confessions in the community and so I chose him as my confessor, and continued to go to him during several years when I was a student of philosophy and theology. His direction was always simple and practical and of a kind to give clarity and peace. He showed his penitents that if they really surrendered their wills and accepted the realities of regularity and obedience in the monastic life, they would be able to advance without anxiety and make true progress. I remember him frequently urging me to keep my life simple and not to complicate it by what he thought was an undue interest in controversial questions about monasticism. For Dom Vital there was no monastic problems. The *Rule* and the *Usages*⁹ were the will of God: what more did one want? This view may perhaps have been too simple for a generation that has had to take stock of its monastic heritage and seek new solutions in an *accommodata renovatio*¹⁰ as recommended by the Second Vatican Council. But the spirit of humility and common sense which combined in the teaching of Dom Vital has a perennial value. Without something of that spirit one cannot be a monk.

It must be said without hesitation that Dom Vital himself was a real example of humility. For some reason or other the fact that he was a retired abbot did not seem to merit him any privileges. Apart from the fact that he wore a pectoral cross and sat next to the father abbot in the common exercises, he was in all things like everybody else. He was sometimes the victim of misguided and wrongheaded proclamations in the chapter of faults, and these were not always easy to accept because they were offensive to his humane spirit and his common sense, yet he accepted them without murmur. Once, when an overzealous simple professed proclaimed him for the friendly signs he sometimes made in a spirit of charity, the presiding superior, speaking perhaps for others more than for Dom Vital, said, "You will never get anywhere in the religious life if you do that!" One wonders what a venerable senior and retired abbot felt on receiving this rebuke appropriate for a beginner. But he accepted everything in a spirit of humility and faith.

I remember once when I was a novice and was kneeling, according to the custom of the time, by the abbot's desk receiving direction, Dom Vital came in from his work with the brother novices in order to display some trophy – perhaps an enormous potato or ear of corn – and he knelt down to speak to the abbot as if he were a novice himself.

He was frequently at the common work with the others, though his health was poor – he had had consumption, and consequently worked most of the time in the tailor shop.

Dom Vital practiced the same simple and unquestioning monastic obedience which he taught to others. His conduct was consistently that of a humble, self-effacing monk who took it for granted that he had come to the monastery to surrender his whole being to God in surrendering his will. Consequently, everything he did was carried out with attention and care, and he trained his novices to be exact and attentive in performing their duties. He liked to see everything well done, but without display, ambition or vanity. He was very fond of ceremonies and festivities, and was well-known for his perhaps' inordinate taste for decorations. At Christmas he had the novices bring in such a mass of Christmas trees that one could hardly circulate around the novitiate. In his chapter talks to the community on rubrics¹¹ he became famous for certain ceremonies upon which he insisted almost to the point of obsession. The chief of these was that the thurifer was supposed to glorify God by copious smoke. Dom Vital's earnest and lengthy exhortations on this point sometimes raised a smile, but in any case they had a good effect. He produced a generation of servants of the church who filled the sanctuary with impenetrable and sacred clouds, and sent what seemed to be atomic fallout drifting back into the choir.

For the last eighteen years of his life Dom Vital lived in semi-retirement, as a simple monk, attending all the community exercises but not holding any official position in the community, though he took care of the Mass accounts for many years. It was perhaps during this time most of all that he impressed us with his humility and obedience, his simplicity, his inexhaustible good will, his deep fraternal charity and his devotion to his monastic vocation. Certainly everything he did or said made abundantly clear the deep love he felt for the monastic life and for his community at Gethsemani.

At this point we can do no better than quote a long section from the sermon preached in chapter by our Father Gregory¹² on Trinity Sunday, the day after Dom Vital was buried. Father Gregory said:

It was my good fortune to work for Dom Vital for about a year when I was a novice. He became one of my “ideal Cistercians.” I think there was something very appropriate in his dying just as the church building and the cloister are falling down around our ears. Not for twenty-four hours did he survive the lowering of the old steeple’s cross. That, and his death, alike mark the end of an era. And there is even a good aspect to the rather unfortunate but necessary absence of Reverend Father. Most of us know how much Dom Vital appreciated the chances he had to pontificate when Reverend Father was away. It was fitting, then, I think, that only he was wearing a miter at his funeral Mass.

It was appropriate, too, that his death and burial should coincide with the end of the Paschal season. One of the yearly features of his rubrics conferences was the one in which he would speak of the little ceremony on the eve of Septuagesima Sunday, “*in qua ponitur canticum Domini, Alleluia*” – “on which the canticle of the Lord, the Alleluia, is laid aside” (is buried, he expressed it). We laughed at him, but he was always deeply concerned as if he were to lose a good friend. And so the Paschal season, with its repeated “Alleluia,” was a time of happiness for him, when according to the *Rule*, “From the Holy Feast of Easter until Pentecost, without intermission (*sine intermissione*), let Alleluia be said both with the Psalms and with the responsories (*Holy Rule*, chap. 15). And so this year we can hope and pray that the end of the Paschal season found him in the place of the eternal Alleluia.

And it is fitting too that the first feast he celebrates there is the Most Holy Trinity. I can think of no one whose life was more centered on God. Yet he was no plaster saint. Human as they come, and he never lost his sense of humor. He used to have a hard time and a slow time adding up columns of figures. He would sadly shake his head and make a sign which was all his own, and which I took to mean he was calling himself a jackass. If I made a mistake, he would crack me – but lightly – on the head, saying, “Dummkopf,” and if it was a matter on which he had been right, when I was wrong, then he’d say, “I’m not such a jackass as you think.”

But I think the outstanding thing about Dom Vital was his regularity. We were so used to his being always in choir, and thus, to have an abbot in choir even when Reverend Father couldn’t be there, that it was hard to get used to looking to Fr. Prior for permission to leave church after Dom Vital began to be ailing. Then there was his fidelity to the Usages. Most of us will remember his bows to the crucifix as he passed near an altar or when he arrived in the refectory. Exaggerated it seemed, but how many acts of devotion he must have made which most of us miss due to a lack of attention. And his moderate bows when he passed members

of the community. I used to give a head bow for the fun of seeing him put me in my place by imitating my nod, after his very exact – neither too much nor too little – moderate bow to me. All will have their own recollections, but I think most would agree it would be hard to find one who was more faithful in leading the monastic life as he saw it. He used to say, “A lifetime’s fidelity to the little things is heroic.” If *this* is true, then *he* was heroic.

As time went on and as his years and infirmities multiplied, Dom Vital withdrew to the infirmary. This year when I returned at Easter from an operation in the hospital, I had Dom Vital for a neighbor in the infirmary and was surprised to see how thin he had become, how slow his movements were, and how his eyes had lost their brightness. He was obviously declining, and indeed he had only a few more weeks to live.¹³ Father Gregory, who had visited him some time earlier, found him suffering from a fall which had injured his back. Dom Vital simply said, “God wants it: it is good.” Earlier, when Fr. Gregory said something about Dom Vitalis, our venerable Father smiled and said, “Better: Dom Mortalis.”

Dom Vital was anointed for the second time on Easter Monday in the infirmary (having been anointed in the presence of the community in choir twelve months before). He received the sacraments most fervently and said that he was ready and eager to go whenever the Lord should be pleased to call him. For the rest of Paschal Time he went on quietly, as usual, sometimes a bit weak and disoriented, no longer to say Mass even sitting, but frequently attending the daily concelebrated conventual Mass.

The Father Infirmarian reports: “A few weeks prior to his death I awakened him for dinner. He looked out the window (toward the woods) and exclaimed (with an innocent sweetness that suggested he was speaking from fondest memories), ‘The world is the same all over.’ I thought he had got another siege of mental confusion and asked about the meaning. He said: ‘It looks just like Achel over there. The world is the same all over.’”

At that time apparently Dom Vital said something about returning to Achel. The infirmarian reminded him that he had been with us thirty-eight years now and we were not eager to let him go. Dom Vital read the Achel publications regularly, and had several copies in his room at the time of his death. He was also reading a book on monasticism in Dutch. On the night of June 2-3 he had one of his rather frequent mild attacks of angina pectoris which was promptly treated. Feeling better, he told the infirmarian, “Go to bed you poor fellow” – perhaps his last words. Dom Vital then went to sleep. He died peacefully in his sleep about 6 a.m. June 3rd, when the community was at Mass.

Dom Vital was greatly loved and admired by all who knew him at Gethsemani, and even those who, in his last days, were never close to him, still admired his regularity, his humility, his deep simplicity and purity of heart. Certainly we all feel that our community has lost one of its most edifying and holy members – but we know that he will continue to be very close to us. Indeed one of the monks once asked Dom Vital to pray for him “especially at the hour of my death.” “Do not worry, dear child,” Dom Vital said, “I will be there.” We feel sure that our good and revered Father will also continue to be very close by prayer and intercession to those who loved him and those he loved at Achel. May we all have the grace to imitate his humble abandonment to God and his loving fidelity to his monastic vocation.

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 10-11: headnote to Merton's August 29, 1945 note to Dom Vital (subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text).
2. Merton made his solemn vows on March 19, 1947 (see Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals*, vol. 2: 1941-1952, ed. Jonathan Montaldo [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 49-50; subsequent references will be cited as "ES" parenthetically in the text).
3. See the entry for the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1958: "Chapter – Dom Vital on Martha and Mary. Our wonderful contemplative vocation, how much better off we are than the active orders. Utterly unable to swallow the mass of half-truths and delusions and good middle western complacencies that made up the usual feast-day chapter (Not Dom Vital more than anyone else. He was only part of it)" (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] 212).
4. Dom Edmond Obrecht (1852-1935), fourth abbot of Gethsemani (1898-1935); Merton's repeated spelling of his first name as "Edmund" has been corrected.
5. The light breakfast ("two pieces of bread and some coffee") taken by the monks on fast days: see Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010) 187.
6. Vital Lehodey, OCR (1857-1948), abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Bricquebec (1895-1929) and author of *Holy Abandonment* (1918) as well as of the *Cistercian Spiritual Directory* (1909).
7. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, SJ (1675-1751), author of *Abandonment to Divine Providence* and other texts on contemplative prayer and the spiritual life.
8. *Rule of St. Benedict*, c. 4.
9. See *Regulations of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance Published by the General Chapter of 1926* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Sons, [1927]); these *Usages* are the Cistercian application of the *Rule of St. Benedict* to their own monastic life.
10. "appropriate renewal" – a phrase used in the title and in section 2 of *Perfectae Caritatis*, the *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life* of the Second Vatican Council; see Walter Abbott, SJ, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) 466, 468.
11. Dom Vital regularly gave the monthly conference on liturgy at Gethsemani: see Thomas Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 7, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015) 120.
12. Fr. Gregory Lambing (1915-2000) entered Gethsemani on August 14, 1951 and was ordained on May 23, 1959.
13. See Merton's journal entries for April 12, 1966 (Tuesday after Easter): "Dom Vital seems to be gone in senile dementia now, poor man"; and for April 14, 1966 (Thursday in Easter Week): "I dreamt that I was talking to Dom Vital and that he made sense; and today he was better, was up – fully dressed, not looking blank, walking around with his cane, and sitting in prayer before the Bl[essed] Sacrament" (Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals*, vol. 6: 1966-1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 39).