

Thomas Merton, Joan Baez and the Midnight Run to Bardstown

By James Ryan

Along with a few other young Passionist monks, I met Joan Baez and Thomas Merton on the same day in the same place. The place was the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani, south of Bardstown, Kentucky. The day was December 8, 1966, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, as it happened.¹ You can read about it in Baez's memoir, *And a Voice to Sing With*.² She identified me, mistakenly, as one of the young Trappist monks; as I've said, I was at the time a young Passionist monk. She wrote: "I went into one of my religious states at the sight of the monastery. Then I wished the monks were hidden behind bars in great hoods, because the first one I saw was tripping over himself, acting suspiciously like a Joan Baez fan." Despite her reluctance, I have the card on which she drew a flower and monogrammed it for me, this tripping-over-himself Joan Baez fan – although my memory of the encounter is slightly different. The exuberance, however, was definitely there. She told me she never gave autographs to anyone over ten years of age. I



Joan Baez

the Trappist Order in order to join the Camaldolese Order of hermits in Camaldoli, Italy. (Spoiler alert – he didn't go!)

Grayston's larger point is that this period of his life, along with other

didn't believe her, which was the reason I said (exuberantly), "But Miss [evidence of a much earlier age] Baez, no one will ever believe me that I saw Joan Baez at Gethsemani if you don't do something," as I offered the now famous note card – a note card with her flower and monogram made even more famous by the addition of Fr. Louis writing: "With Best Wishes, Tom Merton" on it.

I'm telling this story first because I absolutely love telling it – as many, many people can attest. I'm also telling it because I just finished reading Donald Grayston's book *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: the Camaldolese Correspondence*.³ This is a slice-of-life book that covers, principally, three years of Merton's life in which he conducted a correspondence between and among many people. The letters therein covered Merton's idea that his call to solitude meant that he should transfer out of



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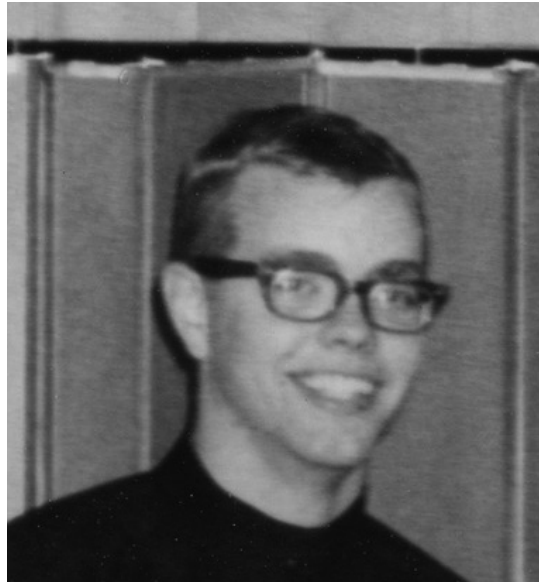
shorter periods, involved an experience well-known in monastic life. It is the condition known as *acedia*. When a monk hits the wall on awareness of his identity and the impact brings with it questions about longevity in one's chosen vocational state, a restlessness surfaces that combines with a listless attitude of purpose (which comes and goes, but not the restlessness). Grayston contends that this was Merton's lot in life – namely, to be restless and, to the point of the book, to include many people and involve them in the great decision.

This large group includes general superiors and abbots, no less than five spiritual guides, an eventual ambassador to the Vatican, and one future pope – among others. The correspondence provides a revelation not of one of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century, nor of the public intellectual who “suffered” many visitors – some would say unlikely and unexpected – who came knocking on the doors first of the abbey and later of his hermitage in the woods. The revelation is, in great part, of the man himself and his strategies and patterns that he executes in service of his stated one great desire to be a hermit. With thanks to Grayston, it must be made clear that this revelation is not always pretty, at times petty and mean-spirited to the point of unbelievability, were it not for the existence and the authenticity of the letters.

I would like to say here that I have great respect for and owe much to Thomas Merton. In college in the late 1960s at the Passionist monastery in Louisville, he was a hero to us young monks. I, like so many of my brothers in community, couldn't wait to get hold of his writings, essays, commentaries and thoughtful responses to the issues of the day. We added his poetry to our prayer services.

When *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*⁴ came out in 1968 I accompanied him, in my reading of it, to a spiritual consciousness that allowed me to break free of the bonds of traditional Roman Catholic ways to pray. Thomas Merton was personally kind to me in the Gethsemani Gift Shop when he acknowledged that, yes, that woman who just went to the restroom is Joan Baez. He didn't seem to mind the young monk tripping over himself, yes, looking for an autograph, but who was more importantly seeking a connection.

I am one of a very small group of individuals whose senior philosophy seminar at Bellarmine University was led by Professor Dan Walsh, Merton's friend, teacher and mentor.⁵ This was in the spring of 1970 and Dan had purloined from out of the abbey unpublished manuscripts of the recently deceased Merton, who had of course died on December 10, 1968, just two years after my meeting him. Walsh read to us because these materials could not be published at that time. He



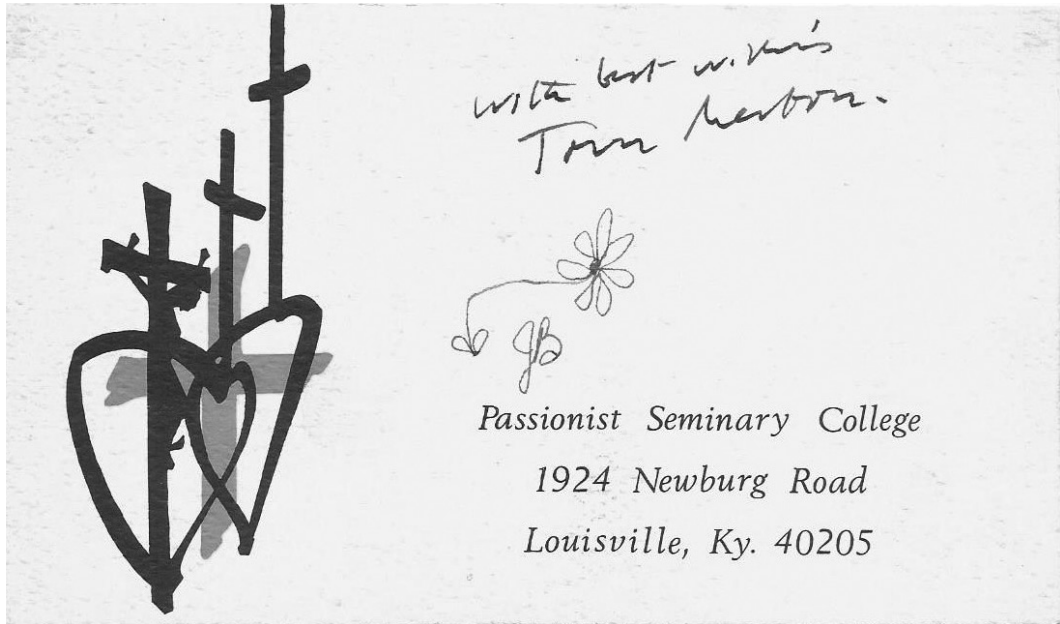
Jim Ryan in 1966

read to us, looked at us (those piercing ice-blue eyes under a bald head), then he looked out the window. And we waited. Sometimes Dan would return to reading with tears in his eyes. And we waited. We didn't learn much philosophy in that seminar. What we did learn as this old friend, now quite literally lost over the death of his beloved one, read to us, was Merton's vision of the future of the church, the joining of East and West in the ultimate search for the divine source, and commentary on peace in the face of an ever-increasing madness known as the Vietnam War – what we learned was that love must guide, form and move the intellectual topics of whatever philosophy one attaches oneself to.

As you can see, Thomas Merton held a special place at a most formative time of my life. I say all that to speak now of Merton the snob. It is my sincere hope that he would agree with me. In his correspondence, I love it when he writes to Dom Giabbani, the Superior of the Camaldolese, that he must become a hermit so as to enter into solitude's depths (see Grayston 70-72). Merton writes: "O my father, I have an immense need for that silence, for that *quies* in which the soul rests, unmoving, in the obscurity of an immense and simple activity which is God himself." He goes on to say how worn out he is by the writer's life and the demands of the timetable of deadlines. Don't we all have visions and images of the hermit who leaves the world behind, who possesses nothing, who becomes a nobody so that God will be the somebody who is All? Merton informs Dom Giabbani, well yes, all of that is what he looks forward to, but that he would, upon becoming a hermit, also retain his writing which of course involves publishers and, necessarily, contact with the outside world (see Grayston 118-21). And – oh by the way – he would retain his freedom to have one spiritual guide who is outside of the hermit community (see Grayston 127-30). I find this very amusing, and yes, revealing.

I mentioned that Grayston also covers other shorter periods of Fr. Louis' life that give evidence of later episodes of *acedia*. There was the time he wanted to establish a hermit community in Latin America. In a letter dated July 29, 1966 to Dom James Fox (Merton's abbot) he informs the abbot that this hermitage would allow him to be in correspondence and contact with certain intellectuals of Mexico and South America; and in a telling addition he lets Dom James know that his preparation for this contact required him to be in touch with creative people, intellectuals, those, as he said, who do "interesting work." Merton writes: "The kind of contacts that will help me will, I think, be occasional visits or talks with people who do unusual creative work, or are in some way interesting and exceptional people, or come from foreign countries, etc. This will provide challenge and stimulation and perhaps occasions for interesting work" (Grayston 266). Evidently the monks of Gethsemani weren't up to meeting that requirement. Enter Thomas Merton, snob.

This gets us back to December 1966 and Joan Baez, presumably one of those creative, interesting people. As she continues her story about those spiritual heights she thought she might achieve during her visit with Merton and the monks, she relates some very interesting details. She does say they had discussions on topics of the day. But she goes into greater detail about how Thomas wanted Joan and Ira Sandperl, her travelling companion, to take him into Bardstown (closest big town to the abbey) so he could get a couple cheeseburgers. Later, in his hermitage he produced a bottle of Irish whiskey which, as they tipped a few, loosened Merton up to tell them that his abbot wouldn't let him travel.



Then, as Baez tells it, these creative types asked about Merton's love life – which brings up the matter of his relationship with the woman identified as M. in all the Merton literature.⁶ I think the whiskey got in the way, though Joan says she didn't drink any, and the details start to blur. I relate this episode from Baez's memoir not to slight Merton's intentions, motivations, even his spiritual writings and practices, but to more deeply appreciate that spiritual life is both heavenly and earthly, that God may be found both in the spareness of dispossession as well as in the company of friends.

Oh yes, there's one more thing. On our way out of town – it was approaching midnight – our car of young Passionist monks pulled up alongside a car at the one traffic light in Bardstown. We looked to our left into the car and, lo and behold, we were looking at Joan Baez, Thomas Merton and Ira, who was driving. Maybe, I thought, they were just cruising the bright city lights of Bardstown, Kentucky. Or perhaps, they were sharing the age-old insight of St. Augustine: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in thee."⁷

1. See Merton's December 10, 1966 journal entry: Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 167-68; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text. For an overview of the visit see Robert Hudson, *The Monk's Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018) 150-57.
2. Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) 130-31.
3. Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015); subsequent references will be cited as "Grayston" parenthetically in the text.

4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).
5. See William H. Shannon, "Walsh, Daniel" in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 515-16.
6. Merton wrote in his journal: "We talked of my love for M. and I read some of the poems and Joan was ready to drive ninety miles an hour through the rain to Cincinnati so I could see M. when she got off at the hospital (11:30 p.m.). So we went to Bardstown and called M. But then they could not get their reservations changed to a convenient time. Just as well I did not go!! Would have been totally exhausted. Tired enough after driving with them to the airport and then coming home with Jack Ford after watching a bit of the *Glass Menagerie* at his house. Guilt next day for this wild impulsiveness, this night ride" (LL 168).
7. St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1.