

## Variant Drafts in a Manuscript of *The Sign of Jonas*\*

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### Author's Note

The title, *The Whale and the Ivy*, comes from the Book of Jonas. Jonas went where he did not want to go, but where God wanted him to go in the belly of the whale. Later he was sitting in the hot sun and the ivy plant grew up over his head and gave him shade. This made him complacent, so the ivy withered. At this he got mad. The whale and the ivy in Jonas can be taken to represent the vicissitudes of the interior life, in which God sends us a darkness which we do not like, and takes away the consolations that we do like, in order that in all things we may do His will and live in detachment.

### The Sign of Jonas: Prologue

The way to God is short and easy. We do not have far to go. He is not separated from us by distance. Where we are, He is. We cannot be

\* In 1999 Robert Giroux, editor for *The Sign of Jonas* at Harcourt, Brace, unexpectedly discovered a typed draft of the manuscript in his personal library. This draft is a late edition of the manuscript with editorial emendations by Merton, Giroux and Merton's literary agent, Naomi Burton. What is presented here are variations from the published version limited to the 'Author's Note', the 'Prologue' and the Introduction to Part I. These variations have been transcribed as Merton wrote them but include the editorial changes suggested by Merton, Giroux and Burton (now Burton Stone). The entire manuscript deserves analysis. Robert Giroux has made a gift of his manuscript to the archives at the Abbey of Gethsemani, which in turn has placed the manuscript on loan to the Thomas Merton Center archives at Bellarmine University.

without Him. Our very being is rooted and established in His living presence, so that we live in Him, and by Him, and for Him. As St. Paul told the Athenians, quoting one of their own forgotten poets: 'In Him we live and move and are'. And quoting another: 'We are His children'. If we only descend a little into our own soul, if we only find the solitude which is our own 'being', distinct from every other being under the sun, if we only retired into the silence which is the intimacy of our own inviolable person, we come to the threshold of another solitude, another silence, another Person.

Even the Greeks knew they were children of God. We who have been baptized in the death of Christ know our sonship in a more special and definite way. The Spirit of God lives in us, not as our Creator only, not as the One Who breathes into our substance the breath of natural life, but as the One Who recognizes the Father in us because His lifegiving presence makes us other Christs. It is this Spirit Who prays to the Father in us, helping our weakness. It is this Spirit Who leads us, as He led Christ, into the desert to fight with the tempter and to overcome. And it is this same Spirit Who arms us with divine power for another and more terrible battle which is man's battle with the love of God. For we are called to glorify God by wrestling with Him in darkness, fighting for the world lest he reject it and cast it into the abyss.

More terrible than any temptation, this wrestling with God takes place at the summit of our being where we emerge from nothingness at His command. The Holy Spirit uses our nothingness as a weapon with which to battle for the salvation of the world. It is the old battle fought by Moses. It is the battle which was fought in Christ, when God died for us. Monks, more than other men, more than anyone else dedicated to God, make this battle their life.

The battle is fought and won in great tranquillity. It is a battle of peace. God fills us with peace, and measures our peace against His peace. God fills us with silence and measures our silence against His silence. God fills us with abjection and measures our abjection against His glory. The fruit of the victory is happiness, glory and annihilation. We become like the God Who died for us. We learn to descend into the abyss for love of Him.

It is no small thing to enter into this battle with Him Who came to bring not peace, but the sword (because He knew that in His war peace was not to be found, and that all other peace was everlasting war).

Our own nature, which we have brought with us into the monastery and is supposed to provide us with the matter for our

sanctification by furnishing us with a gift which we can consecrate to God, invariably substitutes other victims in place of itself, and evades the challenge that will bring us face to face with God. This evasion takes place on many levels, and is usually effective enough to prevent us from ever meeting God at all on our way to heaven. We come to the monastery to find Him, but without knowing it we spend our lives avoiding Him. Yet He is unavoidable. Our only hope of evasion is to fail to see Him where He is and to ignore Him whenever we meet. This can only be done by asserting that He is not the one we are looking for, and claiming that we must look further on, for someone else.

Therefore, instead of seeking God, Who is easy to find, we look for something else that is impossible to find. We look for abstractions, like 'sanctity', 'virtue', 'contemplation', 'perfection', 'detachment'. We suppose that, having found these things, and having decorated ourselves with their beauty, we shall then enter into the presence of God. We forget that God alone is holy and strong, that God alone is pure, that He is His own 'contemplation' and that to be detached is to be united to Him, which means finding all things in Him. Are we to attract His attention by a holiness we have procured for ourselves from some other source than His own holiness? Are we to raise ourselves to a vision of His light by following some other light than that of His hidden presence, which faith alone can see? Are we to conquer a right to merit His rewards by action that flow from some other power than that of His grace? And when we have the gifts He gives us, and when we receive the light and the strength with which He alone can endow our being, is there not, beyond all gifts and graces, a deeper and more mysterious, a purer and more intimate and more unlimited and more unknowable contact with the very Being of Him from whom all blessings come?

After some eleven years in the monastery, I think I have learned not to expect my failures to be spectacular or my successes to have a special meaning. Nothing on the surface of life has any importance of its own. Our true life acquires meaning on a level too deep to be apprehended either by ourselves or by our companions as long as we are in this world. Therefore the most important thing a monk needs to know is the supreme unimportance of his poor exterior being and the supreme importance of his true life hidden in God. Now, as St. Paul says, it is the outward man who changes and is corrupted and who breaks down and falls apart on us from day to day. The inward man grows and is renewed and is built up and made strong and increases in Christ. The outward man can be the subject of a book: the inward man, not so. Or rather, if you begin to write a book about the inward

man, you may try to reach him through figures of speech and symbolic gestures which the outward man perform in order to help you achieve your end. But since the outward and inward man are not always in the harmony they were created to share, the things we think and say about our inward selves are usually no more than shadows and images of an exterior world, reflected on the shiny surface of our own outer being.

In the end, a spiritual journal is all too likely to prove nothing more than an echo of the ideas and ideals of the people we live with. This explains the fact that today some of the very worst books that have been written in our time are spiritual journals and autobiographies. It is impossible to write a spiritual journal or any other document without having in mind at least an imaginary reader. Ever if the writer writes for himself, and is thus his own imaginary audience, he tends to conform to the people he lives with, when he reacts to his own book. He is apt to write down what he thinks his group will approve of. In doing this, he runs the risk of being entirely untrue to himself. In that event, his writing loses the one quality that its nature demands: authenticity.

This hazard prevented me from writing an explicitly 'spiritual' journal. The present book does not even pretend to be about an 'inward man' with whom I am too little acquainted. I have enough respect for this inward man and enough fear of His Maker and Sanctifier to reject any temptation to describe him in term that merely would make him socially acceptable. Not that I have any contempt for the opinion of men: for human opinion is something which a monk neither despises nor values. It remains indifferent in itself, and is only respectable for the sake of the human souls in whom is [sic] exists and whom it can subjectively affect for good and evil.

But I must admit that I feel it would be a great betrayal of the grace of God and of my own vocation if I wrote a book about myself with the subconscious aim of appearing respectable, spiritual, or even somehow extraordinary.

Unfortunately, the art of being sincere with oneself and with God (not to mention other people) is a lost art and a hard one to acquire. You have to learn it all by yourself, in solitude, from a God Whom you can only recognize in proportion as you possess the sincerity you are trying to acquire! Re-reading the early pages of this *Journal* I have to admit that the man I find there is not really myself. I see myself, in these pages, disguised under an artificial 'problem'. I cannot deny that the problem seemed to me to be important at the time. It certainly appeared to cause me and my directors much trouble, and I even

imagined that it was a source of interior suffering. But now I see that, like most of the problems of monks, it was imaginary.

Why, then, did I imagine it?

Here was the situation. I had come to Gethsemani to be a Trappist monk, not precisely because the Cistercian rule attracted me, not precisely because I thought the Trappists were the best monks in the world, nor even because Gethsemani itself appeared to me to be a kind of earthly paradise. If I had gone to the Order that most attracted me, I would have become a Carthusian. If I had been looking for a monastery that pleased my human sensibilities I would certainly not have picked Gethsemani where many things offend them.

I came to Gethsemani at the very beginning because it was the place God had chosen for me. And I cannot say that I have ever seriously regretted, even for a moment, the fact of coming here. If I tried to say that I did not, in the depths of my being, love Gethsemani more than any other place in the world, I would be a liar. When I have nightmares, they are always terrible dreams in which I find myself outside the monastery and am trying desperately to get back. And yet for year I struggled interiorly with aspects of the life at Gethsemani which, I told myself, I did not like. The struggle itself had many forms, but it always resolved itself into one central problem. It went like this: 'I came to the monastery to lead a contemplative life. But I am not leading a contemplative life. In fact, I wonder if anybody in the monastery is leading a contemplative life. I wonder if it is even possible to lead a contemplative life in this or any other monastery. It wonder if I would not be better off as a hermit'.

As soon as you put it down on paper, the whole thing looks foolish because, as I just said, the reason for my being a monk is not sanctity, not virtue, not perfection, not 'the contemplative life', but GOD. God is not found in these abstractions. The abstraction themselves were only devised to describe and characterize the soul that is already united to Him. Therefore, the only thing that matters is to seek Him.

But you cannot begin to seek God unless you have already found Him. It is by His grace that we seek Him. His grace is the effect of His presence in us. Therefore, from the mere fact that we seek Him, we know He is already there.

I found God before I came to the monastery. I found Him in a much deeper way as soon as I got to the monastery. I know I have never ceased to find Him over and over again. For He is always with me. Why, then, have I upset my life and obscured the reality of His presence by an illusory problem about 'my contemplative vocation?' The reason is that I am just as much of a fool as other men, and in fact

more of a fool than they are. For they miss finding God when they have no means of knowing that He is there: while my absurd illusion has sprung from the very experience which it betrays and contradicts!

It should be enough for me to know that He Who has brought me to this place in order that my inner life might grow and develop in Him knows far better than I do how to arrange the exterior conditions upon which my inner union with Him depends.

No matter what may be the conditions under which a man lives the contemplative life, he will find that the essence of that life is situated in paradox and contradiction. It cannot be otherwise. For the contemplative life, which brings us into union with God in a mystery which we can never fully understand, achieves its end by contradicting the hopes and plans and judgments and aspirations of the natural man. That was what Jesus meant when he said: 'If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For he that will save his life must lose it; and he that will lose his life for my sake shall find it'. (Matthew 16:24-25).

As soon as the paradox is fully accepted, we find happiness where we least expected to find it. We discover inexhaustible peace where before there was nothing but struggle. The reason for this lies not in the paradox itself, not in contradiction as such, but only in the fact that we have accepted the particular paradox willed for us by God and, in doing so, found God himself.

After eleven years in the monastery I find certain truths continue to impress themselves more and more deeply upon me every day. One of these is the fact that a vocation is an extremely definite and personal thing. It is a gift, measured out to the individual who receives it. Indeed it is a gift which the individual himself was created to receive. It is not we who decide, pure on our own initiative that we are going to be monks, much as we might decide to be lawyers or professor or doctors in the world outside. The monastic vocation is more than a matter of temperament and personal taste. The proof of this lies in the fact that some of postulants who enter the monastery with the best apparent dispositions and qualifications hardly last a month while others, whom you would never dream of as monks, hang on for years and eventually turn out to be the best ones in the house.

This Cistercian monks make five vows, at the time of their profession. Poverty, chastity, obedience, stability, and conversion of manners (*conversio morum* or *conversatio morum*). This last has little to do with exterior conduct. St. Benedict, whose Rule we follow, did not explicitly mention the vows of poverty and chastity, because, in his eyes, these two essential obligations of monks were summed up in the

general obligation to tend to perfection of charity which is what the 'conversion of manners' really means.

The whole meaning of the monastic vocation is summed up in these vows, which are given to the monk as a means of consecrating his life to God. They deliver him from the uncertainties and care and illusions that beset the man of the world. They imply struggle and difficulty. They demand complete self-renunciation. They lead to a life perfectly hidden in Christ. They embrace the whole life of man and all his desires with a singular completeness. The monk is more strictly bound to God than the member of an active order, engaged in works of the exterior ministry.

One of the most significant of these vows is the vow of stability which binds a monk to one monastic community. Unless the Superiors decide to send him to a foundation, the monk lives and dies in the monastery of his profession. It takes a special dispensation from Rome for a monk to move to another monastery. Monks are not even supposed to be off the property of the their monastery without grave reason and special permission.

The reason for this vow of stability is not merely to mortify the monk's instinct to travel (an instinct which, in me, was once very powerful and has now practically ceased to have any effect on me). Stability makes the monk a member of one very definite family, and each monastic family has its own characteristics, its own spirit and, of course, its own limitations. St. Benedict who, like the Desert Fathers on whom he based his Rule, had a very realistic sense of human values, introduced this vow into his Rule precisely because he knew that the limitations of the monk and the limitations of the community he lived in formed a part of God's plan for the sanctification both of individuals and communities. In the monastic life we have to be sanctified by charity. And charity means loving God and other men. The love of God can easily become an abstract thing: the love of other men can degenerate into a merely theoretical humanitarianism. The vow of stability makes it necessary for us to love other men just as they are. It closes to us any convenient avenue of escape into the world of theory and makes us spend a good solid lifetime in the presence of one another's imperfections. The purpose of this vow, in St. Benedict's eyes, was to save the monk from the useless and futile pursuit of some imaginary and impossible ideal. By making a vow of stability the monk renounces the vain hope of wandering off to find a better monastery. This implies a deep act of faith: the recognition that it does not much matter where we are or who we live with, provided we can devote ourselves to prayer, enjoy a certain amount of silence

and solitude, work with our hands, read and study the things of God, and above all love one another as Christ has loved us. The acceptance of monastic stability is not altogether possible unless we fully understand and accept the fact that the monastic life is nothing but the simple, total, integral Christian life as it is mapped out for us in the Gospels.

Stability becomes difficult for a man whose monastic ideal contains some note, some element of the extraordinary. All monasteries are more or less ordinary. The monastic life is by its very nature 'ordinary'. Its ordinariness is one of its greatest blessings. The very exterior monotony of regular observance delivers us from useless concern with the details of daily life, absolves us from the tedious necessity of making plans and coming to many personal decisions. It sets us free to pray all day, and live alone with God.

But for me, the vow of stability has been the belly of the whale. Like the prophet Jonas, whom God ordered to go to Nineveh, I found myself with an almost uncontrollable desire to go in the opposite direction. God pointed one way and all my 'ideals' pointed in the other. It was when Jonas was travelling as fast as he could away from Nineveh, towards Tarsus, that he was thrown overboard, and swallowed by a whale who took him where God wanted him to go.

A monk can always legitimately and significantly compare himself to a prophet, because monks are the heirs of the prophets. Not that we necessarily foretell the future: but that is only one aspect of the prophetic vocation. The prophet is a man whose whole life is a living witness of the providential action of God in the world. Every prophet is a sign and witness of Christ. Every monk, in whom Christ lives, and in whom all the prophecies are therefore fulfilled, is a witness and a sign of the Kingdom of God. Every man who gives himself to God comes under the action of God's love: the same love which brought Abraham into a distant country, which led the children of Israel through the sea and the desert, which approached Israel in the prophets and which died on the Cross in Christ. The power which raised Christ from the dead lives and works in those who believe. This power transforms us more than we can ever realize, and the transformation itself, without our knowledge and without our comprehension, speaks eloquently of God and stands as a sign and a witness of His action in a world which may or may not understand. We who belong to God never need to be self-conscious about this role He has given us in the world: for we bear witness to Him without knowing what we do, provided that we love Him. After all, even those who do not love Him bear witness to His love by the emptiness of lives that

cannot be full without Him. So we too, who seek Him, do not need to regard the effect of our seeking on other men. Even our mistakes are eloquent, more than we know. We have only to be hidden. The more we are hidden, the more we are a 'sign'.

The sign Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the 'sign of Jonas the prophet'—that is, the sign of His own resurrection. The life of every monk, of every priest, of every Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ's resurrection. But I feel that my own life is especially signed with this great sign, which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned in the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself I find myself gladly travelling towards my destiny in the belly of a humorous contradiction.

### Part 1 SOLEMN PROFESSION (December 1946–December 1947)

This *Journal* begins in December 1946. At that time I was a scholastic completing my first year of theology, coming to the end of my three years of temporary vows, preparing to make solemn profession and consecrate myself to God for life.

My temporary vows would expire on March 19, 1947 and then I would be perfectly free to go to another monastery, change to another religious order, or adopt any other form of life I pleased. The only trouble about the change was that it would mean starting all over again from the beginning, as a novice. But even then I often wondered if perhaps I ought not to go somewhere else. The fact that this preoccupation never got below the surface of my mind was enough to indicate, to me, that it was a 'temptation'. In the depths of my will, I already knew the answer. I knew that I was meant to stay at Gethsemani, and I knew that I would in fact stay. I knew that this was where I belonged. I did not deliberately try to upset my mind by thinking of other possibilities, other vocations: but when the thoughts pressed upon me I more or less accepted them—they brought with them a certain hazard, a certain excitement, a last hope of natural independence and of human pleasure!

I think I was deceiving myself when I told myself and my confessors that I worried about having to write books—for Dom Frederic, the abbot, wanted me to write books. It was during 1946, in fact, that I had written an autobiography called *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and it was now about to be accepted and published. During the year to come I would write another book, about monasticism, which reflected

something of my own self-questioning, and which was called *The Waters of Siloe*.

The life of a student in the monastery is uneventful. Ordinarily the scholastics do not have any special job that would take them away from their studies. My writing work did not interfere with my theology or with my life of prayer—it only occupied me for two hours, every afternoon. But it kept me from getting out to work in the fields or in the woods, and that was probably one reason why it kept upsetting me: for the monastic life is a balance between prayer, study and manual labor. We need those hours in the fields, not only to exercise our bodies, not only to make living, but to balance our life of prayer. I am the kind of person who prays best out of doors. But even when you get all the prayer you want in choir or in meditation, you still need the fields.

However, if I had realized it then, there is nothing to prevent a monk from praying even while he writes a book. This discovery came to me later, when I finally resigned myself to being a writer, and found out that the job had one big compensation: it brought me solitude. In 1946 and 1947 I did not have a room to myself to write in, and so it did not occur to me to pray. The room where I worked was shared by another monk with another typewriter—a canonist, working on some involved and secret problem of law—was in fact my professor of theology and later became my confessor and was also one of the censors whose penance was to read the pages that flowed with such easy and meaningless regularity from my typewriters in those innocent days. [He describes Anthony Chassagne.]

In 1947 I was given a small position in the choir—that of assistant cantor. It does not sound like much and is, in fact, even less important than it sounds.

In this year, Dom Frederic was busy with the new foundation in Utah. I kept wondering whether I would be sent there, and sometimes hoped I would be, because I like mountains. But that is not the sort of motive that a monk can be proud of. The Utah founders left us in July 1947 and after that I had another job to do: I was appointed to read aloud to the guests in their dining room, during meals.

Meanwhile, although I had made my solemn vows in March, I was still haunted all summer by the thought of becoming a Carthusian. It was no longer a thought which I was fully entitled to entertain. It is of course possible for a monk under solemn vows to transfer to another Order, if he gets a special indult from the Holy See. But such a transfer presupposed a real lack of adaptation in one's present Order, and I could never really convince myself or anybody else that I did not fit in

at Gethsemani. By the end of the year, 1947, I finally got rid of this idea. After the annual retreat, in December 1947, although the thought returned, it never carried much conviction.

As I look back on these years and on the pages which were written then, I realize that this idea (which I never admitted except with cautious reservations) was nevertheless a harmful one. It prevented me from entering deeply and seriously into the interior life. It served as a kind of pretext for not fully accepting the demands of my vocation to prayer: as if the whole question of interior prayer would have to be postponed until I found myself a more convenient setting. As long as I played with this illusion—and argued that I was not wrong in entertaining it—I could not fully be myself, or know myself. And consequently I could not grow.