

Harvesting Seeds of Contemplation

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If I were looking for God, every event and every moment would sow, in my will, grains of His life, that would spring up one day in a tremendous harvest.¹

These uncertain days at the beginning of Christianity's third millennium could be harvest time for seeds of contemplation that Thomas Merton sowed when he began to explore the meaning of contemplation, an exploration that he shared widely with the public when he published *Seeds of Contemplation* in 1949. Michael Mott has claimed that 'Merton's strongest prose was consistently on the subject of contemplation or in the autobiographical writings drawn from the past and the current journals'.² Contemplation is practically speaking a signature theme for Merton. It appears throughout his writings. Nothing preoccupied him more. On November 8, 1948, Merton wrote to Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, poet and president of St Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, that '...contemplation is the subject closest to my heart'.³

Merton was still exploring contemplation on the day he died, 10 December 1968, when he addressed the Asian Benedictine and Cistercian Superiors in Bangkok, Thailand. In a talk entitled, 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', a subject suggested to him by Dom Jean Leclercq,⁴

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 18; *idem*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 16.

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 217.

3. Merton to Madeleva, 8 November 1948, Archives of St Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana. Henceforth: SMC Archives.

4. In a conversation on 28 April 1979, in Toronto, Canada, Dom Jean Leclercq, OSB, told me that the topic Merton spoke on was Leclercq's suggestion. See Patrick Hart (ed.), *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), pp. 174-75.

Merton said that this presentation could have been entitled 'Marxist Theory and Monastic Theoria [Contemplation]'.⁵ The lecture returned again and again to Merton's favorite theme: the transformation of human consciousness. A monk who knew Merton firsthand and well, John Eudes Bamberger, has written that 'the word which best summarizes the spiritual teaching of Merton is contemplation'.⁶ Yet, contemplation was rarely discussed in the mid-twentieth century even in monastic circles. Moreover, Christian churches, their leaders, guides and preachers, showed little, if any, interest in contemplation or mysticism. Thomas Merton played a significant role in retrieving a number of Christian themes from the tradition, perhaps none with as much enduring passion as contemplation. That contemplation and contemplative prayer are now a concern of more Christians than ever before is due in no small measure to the legacy that the poet monk Thomas Merton left to a world that is caught now in a chaotic transition between a modern and postmodern consciousness, a transition that his own life anticipated in countless ways. Thomas Merton knew well that contemplation of a loving God is also, not only for survival, but a way to discover hope in the human search for ultimate meaning by Christians, monastic and otherwise.

Merton's Prophetic Imagination

These years at the beginning of a new millennium may well be the beneficiary of Merton's prophetic search for the contemplative encounter with the divine. Yet, there is no guarantee that Christian churches will become more contemplative despite the widespread interest in spirituality and contemplation. It would not be the first time that Christians failed to heed a prophetic voice. But, no one can accuse Thomas Merton of failing to direct the attention of Christians to the graced human capacity for contemplation. That gift, along with mysticism, had been relegated to an elitist and elusive gift which only the few were privileged to receive. That state of affairs was largely the Christian stance from the late seventeenth century until the middle of the twentieth century. Merton's voice was one of the first in the middle of the twentieth century that began to alert Christians that they were missing out on a very important

5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin; New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 327; the conference by Merton at Bangkok is detailed in Appendix 7, pp. 326-43.

6. John Eudes Bamberger, 'Merton (Thomas)', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, X (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), cols. 1060-1065 (1064).

gift that flourished in eras gone by and that could bring 'joy and hope' to a world struggling to hold onto its humanity.⁷

In 1948 Thomas Merton burst onto the public scene with his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Yet, in 1941, before he entered the monastery, Merton had already asked himself during a stay in the Gethsemani guesthouse, 'What do you mean by contemplation, anyway?'⁸ For the rest of his life Thomas Merton relentlessly pursued that question. In his autobiography Merton already revealed his intense interest in contemplation and to some extent its democratization. He was convinced, even then, that

America is discovering the contemplative life

and, in words few Americans would have heard before then, that

...there is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others.

In the same concluding part of this text, the young Merton had just noted that

...St Bonaventure makes no divisions and distinctions: Christ imprinted His own image upon Saint Francis in order to draw not some men, not a few privileged monks, but *all* truly spiritual men to the perfection of contemplation which is nothing else but the perfection of love. Once they have reached these heights they will draw others to them in their turn. So any man may be called at least *de jure*, if not *de facto*, to become fused into one spirit with Christ in the furnace of contemplation and to go forth and cast upon the earth that same fire which Christ wills to see enkindled.⁹

The ecclesiastical and even the monastic culture of the middle of the twentieth century, and certainly the secular culture, had little interest in the mystical and contemplative traditions. Merton brought with him to Gethsemani an ingrained penchant for putting his finger on the fault-lines in American culture. His conversion had opened up new horizons from which he could bring gospel values to his incisive critique of contemporary culture. Merton had, if anyone did, what Walter Brueggemann has called a prophetic imagination, honed as a monk through

7. See Vatican II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes* (Joy and Hope), (1965).

8. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 213.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), pp. 414, 419, 418.

contact with biblical, patristic and monastic sources. Merton's imagination was empowered by an immense energy to mine these sources for the renewal of monastic life as well a willingness to share those sources with those who lived beyond the monastic community. Like Yves Congar and other theologians in France during that time, Merton was practicing a renewal of the spiritual life through *ressourcement*, that is, identifying and interpreting crucial sources for the enrichment of the Christian life. His was a prophetic ministry in the way Brueggemann has described it, that is 'to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us'.¹⁰ There is nothing new in seeing Thomas Merton as a prophet.¹¹ But, his prophetic stance on contemplation, needed now more than ever, is a voice to be taken to heart. It is a message for the healing of a humanity that seems at odds with itself, often adrift without meaning. Merton, like Augustine and Teresa of Avila, has bid his readers to go deep within to discover a spiritual life that is 'fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive'.¹²

Merton and Madeleva: *What is Contemplation?*

Merton's writings were not only prophetic, they also were composed within a large circle of friends with whom he frequently dialogued about the ideas that emerged from his voracious reading, his meditation and contemplation. His exploring of the sources of renewal was also carried out in the context of the communal liturgy which he saw as a resource for contemplation. Merton's personal explorations and his varied kinds of conversation with his community of friends enabled him to become a voice calling the human community to a deeper interior life. Even his search for solitude was a message for communities. Merton became a prophetic spiritual guide for the Christian community in his time and ours, monastic and non-monastic. As Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has written: 'Prophecy is defined by its effect on the community. Revelation in the sense of a new insight into the mystery of salvation is actualized in

10. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 13.

11. Many citations would be possible here. For recent notices of Merton's prophetic role, see Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998) and Arthur W. Biddle (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

12. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 1.

pastoral guidance and instruction...'.¹³ Thomas Merton is a prophet calling women and men within the human community to contemplation. Yet, he had first to discover his own membership in that community as readers will recall from his Fourth and Walnut experience as retold in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.¹⁴

Merton carried on a voluminous correspondence with a community of friends, many of whom he never met. One such correspondent, who was instrumental in making possible his first publication on contemplation was Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, a poet of note, longtime president of St Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, and founder of the not nearly enough well-known Sacred School of Theology which she inaugurated in 1943 and whose last graduates received their degrees in 1970.¹⁵ Merton and Madeleva were kindred spirits whose poetry and commitment to the life of the spirit gave them more than a little in common. A mutual friend put these two poets in touch with each other and from this initial contact came Merton's pamphlet *What is Contemplation?*, his first, albeit brief, seminal study of contemplation.¹⁶ The Cistercian monk and the Holy Cross sister exchanged warm, friendly letters, and sent each other copies of their writings, from 1948 to 1963.

Thomas Merton and Madeleva Wolff admired each other's poetry; in fact, the latter found time to lecture on and write about the poems of her Cistercian friend.¹⁷ Merton's first letter to Madeleva contained an apology for having won a Catholic Press Award for poetry when he

13. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 'The First Letter to the Corinthians', in Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmeyer and Roland Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), pp. 798-815 (811).

14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Image Doubleday, 1965), pp. 156-57.

15. Gail Porter Mandell, *Madeleva: A Biography* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 204-205, see also p. 216. See also her, *Madeleva: One Woman's Life. The 1994 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994). See also the file of letters between Merton and Madeleva Wolff, 'Wolff, Sister Madeleva: Correspondence; Merton, Father Louis 1948-63', SMC Archives. Sister Madeleva was born in 1887 and died in 1964. She was 28 years Merton's senior.

16. Marquita E. Breit and Robert E. Daggy (eds.), *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, new edn, 1986), 1.1J; 1.59C; 1.115; 1.115F; 1.115J. For a review of this pamphlet see 6.361b.

17. Merton to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS 15 July 1949. Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 194: 'Poor Sister Madeleva! Don't ask her to write another article on the poet Merton; she has done at least four articles and reviews, all of them so generous'.

claimed that she was the one who she deserved the award.¹⁸ With this letter the Merton–Madeleva correspondence mentions for the first time the pamphlet on contemplation. Merton wrote:

Also I have been very slack in not attending personally to the little essay on Contemplation which reached you via Ruth Hallisy. First of all I spoke of a leaflet and then the thing turned into a pamphlet, and I am afraid perhaps you are embarrassed with it. If you can think of no good way of disposing of it, please let me know and I will relieve you of the burden. The original idea I had was that it might make a nice booklet, but I cannot reasonably ask you to undertake the publication of such a thing—unless it should happen that you do print booklets at St. Mary’s. Please let me know what ought to be done about it, if you think it is worth the bother. It has been censored by the Order, but by no *ordinarius loci* [original not underscored]... I feel rather dubious about having saddled you with that essay on contemplation, especially through an intermediary. I hope that it is not a great nuisance.¹⁹

Abbot Fox at Gethsemani sent a note to Madeleva on the same day as Merton’s first letter, perhaps accompanying Merton’s letter. Madeleva responded to the abbot with a word on the intermediary:

Last year we had on our faculty and in our School of Sacred Theology Miss Ruth Hallisy, a friend of Brother Louis.²⁰ She brought to me a manuscript from him entitled ‘What Is Contemplation’ [no question mark] with the message that we might publish this in a booklet. Many interruptions have delayed our doing so until now.

I had the manuscript on my desk in the process of arranging for printing when a letter regarding it came to me from Brother Louis. This I answered last week, as I am sure you know...

I am writing now to ask your authorization and approval to proceed in this project. I need not tell you what a privilege we shall consider it to participate in this way with your great work, your apostolate of the contemplative life. We shall be glad to supply you with whatever number of copies of this brochure you may wish for circulation from your monastery in the event that you wish us to go ahead with its printing.²¹

18. Merton to Madeleva, 21 October 1948, SMC Archives. Madeleva wrote concerning Merton’s apology about the award: ‘I disagree with you entirely on the matter of the poetry award, not on the basis of charity or humility but simply as a matter of obvious fact. If humility is truth then in all humility I rejoice in the pre-eminence of your work’ (Madeleva to Merton, 25 October 1948, SMC Archives).

19. Merton to Madeleva, 21 October 1948, SMC Archives.

20. There is a file in SMC Archives marked Ruth Hallisy. She taught English at Saint Mary’s College in 1947–48. This information from John Kovach, Archivist, St Mary’s College.

21. Madeleva to Abbot (James Fox), All Souls’ Day, 2 November 1948, SMC Archives.

Madeleva also wrote to Merton in a lighthearted vein only four days after he had written his first letter.

Your letter of October twenty-first has opened to me the only door through which I can enter your Abbey without the pain of excommunication. I hope that I shall not bring with me too much of the world that has neither right nor business there.

Then Madeleva got down to the business of Merton's manuscript:

By providential coincidence the manuscript about which you wrote had been on my desk for the past two week[s] awaiting decisive treatment. I have been trying to decide the format in which to have it printed. Your letter pushes me to definite conclusions. We shall not only be pleased but proud to print this booklet on 'Contemplation' and to give it as wide circulation as possible...

Can you send me some word as to the number of these booklets that you would like for distribution from the Abbey of Gethsemani and your other abbeys dependent upon it? We shall want to provide these for you.

Ruth Hallisy was more than a benefactor to us in making this manuscript available. Your own generosity and that of your Father-Abbot are simply apiece [*sic*] of the charity which you teach the world by what you are and what you do.²²

Merton had been planning or working on what became *What Is Contemplation?* as early as 1 April 1948, when he wrote to his friend Robert Lax about the project:

A Dominican nun in Erie, PA., has been writing me fine letters & together we are getting up a leaflet on contemplation. She is a friend of Sister Madeleva who writes the poems and Sr. Madeleva will – it seems – print this leaflet. Sr. M is running some kind of a theology course for lay people & that is very good. [The Graduate School of Sacred Theology at St Mary's College.]²³

Merton had been at work on his essay on contemplation on 4 April 1948. On that date, he wrote in his journal: 'I am writing a leaflet on contemplation with a Dominican Tertiary in Erie²⁴ which she says she can get Sister Madeleva to print. Already it is more than a leaflet. I go slow and rewrite. Today, instead of writing about contemplation, I had

22. Madeleva to Merton, Feast of SS Chrysanthus and Daria, 25 October 1948, SMC Archives.

23. Merton to Lax, 1 April 1948 (Daggy [ed.], *The Road to Joy*, p. 170).

24. It is likely that Merton exaggerated Hallisy's role in the pamphlet or he was speaking loosely about the part she played in it. She was perhaps a catalyst for the pamphlet and then acted as a courier to Sister Madeleva to whom she gave the essay.

some of it and it was good to rest and stop fussing and tugging at my wits for useless ideas'.²⁵

On 7 April 1948, the Feast of St Joachim, Merton noted in his journal: 'Yesterday with hailstones hitting the windows like a war, I finished the pamphlet on contemplation and today Fr. Anthony as censor made me signs that he was not pleased with it *at all*. So in a minute I go to confession to find out what is wrong'.²⁶ On the following day Merton reported on the censor's objections which fortunately did not change the content of the pamphlet. That the censor did not demand a change in Merton's stance on the democratization of contemplation was an important moment in the modern retrieval of contemplation:

What Father Anthony did not like about the leaflet was the assertion that mystical contemplation was for everybody and was an integral part in Christian perfection, but he told me that I could hold it and he didn't want me to delete a word of it, and I won't if I can help it, except to make clearer what I mean. Because if contemplation – experimental knowledge of God – is given with the perfection of love for God that empties a man of all other affections, then it is certainly integral to Christian perfection. As a matter of fact, it is given to plenty of people who do not attain that perfection on earth.²⁷

Merton was back in touch with Madeleva by the end of the first week of November, quite interested in the details of the printing of the pamphlet.

I have received the attractive little report on St Mary's College [sent by Madeleva as an example of their printing] and the format would certainly be excellent. I like the type used on the title page, too, and wonder if that style could be used on the titles throughout. It might mean a different style for the body type, but the printer could judge. About the cover, we have no cut to supply and I suppose we can get along without anything. Blue would be excellent, or light brown – or anything that is easy to get. Father Abbot who charges me with acknowledging your letter to him, also, says that we can easily dispose of a thousand if it would not be too much trouble to you. Is that satisfactory? And also, do you mind if we sell some of them, because we are in debt now, with our foundations...

Really, however, contemplation is the subject closest to my heart. If God wills, I hope to get down to a book on it after the annual retreat in December and I count on your prayers, dear Sister Madeleva, to help me through a difficult job...

Thank you again for your kindness in undertaking to print this little

25. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941–52; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 196.

26. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 196.

27. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, pp. 197–98.

booklet on contemplation. I shall try to pay you in prayers, counting on a share in your own prayers and merits before God.²⁸

Three weeks later Madeleva had good news for 'Brother Louis'. The pamphlet had been printed.

The essay on contemplation is in print and should be delivered to us within the week. Instead of blue or brown we have chosen a bright red cover. It seemed to me that this work of the Holy Spirit could very well be clad in flame. I hope that this is not too bold for a Trappist publication. I am reassured, however, by your use of the red strip on your typewriter ribbon for the date of your letter ['Nov. 8th, Octave of all Saints'].

We are having a thousand copies of the booklet mailed directly to your Father Superior and shall be glad to have him dispose of them as he wishes. It will be good to know that we have in any way contributed to the needs of your great work...

I share with you the great wish that writing and publication may not intrude in any way upon the affairs of your great vocation. You have no idea how jealous we in the active life are of that essential exclusion and how much we want you to realize in its completeness your aloneness with God.²⁹

The cover of this pamphlet had the seal of St Mary's College along with its motto, *Spes Unica* (the Cross our [only hope]). The archival copy at St Mary's College has now faded from its bright red to a sedate pink. The cover reads 'What Is Contemplation [no question mark] by Thomas Merton, O.C.R.'. The title page has the same information as the cover with the addition of 'Printed at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Holy Cross, Indiana, 1948'.³⁰ On the final page of the twenty five page pamphlet is the date, 'Feast of the Annunciation [25 March], 1948, Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky'. Known for her ability to get things done expeditiously, Sister Madeleva delivered the published text within a few months from the time she had received the manuscript.

Merton was delighted with the printed version of the essay that Sister Madeleva sent to Gethsemani.

The booklets just arrived, and I assure you they are splendid. The red is just the thing. I have immediately resolved to send a whole lot of them to the *Catholic Worker*. The coat of arms certainly makes the booklet look dashing. How can I express my gratitude for your kindness? I am going to get permission from Father Abbot to sow the books all about, broadcast. Perhaps, as I mentioned, he might want to sell some at the gatehouse. In

28. Merton to Madeleva, Octave of All Saints. 8 November 1948, SMC Archives.

29. Madeleva to Merton, Feast of St Virgilius, 1 December 1948, SMC Archives.

30. On the verso of the title page are the words 'NIHIL OBSTAT, *Censor Librorum, Cum Permissu Superiorum*', with no evidence of an episcopal imprimatur.

that case what should we charge for them? ...

I was very glad to see the remarks on the Chicago talk [Madeleva's] and to hear that there was such a thirst for contemplation in the hearts of some. Really, I believe more and more people are beginning to hear Our Lord speaking to them and urging them on towards an interior life. I have been getting so many letters—some of them heart-rending—that show that Our Lord has been casting fire on the earth—and too often it has been quenched or smothered by misunderstanding. ...

Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your great kindness and hope you will not hesitate to tell me if there is anything at all I can do in return.³¹

Madeleva noted in her next letter that she had remembered Merton on the feast of St Thomas of Canterbury, 29 December, when he was ordained a subdeacon. She also returned to matters about the booklet.

I have wanted to write you about the little booklet much earlier but that was quite impossible. Even now I can send you only a note. That is to say that we are selling the booklet, 'What Is Contemplation' for fifty cents a piece. We have asked the printers to hold the type. We can have more books printed if you will have need of them or if we shall. The cost will be negligible in comparison with the first two thousand.³²

Madeleva wrote to Abbot Fox about the dissemination of *What Is Contemplation?*:

You perhaps are having much the same experience as we are in Brother Louis' little study, 'What Is Contemplation?' We are receiving many requests for the booklet and shall have to have a reprinting. You will probably want more copies also. If so, I should like to know approximately the number...

I have just written to the Copyright Office in Washington and have made application for the copyright to be taken out in the name of Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery. I hope that you approve of this.³³

Merton shared Madeleva's enthusiasm about the success of the booklet.

Reverend Father gives me the pleasant charge of answer [ing] your letter of the fourth, and of telling you that we would be delighted to have a thousand more copies of the pamphlet *What is Contemplation?* since you are reprinting it. I got a very nice note about it from Jacques Maritain the other day. He said he especially liked the sections on 'The Test' and 'Quietism'...

In a few days I hope to send you a copy of the special edition of a new book, *Seeds of Contemplation*. It will be an attempt to show my gratitude for all that you have done for us.³⁴

31. Merton to Madeleva, 14 December 1948, SMC Archives.

32. Madeleva to Merton, Feast of St Genevieve, 3 January 1949, SMC Archives.

33. Madeleva to Abbot Fox, First Friday, 4 February 1949, SMC Archives.

34. Merton to Madeleva, 15 February 1949, SMC Archives.

Madeleva was very pleased with *Seeds of Contemplation* and wrote Merton to say so.

The special edition of 'Seeds of Contemplation' has just come. The book is gloriously Cistercian in format and binding. As a piece of bookmaking it must be a great joy to you as it is to me. The inscription puts it among the rarest of all rare books. I shall have to exercise a special virtue of detachment sooner or later regarding it. I know, however, that it will be later...

At this moment, I have moved with your mind and thought through the first two chapters. I need not tell you how much I find of my own experience in it all. What you say of the sanctity of nature is sheer joy. I wait impatiently for the sowing of the other good seed in the garden of my mind.³⁵

Several weeks after Merton was ordained to the priesthood on 1 June 1949, he wrote to Madeleva about matters other than the pamphlet or *Seeds of Contemplation*, but he took the opportunity to say that he now had a way of repaying friends for their kindnesses by remembering them at the celebration of Mass.³⁶

What Is Contemplation? continues to pop up in the Merton–Madeleva correspondence. In September 1949 Merton wrote to Madeleva: 'First, I remember I have not yet thanked you for the consignment of new copies of the pamphlet which, they told me at the gate, arrived several months ago. You are most kind'. The Trappist also mentioned a Belgian woman who 'wanted to translate *What is Contemplation?* into French. I do not know if she has done it'.³⁷

Word of the pamphlet had spread afar. At the beginning of 1950, Madeleva, not beyond making some money for her institution, responded to an request from the manager at Burns & Oates, publishers in Dublin, Ireland.

Your inquiry regarding the price of a thousand copies of WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION? sent to the Abbey of Gethsemani...has been referred to us. The book was printed here with the permission of the Abbot of Gethsemane [sic] and all of their copies have been supplied by us. We have only five hundred copies available. We shall be glad to send them to you for \$150. We sell these books in our stores at fifty cents apiece and have provided the Trappist Monastery with copies without charge as one practical way of contributing to their great work. I think that at the price quoted you can realize a good return and provide your public with an excellent little work.³⁸

35. Madeleva to Merton, Feast of St. Athanasius, 2 May 1949, SMC Archives.

36. Merton to Madeleva, 17 June 1949, SMC Archives.

37. Merton to Madeleva, 3 September 1949, SMC Archives.

38. Madeleva to Mr. P. Reynolds, Feast of St Martina, 30 January 1950, SMC Archives.

In the spring of 1950 Frater (Brother) M. Thomas, sec (retary) apparently to Merton, sent a postcard to Sister Madeleva saying that 'Father Louis would like to know if you still have some copies of 'What is Contemplation'. If so could we have a thousand more. He is preparing a revised edition of this booklet and would like to know also if you wish to print any more or whether he should relieve you of the burden'.³⁹

Madeleva responded quickly to Frater Thomas.

We have eight hundred copies of WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION which we are sending on to you. This exhausts our supply with the exception of a small number which we are keeping for our own use here.

Much as I would like to print Father Louis' revised edition of the booklet we cannot undertake that expense now. We are engaged in a building program which will involve all our available funds. It will also requisition many intentions in your prayers.

Father Louis knows, I am sure, how proud we have been to publish this brochure and what a privilege we have considered it. He must remember the request for it which came from Burns and Oats [sic] in Dublin. Although we wrote to them telling them what copies we had available we had no reply. It may be that they will wish to buy the books from you later.⁴⁰

The details about the booklet still occupied Merton's attention. He wrote to Sister Madeleva about the copies of it that she had sent to Gethsemani.

This is a belated note to thank you for your kindness in sending us eight hundred of the last copies of *What is Contemplation?* It was not our intention to take all that you had! But thank you for all you have done. We will not reprint the book here, but I have sent it to Burns and Oates and that means the people in Ireland will have it. Then I have sent it to Italy where it will be translated.

At the moment I am working on a full length book on Contemplation, expanding the notions in the pamphlet and deepening the whole view of the subject, so I ask the help of your good prayers that the work may be brought to completion as God may will and dispose.⁴¹

Merton eventually sent to Madeleva a copy of the book on contemplation on which he had been working, *The Ascent to Truth*. She thanked him 'for remembering me and shall thank you repeatedly as I follow the ascent to Truth repeatedly [sic]'.⁴²

39. Frater M. Thomas to Madeleva, 22 April 1950, SMC Archives.

40. Madeleva to Frater M. Thomas, Feast of St Louis de Montfort, 28 April 1950, SMC Archives.

41. Merton to Madeleva, 3 June 1950, SMC Archives.

42. Madeleva to Merton, [Feast of] St Raphael, 24 October 1951, SMC Archives.

Correspondence about *What Is Contemplation?* was not yet over. Merton informed Madeleva in 1953 about a new printing of the pamphlet.

It has been a long time since I have written to you and I am glad to have an excuse to do so now. This is to tell you that the pamphlet 'What is Contemplation?' is being published in this country by a house called the Templegate Press. It is only by way of formality that I let you know, since you wrote me some time ago that you were no longer considering a reprint of it. I take this opportunity to thank you for your kindness in printing it in the first place.⁴³

Madeleva responded quickly as was her wont. Besides making sure that Merton got to know something of St Mary's School of Sacred Theology, she concluded the conversation concerning Merton's pamphlet on contemplation.

The word you sent me of your brochure, WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?, is of particular interest. The Templegate Press is a book shop operated by the husband of one of our finest graduates.⁴⁴ We are deeply interested in the whole project and enjoy visits from these enterprising printers occasionally. You must know what a privilege it was for us to print your study in the first place. We are happy now to put it in the hands of our children.⁴⁵

If the St Mary's College Archives tell the full story of the Merton-Madeleva correspondence, they did not correspond again until Madeleva wrote to Merton in 1962. Of the letters between 27 January 1962 and October 1963, Madeleva wrote four letters to Merton and he wrote three to her. The pamphlet *What Is Contemplation?* was not mentioned again in their correspondence after Madeleva's letter of 8 July 1953. Sister Madeleva Wolff who had been president of Saint Mary's College between 1934 and 1961 died suddenly on 25 July 1964.

Madeleva's letter to Merton on 27 February 1962 took Merton to task for an omission in his manuscript 'Ascetical and Mystical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism', a collection of lectures Merton had given at Gethsemani. She was much surprised that he had omitted from his lectures Dame Julian of Norwich and other fourteenth-century English mystics. Madeleva's complaint led to the frequently quoted letter in which Merton says among other things: Julian 'gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to

43. Merton to Madeleva, 3 July 1953, SMC Archives.

44. Mrs Jane Louise Driscoll Garvey, d. 22 August 2000, wife of Hugh M. Garvey. This information was supplied by her son, Mr Michael Garvey, Assistant Director of News and Information, Notre Dame University.

45. Madeleva to Merton, [Feast of] St Elizabeth of Portugal, 8 July 1953, SMC Archives.

be crazy about St John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian of Norwich if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle'.⁴⁶

The correspondence between Thomas Merton and Madeleva Wolff, concluded, it seems, with these last words of Madeleva to her Trappist friend: 'God fill your life with His. Yours in the Holy Spirit, Sister M. Madeleva, C.S.C.'. The collaboration of these two friends on *What Is Contemplation?* was a graced moment in the twentieth-century renewal of contemplative prayer. For Merton this pamphlet had a long life of revision and extension. On 24 April 1950, he noted in his journal the following: 'This afternoon I tried to work on the pamphlet, *What is Contemplation?* It is to be reprinted in England. I thought it would need to be changed, but now that I look at it, I am almost afraid it will have to be rewritten. I spent most of the afternoon with my head in my hands, scarcely able to think or move'.⁴⁷

Nine years later Merton was still wrestling with *What Is Contemplation?*. On 12 July 1959 there is this entry in his journal:

This week I have been rewriting 'What is Contemplation?' and of course it has come out three times as long and is a completely different book. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since 1948. How poor were all my oversimplified ideas—and how mistaken I was to make contemplation only part of man's life. For a contemplative his whole life is contemplation. The last part of the book is turning into a vocal protest against *vanitas monastica* [monastic pride]. I protest too much. It is a sign of weakness and bad conscience. I will have to revise all that.⁴⁸

The editor of this journal notes that the revised *What Is Contemplation?* appeared as 'The Inner Experience'. The latter was published in eight installments in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* during 1984–85. On 21 July 1959 Merton's journal shows him still at work on the revision of the pamphlet: 'Rewriting *What is Contemplation?* – making too many cracks about "large monasteries" which are "like factories"'.⁴⁹ On 9 August 1959, Merton has this to say about the pamphlet: 'The second ½ of the

46. Merton to Madeleva, 9 March 1962, SMC Archives. See also Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 274–75; William Shannon (ed.), *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 43.

47. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 433.

48. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–60; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 303.

49. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 308.

transformed version of *What is Contemplation?* (totally transformed) seems satisfactory. The 1st., in which much of the old is left, is poor'.⁵⁰

Harvest Time

At least from 1948 Merton had begun with his pamphlet *What Is Contemplation?* a public, if limited, conversation about contemplation, a conversation that grew to include many, many partners. The pamphlet preceded such undertakings as Merton's *The Ascent to Truth*, *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 'The Inner Experience' and, in one way or the other, nearly all that he subsequently wrote. One may note that already in *What Is Contemplation?* Merton had used the phrase 'Seeds of Contemplation' (p. 6).

The seeds of contemplation that Merton sowed more than a half century ago ought by now to be ready for harvest. One sign that Merton's seeds of contemplation have fallen on good ground and are ready for harvest is the widespread use by Christians of all kinds of contemplative prayer forms such as Centering Prayer⁵¹ and John Main's Christian Meditation. These contemplative prayer forms and other intimations of the search for a deeper interior life are all signs that Thomas Merton has found conversation partners in this new millennium who accept, directly or indirectly, his challenge to be aware that contemplation – that is, living fully and consciously in the presence of God – is their heritage whether they be nuns, monks, clergy or none of the above. As it was for Merton, it is now for Christians a matter not of survival but of prophetic contemplative prayer⁵² that issues in justice and peace.⁵³

50. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 316.

51. Thomas Keating, OCSO, ascribes to Thomas Merton the possible origins of the term 'Centering Prayer'. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 16.

52. See Hart (ed.), *Survival or Prophecy?*, p. 175.

53. For Merton's realization that action and works of justice flow from contemplation see the quotation from Merton that concludes Lawrence S. Cunningham's, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 209.