

# An Exchange of letters

Jill Robson

## **Introduction**

In 1962, at the age of 18, as a rather pious young woman who felt she had a religious vocation to be a Carmelite, I wrote to Thomas Merton and received a reply. I kept his reply for 3 years, along with other precious letters relating to explorations of my vocation. I threw all these letters away in the summer of 1965, prior to getting married – believing that that period of my life was past. In 1969, I heard from an old Carmelite prioress friend with whom I had kept in touch that Merton had died, and that they were calling in all his letters. She knew I had a letter from him. I was shocked to hear of his sudden and tragic death, and was full of remorse for throwing his letter away. Almost 50 years later, that regret still lingers. But I do have a vivid and quite detailed memory of my letter and his reply.

## **A Little Background**

I was born into a solidly Anglican family who were regular church-goers in a fairly conventional 'low church' parish in a respectable village north of London. My parents' religion was heartfelt, but undemonstrative, and certainly not something to be discussed. I had found confirmation classes deeply frustrating – in that we were given small 'tasters' of what religion, prayer, etc., could be about, but no solid satisfying food. A little later, due to the vagaries of educational provision, I went to a convent school, arriving in the fourth form. I had hardly ever spoken to nuns before, let alone been taught by them. I was determined to remain an Anglican, and

not be swayed by these *Roman* Catholics. I felt very suspicious of them.

I gradually began to see how the religious teaching of the gospels was taken extremely seriously by the nuns, and lived out in detail. I began to feel: 'Here is real solid food.' Over the next couple of years, my spiritual appetite was fed with the wide and deep riches of the Catholic Church, and I was getting a real taste for the classic texts of the mystical tradition. I had a forty-five minute bus journey to and from school every day, which gave me a chance to gobble down *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Teresa of Avila, Thomas à Kempis, John of the Cross, Richard Rolle, St Augustine, etc., as well as the works of more recent writers – Theresa of Lisieux and Thomas Merton.

I had become very good friends with another girl Noreen who was a cradle Catholic. Our teenage secrets were that we both felt we had a religious vocation. We were both attracted to the contemplative life of prayer, rather than the active life of good works. Reading Thomas Merton's *Elected Silence* – the edited English version of *The Seven Storey Mountain* – was a really important part of our journeys. It certainly was for me. I read his autobiography with all the heart-fluttering recognition of a love-struck teenager reading a romantic novel. I saw all sorts of parallels between his journey into the Church and the cloister and mine. We gulped down several other of Merton's books about the monastic life. Through reading his books, Merton became a friend and a guide.

At first, I thought I would be an Anglican contemplative nun – I was aware such communities existed, although I didn't know any myself. Noreen and I had been doing quite a lot of surreptitious 'convent trotting' and had met various Carmelites and other religious. When our classmates were having assignations with boys, we were sneaking out to convents. Slowly I realised I was being drawn to the Catholic Church.

When I announced my intention of becoming a Catholic, my father hit the roof and refused to give his permission. I would have to wait until I was 21 years old (the age of majority in 1961). I was shocked and heart-broken, for I knew I would have to wait a further 2 years after being received into the Catholic Church before I could enter religious life as a Carmelite.

My life at home became very uncomfortable. I was in the Sixth Form by now. I decided I would not stay at home for another year and a half in order to do A-levels and try for a university place. Instead I would apply to do nurse training at a London teaching hospital so that I could spend

my life usefully while I was waiting and, importantly, so that I could leave home earlier. My parents were relieved; they were not very sure about a university education for girls, but they recognised and understood nurse training as 'a good thing' for a young woman to do.

So it was that I applied to University College Hospital in London. I was interviewed by the formidable Matron, Miss Downton, who among other things asked me what I had been reading – she liked intelligent girls. I told her I had been reading Thomas Merton. She knew of his works, and we had quite a lively chat about Merton. (I later discovered that she was herself a devout church attender at All Souls, Langham Place.) This was the Spring of 1962; I was given a place for January 1963 entry to the School of Nursing at UCH.

### Summer 1962

So in the Summer of 1962 I was impatiently marking time. I was in love with God, and drawn to the contemplative life. I was trying to be patient and to accept this set-back as the testing and obstacle that many Carmelites spoke of as often littering the paths of those who were drawn to Carmel. In July, I went to Belgium for a couple of weeks, doing the second half of an exchange with Claude, a doctor's daughter who lived in Namur. She had stayed with us at Easter. Claude and I had almost nothing in common: she was interested in fashion, clothes, cinema and pop music, and she didn't read for pleasure. Her family were nominally Catholic, but not practising. They got this studious, pious, English girl who kept going off to Mass, and to visit old churches. Actually they were very tolerant, letting me go off and look at Gothic architecture and castle ruins to my heart's content. With the help of a very nice woman in the local tourist information office, I found the local Carmelite Monastery, which I visited – finding a kind Carmelite welcome.

Now, during this summer when I felt pretty alone and bereft, I found Thomas Merton's story of his searchings and wanderings around before finally finding the Cistercians very comforting. I was encouraged not just by his story, but also by his tone of voice: it felt so personal, as though I knew him. So I thought about taking the risk of writing to him. I was not sure. So I said to God: I will do it if I see a statue or picture of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on her Feast Day, 16<sup>th</sup> July. Well, the 16<sup>th</sup> was the day I visited the nice Carmelites in a suburb of Namur. Unsurprisingly, I did see a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, who in a motherly sort of way was

standing in a niche overlooking the door to the parlour. That was enough for me. I decided to write to him. What I didn't know at the time was that Merton himself had a particular devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and that it was to her that his hermitage was dedicated.

### My letter to Fr Louis: July 1962

In my letter I told him something about myself, how I had loved reading his books, and that I had talked of his works at my interview for nurse training. I wrote of my feeling of vocation and of being drawn to the contemplative Carmelite life; also of my conversion, my parents' opposition, and of how I would have to wait. I knew that he was interested in English medieval Cistercian abbeys, so I told him that I was too, and that I was studying Medieval History at A level, and how I loved visiting Cistercian abbey ruins, thinking of what they had been like in their Pre-Reformation heyday. So I enclosed a postcard of Rievaulx Abbey, and sent my letter off addressed to Fr Louis Merton O.C.S.O. (Noreen and I knew all about the right letters to put after someone's name for each Order!)

### His reply: August 1962

About 5 or 6 weeks later, there arrived an airmail envelope with the address of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, printed on it. Inside was a short letter, typed on a half-sized oblong piece of paper, with the Abbey's address printed on it. In the letter Fr Louis thanked me for my letter, and said something encouraging about my contemplative vocation. He told me that a couple of days earlier, the previous Sunday, he had met a local (Catholic) bus-driver/postman (something like that) who had come to visit him at the monastery with his daughter, who wanted to be a Carmelite and hoped to enter a Carmel in (?)Louisiana.

He said he was very pleased to have the postcard of Rievaulx Abbey, as he had never seen a picture of it before. He had put the postcard up in the Novitiate for the novices to see. I think – I am less sure of this – that he made some remark about English medieval Cistercians. He said he would pray for me. The letter was signed by hand – I think the signature was *Louis Merton OCSO*.

My memory is that the tone of the letter was of a warm, friendly, encouraging reply. It was personal, not in any way patronising or stuffy or formal. It was serious, but friendly. The underlying message was that

contemplation was an important vocation to be pursued.

I felt very chuffed and privileged to have received a reply. Noreen and some of the nuns I knew were very impressed. I treasured the letter as special.

### Postscript: 2017

Over the following three years, I did indeed do a nurse training at UCH. The big London hospital full of illness, births and deaths opened the eyes of the convent school girl. During that period, I realised my 'vocation' had faded away – or so it seemed. Young men, marriage and motherhood began to have new attractions. Then I met a very nice young post-graduate engineer who after a party kindly took me back across London to the Nurses' Home. Two years later, on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, we were married; I was received into the Catholic Church on return from honeymoon. I cheerfully jumped into marriage and motherhood.

About seven years later, after visiting another Cistercian monastery, the contemplative bit of me re-awoke. Merton has continued to appear in my life at different times, and in different guises. Often, as the Quakers say, he has 'spoken to my condition' – as yet another facet of this extraordinary man comes into focus for me.

Some years ago, when reading *The Intimate Merton*, I was astonished to see in a photograph of Merton teaching in the Novitiate that in the background there was a notice board hanging on the wall – with what appeared to be postcards pinned on it. Suddenly, what he had said to me about putting my postcard up in the Novitiate came back to me. Was one of those pale blurs in the image the postcard I sent? The effect of all this on my life is that I now keep almost every letter I receive, although I may never have such a 'pearl' again.

**Dr Jill Robson** is a retired research psychologist. She has a particular interest in the visual imagination and 'special' visual experiences – in particular, 'visions' and moments of heightened and intense visual perception, often with a 'spiritual' dimension. She is attempting to write a book about such experiences. She lives in Hope in Derbyshire, trying to cultivate silence and solitude.

**Note:** Possibly Dr Robson's card is one of those depicted in the cover photograph—the very image that is included in *The Intimate Merton*.