

PATRICK HART

## A WITNESS TO LIFE

It is not without significance that Thomas Merton should have entered the Abbey of Gethsemani at a time when Frederic Dunne was Abbot. I have often reflected on this stroke of Divine Providence in bringing Merton's first Abbot from a family of professional printers in Zanesville, Ohio (coincidentally from the same town where Ruth Jenkins, Merton's mother, was born). The fact that Abbot Frederic Dunne had been a book printer and binder by profession made him profoundly sensitive to the importance of the printed word. To the young Thomas Merton, arriving at Gethsemani on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941, to begin his novitiate training, the Abbot was predisposed to be appreciative of his gifts. At the time Abbot Frederic confided enthusiastically to one of the brothers: "We have a *real* poet and writer in the novitiate."<sup>1</sup>

The Abbot, as a consequence of his great desire to make the Trappist-Cistercians known in the United States, Fr. Louis (the name he was known by in the community) soon after his novitiate to translate biographies of early Cistercian saints from Latin and French. Since Merton knew Latin well,

---

<sup>1</sup> Personal recollections of a monk of Gethsemani.

and had majored in modern languages at Cambridge and Columbia, he was well equipped for just this sort of work. Thus, long before Vatican II and its emphasis on monks and religious returning to the sources, to study the works of their founders and early saints, Fr. Louis was busy translating obscure lives of Cistercian saints and thus becoming acquainted not only with the Cistercian Fathers of the twelfth century, but going back to our monastic ancestors, the pre-Benedictine dwellers of the Egyptian desert, to the early Benedictine monks of Gaul and Italy, as well as the Irish monks and hermits of the fifth and sixth centuries.

My earliest recollections of Thomas Merton when I entered Gethsemani a decade later, in June 1951, were shortly after Merton had been made Master of the Students. He had access to the old vault (where all the valuable manuscripts and rare books were stored) as an office and counseling room for the students. It was a room close to the Guest House refectory in the front wing of the old quadrangle of the monastery. Each time he came walking jauntily down the hall to his vault cell, he pulled out an enormous key, nearly a foot in length, making great gestures as he unlocked the big iron inner doors of the fireproof vault. He usually had a student with him, or one might be waiting outside the door, doubtless for spiritual direction. He gave one the impression of being a happy and spontaneously friendly monk.

As Master of Students at Gethsemani, Fr. Louis very soon began to emphasize the need for more opportunities for solitude and to help the young monks in their desire for contemplative prayer. With about two hundred monks in the community at the time, it was difficult enough to find a quiet place to be alone, since we were only permitted outside the relatively small enclosure if work in the fields or the vast woods brought us there.

During the course of an official visitation from the Abbot General of the Order, Fr. Louis made a strong plea to have the enclosure extended to include a small wooded knoll on the east side of the enclosure wall. To everyone's great surprise, he was successful in this attempt, and thus on Sundays and feast days the students were allowed to go out to the woods for several hours of prayer or *lectio divina* or simple relaxation in this beautiful natural setting. Not long afterward the novices were likewise given a similar permission, and a wooded area and lake south of the enclosure wall was reserved for them.

This was meant to give the young monks more opportunities for solitude and thus restore the contemplative dimension to the monastic life which had been obscured formerly by an overemphasis on penance and work and an overly ornate liturgy. Aside from his gifts and abilities as a translator, his knowledge of French, German, Spanish and Italian put him in contact with many of the new currents of thought in monastic and theological circles long before others in the community were aware of their existence. He kept abreast of all the finest journals emanating from Europe at this time. As it developed, Merton began to initiate his own monastic renewal at Gethsemani in the early 1950's by giving conferences on the Cistercian Fathers. This work brought him into direct contact with the four great "Cistercian evangelists": St. Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Guerric of Igny and Aelred of Rievaulx, as well as many lesser-known monastic writers. He went far beyond De Rance and the Reform of La Trappe to the earliest Cistercian Fathers of the twelfth century. Naturally, this was received as a breath of fresh air for the community at Gethsemani, and soon spread to other monastic communities in the United States and abroad.

In 1955 Thomas Merton was appointed Master of Novices, after having been Master of the Students for just four years. He was to hold this responsible position for another ten years. During this period he had a tremendous influence on the lives of the young men who entered the monastery, and along with the Abbot he was actually responsible for their monastic training and formation. This enabled him to view, sometimes critically, certain methods used in the past, and thus he launched a novitiate training program of his own.

Merton delved into the monastic sources, studying the Cistercian Fathers with the novices and discussing them in open dialogue. Thanks to his insistence, more time was given to *lectio divina*, although manual labor was not neglected. Merton felt, however, that in the past too much emphasis had been placed on manual labor, to the detriment of a fruitful *lectio divina*, meditative reading, study and personal prayer.

Notes of the talks and conferences by Father Louis were subsequently typed up, mimeographed and circulated to many other communities, once the monastic grapevine spread the word of Merton's pioneering efforts at Gethsemani. Thus, before long, copies of the notes on "monastic orientation" which covered the years from 1951 to 1955 were bound in six volumes and circulated to Benedictine and Cistercian houses in this country and

abroad. Beginning with his first year as Novice Master, there were the "Lectures on Cassian" which were soon followed by his own commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict. About this time his introductory course on the Scriptures in the monastic tradition (especially St. Paul) was given and two volumes of notes on the "Liturgical Seasons" appeared. In 1961 he launched a series of conferences on "Ascetical and Mystical Theology" and in 1963 began a course on "The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology." Conferences during 1963 and 1964 were on "Pre-Benedictine Monasticism," including the Celtic monastic tradition that he found so fascinating. This gives some idea of the broad terrain covered by Merton in these monastic conferences.

Thomas Merton at the very outset of any discussion on monastic renewal was careful to make the proper distinctions in regard to a renewal that was appropriate for monastic communities in contrast to that which was more proper for active religious congregations and societies. In a memorandum on monastic renewal, which was published posthumously, he made this point quite clear: "In monastic reform, care should be taken first of all to maintain or restore the special character of the monastic vocation. The monastic life must not be evaluated in terms of active religious life, and the monastic orders should not be equated with other religious institutes, clerical or otherwise."<sup>2</sup> He went on to stress the point that the monastic community does not ideally exist for the sake of any apostolic or educational work, even as a secondary end. "The works of the monk are not justified by their external results but only by their relevance to his monastic life alone with God. They are meaningful insofar as they are appropriate to a life out of this world, which is also a life of compassion for those who remain in the world, and of prayer for the salvation of the world."<sup>3</sup>

When discussing monastic renewal, Merton always pointed out the fact that the doors (and windows) of the coenobitic monastic community must be opened out onto the desert. He believed strongly that there must be room for those monks who felt a growing need for a greater measure of silence and solitude in their lives as they matured in the monastic life. "Monastic superiors should be ready to see and encourage in their subjects any exceptional and genuine desire for a deeper life of prayer and for a return to

<sup>2</sup> Th. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. by Patrick Hart, Mission, Kan.: Sheed, Andrews, and McMeel, 1977, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

a simpler monastic way."<sup>4</sup> Merton pointed out that it was the Abbot's responsibility to foster the spiritual growth of each member of his community. "The Abbot is responsible to God for the development and true sanctification of his monks. When therefore they believe they should seek a simpler, more solitary and more fervent life of prayer, they should not be prevented from investigating reasonable possibilities of doing so... but should be helped in various ways to test their abilities and prove the reality of their higher vocation."<sup>5</sup>

Thus Merton saw the possibility of a more solitary life within the context of the traditional monastic community as an important point in renewal. It was a matter of giving precedence to the personal charism of an individual monk over that of the institution. In other words, a true eremitical vocation that might develop and grow within the coenobitic community should be encouraged if it were considered authentic by a monk's spiritual director and his superior. Merton wrote a number of articles on the history of eremitism within the *ordo monasticus*, showing clearly that from its very beginning some monks of the Cistercian Order, after many years in the community, in later life became hermits and solitaries. This was even in evidence at La Trappe during the time of Rance. These published pleas for a renewal of the ancient tradition paved the way for an eventual approval by the General Chapter of the Order allowing monks this option after being well-tried in the community, and with the Abbot's approval, as St. Benedict in his Rule provides.

Merton's Abbot, Dom James Fox, during the General Chapter of 1965 successfully presented the issue of the possibility of hermits within the Order. His efforts bore fruit, and within a few years Dom James himself resigned his office as Abbot of Gethsemani and became a hermit on the property of Gethsemani. Consequently, the hermit vocation is accepted in monastic communities, although it will always remain a rare calling and few will leave the ranks of the community for the solitary combat of the desert.

One may legitimately ask the question: How was Merton able to keep in touch with all the various monastic experiments and efforts at renewal in other areas of the world, isolated as he was in his monastery in the hills of Kentucky? In actual fact, if one examines his voluminous correspondence over the years, one sees a large segment directed to monks and nuns of

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

Europe and America, Benedictines, Camaldolese, Carthusians and of course Cistercians. For example, his correspondence with the eminent Benedictine scholar and historian, Father Jean Leclercq of Luxembourg, dates back to 1950 and continued unabated until the time of Merton's death in Bangkok, Thailand in 1968. The early letters are full of questions about new experiments in the foundations in Africa and Asia.

In this country the experiment of Dom Damasus Winzen at Mount Savior near Elmira, New York, impressed Merton deeply. Mount Savior symbolized for him what was best in the early monastic experiments in this country in the early 1950's. Dom Damasus believed in a simple type of Benedictine monastery, without parishes or a school and/or seminary attached. Dom Damasus, however, held firmly to traditional monastic hospitality and consequently provided for a large guest house. But he believed it essential that monks earn their living by their own hands by farming, with their life centering around a simple but beautiful vernacular liturgy. And above all, he envisioned only one class of monks. (This idea eventually found favor with other Benedictines and the Cistercian Order as a whole, when their General Chapters abolished the two classes of monks, thus unifying their respective communities.)

It was the policy at Mount Savior to ordain only enough priests to *take care* of the liturgical needs of the community, unlike the prevalent custom in Trappist-Cistercian monasteries at that time. A number of Merton's letters to a monk of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, touch on the subject of monks remaining simple monks, rather than clerics destined for the priesthood almost automatically. Writing to Father Ronald Roloff concerning monks not seeking ordination to the priesthood, in a letter dated November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1962, he observed: "Already for some time we have been insisting that the important thing in the choice of vocations for our choir monks was the monastic vocation, not the call to the priesthood. Also, many of the novices have freely admitted that they really prefer to be simple monks and not priests."<sup>6</sup> He pointed out to his correspondent that until a few months previous we had not tolerated this, but since the recent General Chapter it was agreed to try it as a part of the new monastic program. He went on to say: "Hence, we now have a half-dozen newly professed who are going ahead with the explicit intention of remaining simple monks and not becoming

<sup>6</sup> Th. Merton, *An Exchange of Letters on Monastic Questions*, Gethsemani, Ky.: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1963, p. 24.

priests. They are the best in the house actually. I do not know if they will all manage to have their desire; some may have to be ordained later, just because they do have qualities that make for superiorship, etc. But for my part I would personally support such a one all the way and would encourage him to remain a simple monk insofar as it was possible."<sup>7</sup>

Another subject treated in this same letter was that of a new approach to monastic formation at Gethsemani. It spanned a longer period than in the past, and was geared more specifically for monks, rather than seminarians or priests in the secular ministry. In other words, these studies would concentrate on subjects germane to the monastic vocation: Scripture, patrology and a kind of monastic theology tailored specifically for monks. Instead of three years of simple vows, the Order began to allow for as much as six years. He explained: "After the novitiate, all the choir monks, whether they will eventually go on to the priesthood or not, *continue their purely monastic formation*. This is what we all here consider to be the really important point. They will not begin clerical studies for at least three years after the novitiate."<sup>8</sup> Merton then outlined a pet plan of his own to develop a monastic pre-philosophy course which would have nothing to do with the manuals, "but will be a sort of *divina* of texts from St. Anselm, St. Augustine, Boethius, and so on. This would be a very interesting course and very important. This would not be until the third year. Before that they will take nothing but Scripture, monastic history, the Fathers and a language."<sup>9</sup>

Personal relationships within the monastic community were another very important consideration in Merton's view of renewal. Writing on the subject of "Openness and Cloister" he concluded that in the past the structures of the contemplative life had acquired too much rigidity and uniformity. He felt there was too much emphasis placed on exterior regularity and on uniform observance which tended to stifle personal development and did not take sufficient account of a monk's personal needs. "Contemplative openness must develop not only in relation to the outside world, but also, and above all, within the community itself. Free and spontaneous contacts between the religious themselves are absolutely necessary. Religious must communicate frankly and sincerely in a personal way and not

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

only in the set of formalized relationships which have been favored in the past."<sup>10</sup> Merton went on to stress the importance of relationships being more "natural" and human, which inevitably would result in a greater freedom and openness in communicating with one another.

But as in so many other cases, Merton balanced this very well with an insistence on a measure of solitude and silence for those whose spiritual growth demanded more of this: "On the other hand, to balance this freedom of communication, the legitimate needs of individual religious for greater solitude and silence must also be respected." He felt that a monastic community (or any community for that matter) which is growing in charity and self-understanding will spontaneously recognize the special needs of its members, and in a spirit of charity strive to accommodate them. Merton added that the mature contemplative (who may not always necessarily be the most brilliant or gifted person in the community) "can contribute a great deal to the common life by his or her silent and solitary prayer. Even those who are not yet fully formed need the experience of periods of solitude and silence in order to grow in the life of prayer. Contemplative communities should recognize the value of encouraging these personal aspirations."<sup>11</sup>

Turning for a moment to Merton's poetry, his early Gethsemani poems celebrate monastic life in all its aspects: "Trappists, Working," "Trappist Abbey: Matins," and "Evening: Zero Weather." One realizes the profound effect that the liturgical life had on this young monk, and how it was intended to transform the entire life of the monk. These poems reflect the early Merton perfectly at peace in his natural setting in the hills of Kentucky. In "A Practical Program for Monks," one of his later poems (written about 1958, consequently after he had been four years Master of Juniors and two years as Master of Novices), the poet complains about the attention accorded to externals, not without a bit of humor. The poem is a protest against an overemphasis on rules and regulations which tend to distort the simple contemplative life of solitude and prayer. Merton's frustration shows through in this poem as he ironically contrasts the highly structured, regimented life with the ideal contemplative life:

<sup>10</sup> Th. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, New York: Doubleday, 1971, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 141-42.

Plenty of bread for everyone between prayers and the psalter: will you recite another?

*Merci, and Miserere.*

Always mind both the clock and the Abbot until eternity.

*Miserere.*

Details of the Rule are all liquid and solid. What canon was the first to announce regimentation before us? Mind the step on the way down!<sup>12</sup>

Another area of monastic renewal about which Merton wrote and spoke was traditional monastic hospitality. Before ecumenical dialogue became fashionable, Merton began to see small groups of non-Catholic seminarians and college students, as well as artists, poets, intellectuals, and pacifists, including non-Christians. Among the latter were Zen Buddhist monks, Sufis, Jewish rabbis and a host of others. Merton felt that it was important for monks to have some contact with these people, who in turn would influence others of their own group and beyond. Actually, he began meeting with groups of Baptist and Episcopalian and Disciples of Christ seminarians in the late 1950's and early 1960's. He made himself available to them, usually giving them an address of welcome, telling them something of the monastic life, and then opening the forum to discussion, which was always quite lively. He became very popular in this area, and as a consequence after several years had to call for help from some of the other monks. Having come from a non-Catholic background himself, and with his tremendous interest in Eastern monasticism, he was able to empathize with these groups in a way many other monks could not, which helps to explain his singular success.

Merton summarized succinctly his thought in this matter in "Letter to a Priest," which was published in *Seeds of Destruction*, concerning the Rahnerian diaspora situation: "What I am trying to say about the monk is perhaps too paradoxical and too outrageous to be clear, let alone acceptable: but I think the monastic state should be one of complete liberty from the pressures and confusions of 'the world' in the bad sense of the word, and even from the more 'worldly' side of the Church, so that the monk, isolated and at liberty, can on the one hand give himself to God and to the Word of God, attain to a truly Christian understanding of the needs and sufferings of the men of his time (from his special vantage point of poverty, labor, solitude

<sup>12</sup> Th. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1978.

and insecurity) and also enter into dialogue with those who are not monks and not even Christians."<sup>13</sup>

He constantly stressed the need for monks in their efforts at renewal to examine and return to the sources of their tradition. Writing on the subject of ecumenism and monastic renewal, Merton was later to explain: "The problem of monastic renewal, at the deepest level, is theological, and it is at this point that the monks are finally coming face to face with Luther's challenge. In 'returning to the sources' they are only doing in a more thorough and systematic way what Luther himself did by reexamining his vocation in the light of the Gospel and the Pauline Epistles."<sup>14</sup> Merton then pointed out that monks and nuns today, studying the original monastic sources, seen in their historical and cultural contexts, must begin to ask themselves much more disturbing questions than simply those which are endemic to their monastic observance: "It is no longer just a matter of recovering a genuine understanding of monastic enclosure, silence, worship, fasting and trying to adapt these to a modern situation. The very concept of a vowed and cloistered life, of a life devoted to prayer apart from the world, of silence and asceticism, has to be reexamined."<sup>15</sup>

Merton then sounded a warning to facile proponents of renewal, fearing that those not well grounded in a solid monastic tradition would end up discarding things of perennial value, thus impoverishing and trivializing monasticism: "Let us admit that quite possibly if we are too ready to sacrifice silence, solitude etc., we may quickly find ourselves deserted by vocations."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, he believed a certain amount of adaptation was necessary to meet the needs of the time, thus making the monastic life viable for many who would not otherwise be attracted to this way. "But also if by relinquishing my own favorite interpretation of what the perfect life of silence and contemplation ought to be and submitting to certain adaptations I can make the monastic life possible for others who would not otherwise be able to live it, then it would seem that charity itself ought to tell me

<sup>13</sup> Th. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 182.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Th. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. by Patrick Hart, Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977, p. 131. Cf. also Patrick Hart (ed.), *Thomas Merton/ Monk. A Monastic Tribute*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974, pp. 173-193.

that this need of others is an appeal to my own generosity, in a way very different from that which I anticipated when I made my vows."<sup>17</sup>

Speaking about the monastic dialogue with the world and the relevance of monastic life for the future, Merton insisted that everything depended on the *quality* of the lives of the monks today, and the seriousness with which they examined their witness in terms of the ensuing generations of monks: "Monastic life will remain relevant to the future, specifically in the next two generations, insofar as monasteries open themselves to dialogue and exchange with the intellectual community. But for this dialogue to be meaningful, the intellectual community must find in the monasteries both a monastic reality (people of depth and simplicity who have acquired the values of monasticism by living them) and openness to social reality of the twentieth century."<sup>18</sup>

Again, Merton emphasized the need for inner transformation, for without a real and deep spiritual renewal, the exterior changes would avail but little. He saw this combining of real monastic depth and openness to the living intellectual and cultural forces of our times as requiring a special charism. In the thought of Merton, a charism was a gift one must struggle with to deserve as well as preserve. He felt the most basic and important monastic charism is the essential calling to prayer and renunciation and inner transformation. Toward the end of his life, Merton became more and more concerned with the subject of transformation of consciousness, which was in current usage at that time.

If monks were not genuinely authentic and deep men of prayer and at the same time men of compassion and concern for the anguish of the world, Merton felt their witness would be of little value and perhaps cause more harm than good to those coming to seek their counsel and help. He suggested in this context: "If our monasteries are truly centers of deeply experienced monastic life, those who are most alive in the outside world will spontaneously come to share our silence and discuss with us their own fruitful insights. It is this exchange and participation which I believe to be of decisive importance for monasteries. But it all depends on solitude and prayer."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *The Monastic Journey*, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

Writing on the necessity of the individual monk to begin where he found himself, and not depend on or wait for communal renewal, Merton stated realistically that what one needs to do is start a conversion and a new life oneself, insofar as one can. "My work for renewal takes place strictly in my own situation here, not as a struggle with the institution from which I am relatively free now as a hermit, but in an effort to renew my life of prayer in a whole new context, with a whole new understanding of what the contemplative life means and demands. Creativity has to begin with me and I cannot sit here wasting time urging the monastic institution to become creative and prophetic..."<sup>20</sup>

This realistic approach was typical of Merton in his later years, after many of his earlier idealistic illusions evaporated. In the last analysis it all depended on how each monk personally responded to his call, his special graces of vocation. The point was well made in the following passage: "What each one of us has to do, and what I have to do, is to buckle down and really start investigating new possibilities in our own life; and if new possibilities mean radical changes, all right. Maybe we need radical changes for which we have to struggle and sweat some blood. Above all we must be more attentive to God's way and God's time, and give everything when it is really demanded. But, on the other hand, let these be real changes and not just neurotic upheaval."<sup>21</sup> The essential monastic experience, as Merton saw it, was centered on love. He knew from monastic tradition, and especially from the Cistercian twelfth-century writers like St. Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, that ideally the monastic life was considered a "school of love" or "charity's own school." He resonates the teachings of the Cistercian Fathers in the following passage: "Love alone is enough, regardless of whether it produces anything. In the so-called contemplative life, love is sufficient to itself. It does of course work, it does of course do things; but in our life the emphasis is on love above everything else, on faith above everything else. Especially faith above works."<sup>22</sup>

As Merton grew older and wiser in the monastic life, he depended more and more on the mercy of God, as he often confessed. That is why he loved so much the English mystic, Julian of Norwich, whom he preferred in his

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 338.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 374.

later years to the Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, with whom he was so taken in his early monastic life. "The characteristic of our life is that it makes us realize how much we depend directly on God by faith. How much we depend directly upon the mercy of God, how much we depend upon receiving everything directly through Him, and not through the mediation of our own activity. So that while we continue to act, we act in such a way that this consciousness of dependence on God is greater, more continual, more all-embracing and more satisfactory than it is in the active life. This is what we really seek."<sup>23</sup>

After the appearance of a provocative article in the *National Catholic Reporter* in December 1967 by Colman McCarthy, Merton wrote a letter to the editor early in 1968 in which he said: "The monastic charism is a charism of freedom: including the freedom not to count in the world and not to get visible results in it. The freedom not to have to talk if you don't want to. Not to have to pronounce judgment on anything. Or contrariwise, to speak out without hesitation when you think something has to be said."<sup>24</sup>

Merton then spelled out the implications of the monk's charism of freedom: "Above all the monastic charism is a freedom from set routine official tasks, a freedom from the treadmill of putting out a superfluous religious magazine, of preaching retreats that are driving nuns stark mad, of bullying married couples..."<sup>25</sup> Rather, Merton got to the heart of the monastic vocation by saying that a monk does not have to do any of these things, not simply because he has a secret nobody else possesses, but rather "because he is liberated from the need to produce anything by which to justify himself in the eyes of other men. He is not accountable to them for his life because it is something that cannot be drawn up on a balance sheet for anybody's inspection. The 'solitude' of the monk is the loneliness of being accountable directly to God for something he does not quite understand himself."<sup>26</sup>

At the root of this emphasis on the solitude of the monk, the person of contemplative prayer, was Merton's firm conviction that it was more important for the monk *to be* than to do or to act, especially when he was spe-

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, pp. 374-75.

<sup>24</sup> Th. Merton, *Regaining the Old Monastic Charism*, Letter to the Editor, *National Catholic Reporter*, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1968, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

aking of the monastic ideal in a time of renewal and change. He wanted to be sure that critics of renewal kept this in mind. He disagreed with many critics of monasticism who would have monks abandon their monastic solitude and become more involved in the active ministry, and thus open the doors of the monastery to the world, taking a much more cautious view. He did, indeed, see a need for more openness than in the past, so that guests could come to the monastery for retreats or perhaps to obtain help in their prayer life by those qualified among the monks to advise. But he was opposed to the idea of turning the monastery into a counseling center or a mini-parish church. The monastery had its own particular function in the mystical body of Christ, the Church, and as long as it was faithful to this charism, the more profitable it would be for the Church and the world.

Thomas Merton certainly believed that renewal must come from the ranks of monks and nuns, the grassroots, rather than from the higher echelons. Writing on the Council and monasticism shortly after the close of Vatican II, Merton stated: "While the major superiors and the competent Councils and Chapters must of course finally decide what adaptations are to be put into effect, in accordance with the Rule and Constitutions, it is nevertheless essential that all the members should actively participate in such tasks as: estimation of the meaning and value of their vocation, clarification of the relevance of their particular religious ideal for themselves and their time, evaluation of the contribution they might make to the understanding and aid of the contemporary world, defining the relevance in a present-day context of certain observances belonging to the past, and bringing to the attentions of Superiors the real everyday needs and problems of subjects."<sup>27</sup>

The theological implications were clear to Merton who saw this approach as not only pragmatic, but in accord with the new perspectives on the Church. Indeed, we must recognize that "all true renewal must be the work of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit cannot be said to work exclusively 'from the top down manifesting the will of God only to higher superiors and, further down, granting to subjects no light but only the strength and grace to accept this will, as it comes down the chain of command, with total obedience and blind faith. The new emphasis in the theology of the Church sees the Holy Spirit working *in the*

<sup>27</sup> Th. Merton, *The Council and Monasticism*, in: *The Impact of Vatican II*, ed. by Jude P. Dougherty, New York: Herder, 1966, p. 51.

*collective* and 'collegial' effort of all, each in his own sphere and according to his own function in the Church."<sup>28</sup>

Those who knew Thomas Merton very well recognized that they were faced with a complex personality, and his statements on various subjects sometimes tended to be contradictory at first glance. Monastic renewal was no exception, and in reading some of his remarks on the subject, one feels that there was a certain ambiguity which he himself failed to face squarely. For example, Merton spoke passionately of the need for renewal: "Renewal is something deeper and more total than reform. Reform was proper to the needs of the Church at the time of the Council of Trent, where the whole structure of religious life had collapsed, even though there was still a great deal of vitality among religious. Today the structure and organization is firm and intact: what is lacking is a deep and fruitful understanding of the real meaning of religious life."<sup>29</sup> He went on to define renewal as a restoration of authentic meaning to forms and acts that must recover their full value as sacred signs. Yet in a talk he gave to some rather conventional nuns in Calcutta shortly before his death, he deplored some trends in renewal in the United States, such as "a collapse of formal structures that were no longer properly understood; a repudiation of genuine tradition, discipline, contemplation, trivializing the monastic life."<sup>30</sup>

These are rather strong statements for a proponent of renewal in the monastic world. Again, one must consider the audience to whom he was addressing himself. Merton accommodated himself easily to his audience, and began where he found people. It is certainly true to say that his tone was quite different when speaking to a group of revolutionary students in Santa Barbara at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. It must be admitted that basically Thomas Merton was a man of tradition, which he knew well and loved. Yet, he was not a monk who believed in preserving the past for the sake of preservation. Perhaps only someone steeped in authentic monastic tradition as Merton was can really speak out meaningfully on the subject of monastic renewal. Needless to say, he did this without hesitation, but here he minces no words: "Certain structures need to be

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, pp. 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Th. Merton, *A Conference on Prayer*, in: *Sisters Today* XLI (1970), pp. 449-456.

shaken, certain structures have to fall. We need not be revolutionaries within our institutions. ... But on the other hand, we don't want to go to the other extreme and just simply be ostriches refusing to see that these institutions are in many respects outdated, and that perhaps renewal may mean the collapse of some institutional structures and starting over again with a whole new form."<sup>31</sup>

Speaking of the spirit of openness to renewal in religious circles, which Merton considered most important in any renewal of religious life, he went on to say: "This means that observances which are 'closed' and incomprehensible even to the religious themselves will almost inevitably generate a spirit of pretentiousness and artificiality which is incompatible with the true Gospel simplicity. Such observances must either be re-thought so that they recover a living meaning, or they must be discarded, and if necessary replaced by others that fulfill the function which they have ceased to fulfill."<sup>32</sup>

In studying the various statements made by Thomas Merton over the years on the subject of monastic renewal, one realizes that he was functioning as a critic, showing several sides of an issue, pointing out weaknesses on both sides of a question. This is apparent in dealing with the delicate subject of the monk's withdrawal from the world. His need for a certain *distance*. In the opening pages of *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton writes: "It is certainly true that this special perspective necessarily implies that the monk will be in some sense critical of the world, of its routines; its confusions, and its some times tragic failures to provide other men with lives that are fully sane and human. The monk can and must be open to the world, but at the same time he must be able to get along without a naive and uncritical 'secularity' which blandly assumes that everything in the world is at every moment getting better and better for everybody."<sup>33</sup> He admits this critical balance is often very difficult to achieve, but it is something the monk must strive for. "For the monastic life has a certain prophetic character about it: not that the monk should be able to tell what is about to happen in the Kingdom of God, but in the sense that he is a living witness to the freedom

of the sons of God and to the essential difference between that freedom and the spirit of the world."<sup>34</sup>

Merton was conscious of the fact that God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, but he also knew well that the Son of God came into a world that refused to receive him, a world that opposed and rejected him. Merton summed up his position in these moving words: "The monastic life then must maintain this prophetic seriousness, this wilderness perspective, this mistrust of any shallow optimism which overlooks the ambiguity and the potential tragedy of 'the world' in its response to the Word. And there is only one way for the monk to do this: to live as a man of God who has been manifestly 'called out of the world' to an existence that differs radically from that of other men, however sincere, however Christian, however holy, who have remained in the world."<sup>35</sup>

Dom Jean Leclercq in his excellent introduction to *Contemplation in a World of Action*, published after Merton's death, ends by quoting a letter from Thomas Merton which bears repeating here. In this letter accepting the invitation to come to Bangkok, Thailand, where he was to meet his death, Merton wrote to Leclercq: "The great problem for monasticism today is, 'not survival, but prophecy!'"<sup>36</sup> And those words are as true today as when they were written, a decade ago.

In his later years, Merton often compared the monk to the social critic, and as an example he pointed out that the earliest monks fled the secular society of Rome and sought solitude and silence and purity of heart in the desert of Egypt. It was the monk's way of renouncing the culture of his day, and his withdrawal from society was his personal criticism of the world as he viewed it. In his address at Bangkok, a few hours before his death, Merton referred to a young French revolutionary student who had made the statement some weeks earlier at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara: "We are monks, too." Merton was deeply impressed by these words, and he reflected: "The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures, just as these students identify themselves as people who have taken up a critical attitude toward

<sup>31</sup> *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 337.

<sup>32</sup> *The Council and Monasticism*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*; cf. *Thomas Merton/Monk*, pp. 93-124.

the contemporary world and its structures.<sup>37</sup> The criticism was quite different, as Merton pointed out. Yet he was saying something that was important for the monk to hear: "However, the student seemed to be alluding to the fact that if one is to call himself in some way or other a monk, he must have in some way or other reached some kind of critical conclusion about the validity of certain claims made by secular society and its structures with regard to the end of man's existence. In other words, the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent."<sup>38</sup>

In this respect Merton was closer to Karl Rahner and his "diaspora" Christian than to the vapid optimism of some of the followers of Teilhard de Chardin. Reflection on the atrocities of the twentieth century, especially the "holocaust" of six and a half million Jews by the Nazis and our own ignominious performance in Vietnam, made him very much a sober realist; yet he remained a person of Christian hope in the ultimate victory of Christ, despite human shortcomings.

During the course of his Asian journey, Merton gave a number of talks at the Temple of Understanding in Calcutta, to the Jesuit scholastics near Darjeeling, and of course his last conference at the meeting of Asian monastic leaders in Bangkok. Reading over these texts, some of which have been published as appendices to *The Asian Journal*, we see again the same balanced position between the extreme right and the reactionary left in renewal matters. Speaking of the irrelevance of monks in an informal talk in Calcutta, he asks the rhetorical question which he then proceeds to answer: "Are monks and hippies and poets relevant? No, we are deliberately irrelevant. We live with an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal man accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death."<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, Merton then spoke of death and the marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner, as a witness to life in these deeply moving words: "All these people live in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life. He [the monk] struggles with the fact of

death in himself, trying to seek something deeper than death; because there is something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person, the meditative person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life."<sup>40</sup> If anything can ultimately be said about Thomas Merton, it must be that he was "a witness to life." May his great spirit remain with us as we continue our renewal. In some sense the monastic life, like the Church itself, will always be renewing itself, and the wisdom and insights of Thomas Merton can assist us not only today, but especially in the years to come.

<sup>37</sup> Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart, Naomi Burton, and James Laughlin, New York: New Directions, 1973, p. 329.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 306.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.