

“Now, decades after the publication of five lengthy volumes of Thomas Merton’s selected letters, *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton’s Uncensored Mind* reminds us of the wonderful, simple, direct, insightful, and frequently prophetic way Merton addressed a wide myriad of issues, along with the timelessness of his uncensored wisdom.”

— Paul M. Pearson

Director, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University

A Focus on Truth

Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind

Patrick W. Collins

Foreword by
Jonathan Montaldo



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Contents

Foreword vii

Abbreviations xi

Introduction xiii

1 On Truth and Conscience 1

2 On Spirituality 15

3 On Liturgical Renewal 52

4 On Church Authority 61

5 On Ecumenism 80

6 On Priesthood 92

7 On Being a Hermit 102

8 On Interreligious Dialogue 135

9 On Monastic Renewal 155

10 On the Church 173

Bibliography 196

Foreword

Truth Matters

Thomas Merton exercised his commitments to be a writer and Christian monk by seeking “spiritual liberty.” In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he described his existential focus to live his religious life as seeking “the highest truth, unabashed by any human pressure or any collective demand.” His critical public commentaries on issues of social justice, race relations, nuclear war, and interfaith dialogue were spiritual exercises to excise his writings from the “echo[es] of the ‘yes’ and the ‘no’ of state, party, corporation, army, or system” (86).

Merton as monk had discerned that efficacy in his vocation to write would depend on exercising an ability to report the singular wisdom he was continually learning in the school of his own life’s more intimate relationships with God, with human cultures, and within the opportunities offered through the persons, places, and identity-transforming events of his personal history.

His desire to write and speak truth beyond his received opinions that were inculcated in him by his education, social class, and singular religious commitments, in short, his will to find his own voice, was ascetically heroic. His intuition that a grace was given to write confessing the contours of his personal struggle to be a fully integrated and truth-speaking human being was romantic. His goal to be a witness to freedom by word and example was idealized.

Competing desires within his all too human inner experiences, easily misinterpreted by his prejudices and the easiest intellectual abstractions taken, reflected the challenges to write truthfully within the complexities and personal limitations imposed by his genes and life's historical events. "Spiritual liberty," if such a human freedom actually exists for all persons by birthright, is always publicly pursued under circumstances and with language curtailed by editing and censoring. One fashions a personal truth that will be socially acceptable. Unless one is rendered unselfconscious by passing strong emotions or is drunk, no one speaks or writes publicly without the self-censorship of realizing the consequences for speaking one's mind.

For a period over two decades, from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, episcopal representatives and monks of his own Order, the Strict Cistercians, or Trappists, censored Merton's writing before publication for its conformity to church doctrine and his Order's institutional wish to reflect its popular Catholic image in America. The secular publishers and editors of his books would further modify what and how he wrote with a view to readability, to the current interests of the reading audience, and to making a profit. Merton also carefully censored himself: "I was trying to express what I thought I ought to think, and not for any especially good reason, rather than what I actually did think" (Journals, 1.4.48).

In his private journals Merton wrote to express his paradoxical "True Self," but nowhere did he speak most frankly than in his voluminous letter writing to all manner of correspondents that included church authorities, literary colleagues, social activists, and friends on a spectrum of ages and varying degrees of intimacy. No doubt that he posed for the snapshot of himself that he intuited his particular correspondent expected to see, but often he directly, in his own words, revealed dimensions of his life and thought that transcended, or went below to an inner core, the protective layers of his popular image as Catholic monk and writer. The dialogical nature of Merton's extensive conversations by mail reveals his exercising

himself with spiritual liberty and free speech. His letter writing intimates his openness to having his speech and ideas challenged by those who did not share his life's commitments. He wrote letters in an uncensored voice in hopes that others would respond freely in their own voices, so that a ground of the most expansive truth between them might have an epiphany.

Editors have published five volumes of selected Merton letters from the trove of an archive well over ten thousand items. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon further produced a collection from these letters grouped chronologically in general categories of the monk's personal commitments in their study *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*. Now Dr. Patrick Collins, a Catholic priest, teacher, writer, and musician, who for decades has studied and written on Merton's letters in articles, retreats, and sermons, gathers a portion of his studies that investigate Merton's growth in exercising freer speech in his personal correspondence. He chooses themes as diverse as "spirituality" and "ecumenism" that reveal Merton's engagements with pastoral theologies. In our time, battered by lies, half-truths, and conspiracy theories with no bases in facts, this book is timely by emphasizing Merton's urge for truth through dialogue with others that takes both correspondents beyond received opinions and what Merton called "easy answers."

I have been happy to read this portion of Father Collins's investigations into Thomas Merton's letters. For pragmatic reasons, Collins has curtailed and edited himself to meet the standards for marketability imposed by the economic realities of contemporary publishing. I await the complete harvest of his research being made available in an archive for future study by the diversely interested company of the monk's most "honorable readers." What we have in *A Focus on Truth* is only a refined, small taste of the length and breadth of Thomas Merton's journey to "spiritual freedom."

Jonathan Montaldo
The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals

Abbreviations

CT	<i>The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers</i>
HGL	<i>The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns</i>
Reader	<i>A Thomas Merton Reader</i>
RJ	<i>The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends</i>
SC	<i>The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction</i>
WF	<i>Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis</i>

Introduction

The published writings of Trappist monk Thomas Merton were always censored from two sources. First, by Merton himself. He did not write all he knew, and he sometimes deleted what he had written in early drafts. He carefully selected what he considered appropriate for publication. Second, Thomas Merton was extensively censored by the Trappist Order. Merton's superiors frequently judged that things he chose to write should not be made available in print. This was not infrequently a source of great frustration to the author. In 1957, writing to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Merton voiced his moderate and balanced concern about his Order's censorship of *The Secular Journal*. The Trappist censor had judged that some passages ". . . would shock certain readers coming from a priest, a member of this Order, and the effect of the shock would make itself felt in a harmful way . . ." He reflected to Doherty:

My position is such that in practice I have no choice but to conform to these wishes of my Highest Superior (below the Pope) . . . I think we can certainly differ, privately and speculatively, with this opinion of censors who may not be blessed with a superabundance of judgment in such matters. Yet at the same time, they have reasons of a different order, and I think it would be rash for us to ignore these altogether. . . .

My own opinion is that we ought to just drop the idea for the moment, and if God wills, we will have another chance some time later on.

So you see, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance are very much opposed to any voice with even a slightly radical sound being raised in their midst. I do not know whether or not I feel this is something for which we ought to be proud. (12.28.57 HGL 14–15)

By 1959 Merton's attitude toward this censorship neared outrage. To a woman religious correspondent, he wrote: "I can at any rate say with all simplicity that the censorship situation in our Order is utterly beyond all reason. It is an enormous penance for all concerned . . ." (Sr. M. Emmanuel, 2.3.59 HGL 181–82).

Merton's 1960s writings on social issues such as racism, nuclear weapons, war and peace, and the Vietnam War in particular intensified the censorial activities of the Order toward his more radically critical writings. In response the monk chose to be obedient—to a point. Yet he chose to mimeograph some of these articles for private circulation. They came to be called "The Cold War Letters." As he wrote in 1961 to W. H. "Ping" Ferry, "This would not require censorship" (12.21.61 HGL 20).

Merton's annoyance was expressed again in 1962 in a letter to Erich Fromm: "It takes a terribly long time to get some of it through routine censorship of the Order. Sometimes because the censor has rigid and fanatical views, and sometimes because he just can't face the possibility that a monk should be interested in a public issue. We are supposed, no doubt, to be in a permanent moral coma" (2.16.62 HGL 319).

Perhaps Merton's most extensive negative comments about the Order's censoring of his social writings were to Catherine de Hueck Doherty in 1962:

. . . the voice which was shouting, momentarily, about peace, has been told to shut up. . . . the order came in not to print or publish anything more on topics "not befitting a contemplative monk." Apparently the most crucial problems, and the struggle with the demon, these are out of range of a contemplative monk. I was told it would be all right if I prayed over these matters, however. (6.4.62 HGL 18)

By 1966 the Trappist seemed to be given more leeway by the censors as he wrote in this letter to Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr, colleagues in the movements for peace and non-violence:

The practice we are following here with censorship is that the American censors do not even require to read any article except that which is submitted, on some obviously theological topic, to a big important magazine. This would not apply to any magazine of moderate circulation . . . Unless you are explicitly told otherwise by the Order, on its own initiative, you can I think simply publish anything of mine without further formalities, unless I myself say otherwise . . . (1.14.66 HGL 337)

A fuller view—and uncensored view—of the life and thoughts of Thomas Merton can be found by plumbing his correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues over the years. Five volumes of his personal and professional correspondence have been published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. I have sought to extract from these sources many of the significant subjects about which Merton wrote, and have organized these topics chronologically. In this way readers can note the development of Merton's thoughts, feelings, intuitions, and impressions over the years on a variety of topics of concern to him. In these letters Merton was free to respond as he wished to his correspondents' questions—even though these letters were sometimes read by his abbot, Dom James Fox. As he wrote to Daniel J. Berrigan in 1963: “. . . our mail here is strictly censored and the Abbot reads it, sometimes quite carefully” (6.25.63 HGL 76).

Merton's views as expressed in his correspondence are not, of course, fully worked-out theses about any particular subjects. These letters simply express his way of dealing with particular issues at that time. And this too was, of course, conditioned by the context of the correspondent. In reading and evaluating his uncensored writings in the letters, this limitation of epistolary context must be kept in mind. On the other hand, I believe that Thomas Merton's less filtered reflections written

to correspondents do say something unique and profound about the development of his life and thought. One might say of all of Merton's letters what was written by Mary Tardiff, the editor of *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*: "Though these letters were never intended to be autobiographical in a formal sense, the very nature of informal letter writing lends itself to self-revelation on a personal level. Though engaged in a discussion of theological issues . . . [both writers are] disclosing profound intuitions and deeply held personal convictions" (ix).

Perhaps Merton's thoughts on the difference between the mere communication of ideas and a deeper communion of spirits between persons express something of what can be sensed through these collected letters.

True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary at this level must also be "communion": beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a "preverbal" level but also on a "postverbal" level. . . . And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept." (HGL x)

It is this communion with correspondents that I hope to make available in *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind*.

3

On Liturgical Renewal

The first and most obvious effect of Vatican II was the reform and renewal of the worship life of the church. Liturgical change dramatically affected every Catholic community in the world. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated on December 10, 1963, began the first radical reform of the structures of Roman Catholic liturgical life since the Council of Trent reformed the liturgy with the Missal of Pope Paul V in 1570.

Thomas Merton's first adult experience of Roman Catholic worship occurred while he was studying at Columbia University in New York City. One Sunday morning he felt an urge to attend a Roman Catholic Mass, and so he walked into nearby Corpus Christi Church. He was deeply impressed by the serious prayerfulness of those attending the Masses there, as he recorded in his autobiography:

What a revelation it was to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another; not there to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfill a religious obligation, not a human one. For even those who might have been there for no better motive than that they were obliged to be, were at least free from any of the self-conscious and human constraint which is never ab-

sent from a Protestant church, where people are definitely gathered together as people, as neighbors, and always have at least half an eye for one another, if not all of both eyes. (*Seven Storey Mountain*, in *Reader*, 91)

During the Mass Merton was moved by the “clear and solid doctrine” that was preached that day, “for behind those words you felt the full force not only of Scripture but of centuries of a unified and continuous and consistent tradition. And above all, it was a vital tradition: there was nothing studied or antique about it” (*Reader*, 92). He left liturgy at the end of what was then called the Mass of the Catechumens, and as he walked leisurely down Broadway in the sun: “All I know is that I walked in a new world” (*Reader*, 94).

Thomas Merton was baptized as a Roman Catholic at Corpus Christi Church on November 16, 1938. In his early years as a Catholic, he experienced the importance of the liturgy in his own life and participated in Mass as often as possible—often every day. In 1949, after eight years in the monastery, he wrote to his Columbia University friend, Robert Lax, of his deep sense of Scripture and the liturgy:

Someone should be able to find the living God in Scripture—and this is His word—and then lead others to find him there, and all theology properly ends in contemplation and love and union with God—not ideas about Him and a set of rules about how to wear your hat. The Mass is the center of everything and in so far as it is Calvary it is the center of Scripture and the key to everything—history, everything. All the trouble going on now. (11.27.49 RJ 172)

Merton’s early reactions to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II were largely negative. He had come to love the Latin prayers and chants of the pre-Vatican II liturgy during his twenty-five years as a Catholic. As an intellectual, Merton had a solid knowledge of Latin. He found it most effective to pray the liturgy in that traditional ritual language. These rich traditions,

he feared, were being replaced after the council with overly enthusiastic experimentations, which he judged to be trite and banal.

Liturgical music was one of the first things to change. Music in the vernacular for congregational participation began to be borrowed from the Protestant tradition. Some vernacular music was also being composed by Catholics. By 1964 the Trappist felt it to be an experience of musical impoverishment: "I passed your English-Gregorian texts to our choirmaster, who is a little cool toward Gregorian with English as I am myself. But I am not as cool as he is because I am no professional, and as far as I am concerned I think people ought to try out everything feasible and see what happens. The texts look all right but not inspiring to me" (Leslie Dewart, 9.23.64 WF 298).

Merton's lack of enthusiasm for liturgical reform, rooted in his love and respect for tradition, had been expressed prior to the council in a letter to his former Gethsemani novice, the Nicaraguan priest-poet Ernesto Cardenal: "The psalms are for poor men, or solitary men, or men who suffer: not for liturgical enthusiasts in a comfortable, well-heated choir" (11.18.59 CT 120).

As the council began in October of 1962, the first topic for discussion was liturgy. Merton reacted to these early conciliar discussions with cautious hope in a letter to his English correspondent, Etta Gullick: "Apparently they are on the liturgy now. I don't know what will come, but the whole thing seems to be making sense. Probably it is bound to bog down a bit somewhere, but it is going better than expected" (10.29.62 HGL 355).

By December 1963, following the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first solemn declaration of Vatican II, Merton was less optimistic in his letter to the philosopher E. I. Watkin:

The question of liturgy is of course a very complex one, and I think it is going to disturb very many people on both sides of

the question. The adaptation is not going to be easy, nor is the sweeping optimism of liturgical reformers always a guarantee of the greatest intelligence. I am afraid that inevitably much that is good will be lost, and needlessly lost, and this will be very sad . . . However, it is certain that there must be a warmer and more intelligent relationship between what goes on at the altar and what is done by the people. It is easy enough for you and for me to appreciate the familiar forms which have remained to a great extent unchanged since Charlemagne. It is also easy for us to understand the Middle Ages and to feel our deep indebtedness to them, and to realize the continuity of our experience with that of the Middle Ages. A vast majority of Christians in our day cannot do this, unfortunately . . .

. . . I recognize the justice of your remarks on the liturgical paper and hasten to add that I am not much of a "liturgist" in the modern and fashionable sense, and really at heart I agree with you, for myself. I am very content with the simple Cistercian liturgy we have, and hate to think that it may be suddenly and violently wrenched out of shape for no particularly good reason, as the needs of a monastery are not those of a parish. But the obsession with the latest "thing" is so strong that even monks get swept away by it. And I am heartily in agreement with you in deploring this. (12.12.63 HGL 584–85)

From the start, the Trappist had found fault with the dominant approach to liturgical reform that seemed to favor haste over caution. Merton's negative reactions to the rapid and enthusiastic changes were rooted in many sources. Principally he feared that the contemplative dimension of public worship was being undermined through an overly activist approach. To Gullick in March 1963, he wrote: ". . . I don't hold with these extreme liturgy people for whom all personal and contemplative prayer is suspect. If you make a meditation they think you are a Buddhist" (3.24.63 HGL 359).

Thomas Merton had been studying Buddhism for some time. He had found the Zen approach to meditation to be very helpful for his own prayer and worship. To E. I. Watkin he had written in November 1962:

That brings me to Buddhism. I am on and off thinking a great deal about it, when I can, because I think in many ways it is very germane and close to our own approaches to inner truth in Christ. Naturally, I am glad to find myself in the company of such a man as Don Chapman, in being called a Buddhist, because that is one of the standard jokes in the community here: that I am a hermit and a Buddhist and that in choir I am praying as a Buddhist (how do they know?), while others are all wrapped up in the liturgical movement and in getting the choir on pitch and in manifesting togetherness, whatever that is. Really I do not feel myself in opposition with anyone or with any form of spirituality, because I no longer think in such terms at all: this spirituality is *the* right kind, that is *the* wrong kind, etc. Right sort and wrong sort: these are sources of delusion in the spiritual life and there precisely is where the Buddhists score, for they bypass all that. Neither this side of the stream nor on the other side: yet one must cross the stream and throw away the boat, before seeing that the stream wasn't there. (11.15.62 HGL 580)

By 1964, Merton's fears about the loss of the contemplative dimension in liturgy were deepening. He wrote to Gullick:

It seems to me that the atmosphere in our Church . . . is going to become more and more hostile to contemplative prayer. There will certainly be official pronouncements approving it and blessing it. But in fact the movement points in the direction of activism, and an activist concept of liturgy. I think the root of the trouble is fear and truculence, unrealized, deep down. . . .

In a word, the temper of the Roman Church is combative and "aroused" and the emphasis on contemplation is (if there is any at all) dominated by a specific end in view so that implicitly contemplation becomes ordered to action, which is so easy in a certain type of scholastic thought, misunderstood. When this happens, the real purity of the life of prayer is gone. I must say though that there is a good proportion of contemplative prayer in the novitiate. I don't use special methods. I try to make them love the freedom and peace of being with God

alone in faith and simplicity, to abolish all divisiveness and diminish all useless strain and concentration on one's own efforts and all formalism: all the nonsense of taking seriously the apparatus of an official prayer life, in the wrong way (but to love liturgy in simple faith as the place of Christ's sanctifying presence in the community). (9.12.64 HGL 368)

Merton also feared that the beauty of ritual language would not be respected in the translations of the liturgical texts. He wrote of this to his Oxford scholar and Anglican friend, A. M. Allchin, in April 1964:

I do think it is terribly important for Roman Catholics now plunging into the vernacular to have some sense of the Anglican tradition. This, however, is only a faint hope in my own mind, because on the one hand so many of the highest Anglicans are outrageously Latin, and on the other the beauty of the *Book of Common Prayer*, etc., is out of reach of the majority in this country now, and is perhaps no longer relevant. But the spirit and lingo of modern Roman Catholicism in English-speaking countries has been in so many ways a disaster! (4.25.64 HGL 26)

By the fall of 1964, Merton expressed some tentative views of liturgical renewal in his own monastic community, as he wrote to philosopher Leslie Dewart:

Actually, however, this liturgy thing has, at least in monasteries, become so much of a professional specialty that I am not one of those that can afford initiatives and declarations. I go along with it, and enjoy what is offered, but I cannot do the offering (of new texts and ideas) though people have pestered me a little to write hymns and whatnot. I don't intend to touch any of it because I think it is all extremely fluid (as it ought to be) and the flowing is usually a mile ahead of me, as I cannot keep up with the required information, attend conferences, and so on. It would be naive of me to try to contribute anything worthwhile. I have a rather silly article on liturgy coming out in the *Critic* in December, but that is only a gesture of good will. (9.23.64 WF 298)

By 1965, Merton's fears about the loss of liturgy's contemplative core were being confirmed by his own and others' liturgical experiences. He was also more and more aware of his own inadequacy in the area of liturgical history and the implementation of the reforms. Later that year Merton noted with appreciation that there was a growing interest in prayer and contemplation throughout the world. But liturgy was of little help in this regard, as he wrote to Gullick: "There are a lot of people getting interested in prayer in this country, mostly in academic circles, and in a rather mixed-up context of psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. This is the area where people at the moment are most interested in our kind of contemplation. The Catholics are all hopped up about liturgy at the moment" (11.1.65 HGL 373).

By 1967, Thomas Merton was expressing more positive views of liturgical renewal. He seemed to sense more gain than loss in the changes in worship. This was clearly a change from his earlier attitudes. In his letter to friends at Pentecost, he expressed what the liturgical reforms had come to mean to him personally. He also noted that there were considerable positive results in the worship life of parishes.

Personally, my own life and vocation have their own peculiar dimension which is a little different from all this. I have always tended more toward a deepening of faith in solitude, a "desert" and "wilderness" existence in which one does not seek special experiences. But I concur with these others in being unable to remain satisfied with a formal and exterior kind of religion. Nor do I think that a more lively liturgy is enough. Worship and belief have become ossified and rigid, and so has the religious life in many cases.

Certainly it is fine that now the liturgy is becoming more spontaneous, more alive, and people are putting their hearts into it more. (I am not saying it was not possible to enter into the old Latin liturgy, but it was hard for many.) But we need a real deepening of life in every area . . . ("Circular Letter to Friends," Pentecost 1967 RJ 102-3)

That concern for “depth” and Merton’s more balanced view of liturgical reform was expressed again in the fall of 1967 in his letter to a woman religious:

. . . I am sure that the basic thing will always remain the need for deep prayer in the heart, and the deepest and most authentic response to the word of God. We must certainly bring renewal to our liturgical worship, but we must also preserve a place for silence and for contemplative prayer. However, it must be admitted that entirely new ways of explaining contemplative experiences must be found. However, when we see the Beatles (you’ve heard of them in England?) going to an Indian Yogi to learn meditation, it can certainly not be said that all desire for the contemplative life is extinct in modern youth!!! (Sr. Maria Blanca Olim, 10.16.67 WF 198)

By December of 1967, the Trappist had celebrated some small group liturgies which gave him an even more positive attitude about some of the directions of liturgical renewal. He expressed this in a letter to author John Howard Griffin:

I just got through a really marvelous new venture: first time a group of cloistered nun-superiors was here for retreat and seminar, fifteen of them, including your “neighbor,” Mother Henry of the cloistered Dominicans at Lufkin. We had a really first-rate session, ending with Mass together at the hermitage yesterday, and such a Mass as you never saw: all joined in to give bits of the homily, to utter petitions at the prayer of the people, etc. etc. Really groovy, as they say. (12.8.67 RJ 139)

The old adage “experience is the best teacher” proved to be true for Merton and the reformed liturgical rites. Before his death in 1968, the Trappist had come to appreciate much of the new approaches, although he remained somewhat skeptical of liturgical experiments. As he wrote to a high school student correspondent in April 1968:

Good folk music at Mass can be a big help, but bad singing and trifling hymns are not much help. But so is bad Gregorian an

obstacle rather than a help. I think what counts is life and fervor in the celebration of the liturgy, and whatever helps that in the right way is good.

I have had an opportunity to offer Mass in a home and this is a fine thing, I believe. Undoubtedly there will be more changes, but let's hope they will be really useful ones. Change for the sake of change is useless. I think a lot of progressive Catholics in this country don't really know where they want to go—but will take anything as long as it is different—and gets good publicity. (Philip J. Cascia, 4.10.68 RJ 366)

6

On Priesthood

Thomas Merton's awareness of his call to the priesthood came not long after his baptism as a Roman Catholic at Corpus Christi Church in New York City, in 1938. His mentor, Dan Walsh, called this potential vocation to Merton's attention in 1939. He said, "You know, the first time I met you I thought you had a vocation to the priesthood" (*Reader*, 95).

Merton made a kind of pilgrimage to Cuba in the spring of 1940, and was very moved spiritually at the Basilica of Our Lady of Cobre. It was there that he prayed to become a priest. He invoked Our Lady: ". . . you will ask Christ to make me His priest, and I will give you my heart, Lady" (*Reader*, 79).

Merton first pursued his vocation to the priesthood through the Franciscan Order. But when he revealed to one of their priests that he impregnated a woman while a student at Cambridge University, that friar discouraged Merton from pursuing a Franciscan vocation. Merton was crushed and felt this to be a sign that he did not have a vocation to priesthood (Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 156).

In the summer of 1941, after sensing that his vocation to priesthood had been blocked, Tom Merton talked with Catherine de Hueck Doherty about possibly coming to work with her among the poor in Harlem. Of that desire he wrote:

. . . the first thing to do is to feed the poor and save the souls of men, and in this sense, feeding the poor means feeding them not by law (which doesn't do a damn bit of good), but first of all at the cost of our own appetites, and with our own hands, and for the love of God. In that case, feeding the poor and saving them are all part of the same thing, the love of our neighbor . . . (10.6.41 HGL 5)

After writing so many words in this letter Merton declared one thing about his calling which would prove prophetic: ". . . my vocation is probably to go on finding out this same thing about writing over and over as long as I live: when you are writing about God, or talking about Him, you are doing something you were created to do, even if you don't feel like a prince every minute you are doing it . . ." (10.6.41 HGL 6).

Doherty suggested to Merton that anyone asking the kinds of questions he was asking "probably wanted to be a priest." He was surprised and scared when she said this. "The priest business is something I am supposed to be all through and done with. I nearly entered the Franciscans. There was a very good reason why I didn't, and now I am convinced that Order is not for me and never was. So that settles that vocation" (11.10.41 HGL 7).

In the previous year Tom had told his Columbia mentor, Mark Van Doren, of his high views of the priestly life: "To be a priest does not mean that you are necessarily perfect but that you are solemnly bound to a manner of life in which you observe all those things pertaining to perfection" (6.16.40 RJ 8). Merton was teaching at St. Bonaventure College, a Franciscan school in Olean, New York, at the time. For him it was "a sort of harmless hobby: about on the plane of stamp collecting. In any visible results it may have, as regards the Kingdom of God, it is just about as valuable as stamp collecting, too." Merton told Doherty that he realized this teaching was "strictly temporary . . . I don't know what it is that will help me to serve God better: but whatever it is, it doesn't seem to be here. Something is missing" (11.10.41 HGL 7).

During Holy Week, 1941, at the suggestion of Dan Walsh, Merton made a retreat at the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown in Kentucky. There he sensed a strong attraction to the strict and silent Trappist way of life. Later that year Merton left St. Bonaventure College on December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in order to join the Trappists in Kentucky. He wrote to Doherty that he was finally following his call: "You see, I have always wanted to be a priest . . ." Merton explained that he now knew that he was not called to serve the poor in Harlem.

The draft board was going to reclassify him for military service, and he asked to be deferred to pursue a monastic vocation. Of this he wrote to Doherty:

I don't desire *anything* in the world, not writing, not teaching, not any kind of consolation or outward activity: I simply long with my whole existence to be completely consecrated to God in every gesture, every breath and every movement of my body and mind, to the exclusion of absolutely everything except Him: and the way I desire this, by His grace, is the way it is among the Trappists. . . . I am unshakably rooted in faith in this vocation: but there is the army [that] may try to kill it in me. (12.6.41 HGL 9-11)

After theological studies in his monastic community, Merton was ordained to the priesthood at Gethsemani Abbey by Louisville's Archbishop John A. Floersch on May 26, 1949, and given the name "Louis." As ordination neared the monk expressed his quite exalted and elated thoughts and feelings about the upcoming event to Mark Van Doren. Merton's view at that time of the greater importance of ordination over religious vows would surely change over the coming years.

I know the priesthood is going to be something tremendous. A kind of death, to begin with. But that is good. The whole business about Orders has been striking me as something much more important than religious vows. The question of sacramen-

tal character comes in, for one thing. Then you become public property. At the same time you are mystically more isolated in God. The combination is quite baffling.

Anyway, the priesthood will end up by giving me a completely social function. Perhaps that was what I was always trying to escape. Actually, having run into it at this end of the circle, it is making me what I was always meant to be and I am about to exist.

As soon as I put on the vestments of a subdeacon and stood in the sanctuary I was bowled over by the awareness that this was what I was always supposed to wear, and everything else, so far, had been something of a disguise. (4.8.49 RJ 23)

On the day of Fr. Louis's ordination, Robert Lax, Merton's close friend from Columbia University, commented that Merton looked much younger than his age. He was playful and joyful after the ceremony (William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, 140). Merton himself sensed that he had finally fulfilled the promise he made at the Church of Our Lady of Cobre in 1940 (Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 251).

During the 1960s, Merton moved beyond some of his earlier and more pious views of the priesthood. He became more realistic about what it is and what it is not to serve as priest. As he wrote to Daniel Berrigan in 1962: "I find I have reached the stage where I involuntarily wince when I come upon another poem by a priest called 'Vocation'" (3.10.62 HGL 73). Again, in a 1964 letter to the Jesuit poet, the Trappist seemed to find many of the postconciliar concerns about priestly reform of diminishing concern and interest to him. "What is the Society doing about *aggiornamento*? Do you have a vocation problem? Are you doing something new about religious formation? I don't know, perhaps those questions do not really matter as much as they seem to. I am not totally convinced of the importance that is attributed to them" (9.19.64 HGL 85).

By 1962, Thomas Merton, the monk and the priest, had grown into a quite different sense of his priestly and monastic vocation when he wrote to Abdul Aziz:

I believe my vocation is essentially that of a pilgrim and an exile in life, that I have no proper place in this world but that for that reason I am in some sense to be the friend and brother of people everywhere, especially those who are exiles and pilgrims like myself.

. . . My life is in many ways simple, but it is also a mystery which I do not attempt to really understand, as though I were led by the hand in a night where I see nothing, but can fully depend on the Love and Protection of Him Who guides me. (4.4.62 HGL 52)

Another of the Trappist's correspondents in those years who shared his fears and concerns for the state of the priesthood was Fr. Ronald Roloff, OSB, a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Roloff was experiencing the tensions of trying to be a monastic and at the same time, serve in a parish. The Trappist encouraged the Benedictine to always put his monastic vows first and to avoid the busyness of becoming a religious businessman. This reflects a significant change of view from the time of his ordination, when he placed priesthood ahead of religious vows.

I would say that the great problem for the Black Benedictines in parish work is more or less a universal problem of all priests today in America: getting themselves (and even to a greater extent than other priests) disengaged from the futile routines and paperwork and "public relations" gags and all the rest of the trivialities that have entered the life of the priest in America in proportion as he has become a business man and an operator like other business men and operators. . . .

Here I think it is most important for the spirit of *conversatio morum* to operate, not just picking the Benedictine priest up by the hair of his head and depositing him in a desert cave, but delivering him from the waste motion and the burden of nonsense and triviality that seems to become, so easily, an "essential" part of priestly life. I am sure there must be a thousand tasks that are supposed to be important and which, if everybody faced it, are a pure waste of time. I am just speaking of

the kind of waste motion we get into here, also, even though our life is supposed to be streamlined. It isn't . . . (10.21.62 SC 152)

In the following month Merton again made a similar observation to Roloff, a comment somewhat typical of many monastics: "There is something about the very fact of assuming the burden of priestly greatness and dignity which must have been one of the reasons why the Desert Fathers fled from bishops" (11.13.62 SC 155).

By 1965 Fr. Louis Merton was more convinced than ever of the futility of much of what goes on in the active priestly life and ministry. He wrote to Abdul Aziz:

Yes, you are right that the Catholic clergy are usually so caught up with tasks and rituals that they do not have time or interest to get involved in deeper contacts with those who are not members of the Church. The great trouble today is that with the increase of communications and the greater number of people there is so much to be done that few have time to do anything properly, at least in the West. (11.7.65 HGL 62)

In 1966 the monk wrote to Ludovico Silva, a poet from Venezuela, about the difficulties and stress in the life of his former Gethsemani novice, Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua, that were caused by the priesthood.

You have no idea how difficult and complex a task he [Cardenal] has taken upon himself, to be a poet and a priest at the same time and in a society that is completely fed up with priests. He is just beginning, and the task of being two people is still difficult. Only when one realizes that one cannot be two people, can one be two or many people, that is everybody. No priest and no poet is really mature until he is everybody. But who is everybody? One lets go a little, and one begins to disappear in everybody, and then one wakes up and begins to defend a limited identity once again. An uncomfortable existence. This discomfort is not necessary for those who identify themselves

completely with a Church (like the ordinary priest) or a party (like the Communists). (1.17.66 CT 228)

That same year, 1966, in light of Vatican II and the postconciliar period of reform, Thomas Merton was clearly feeling himself some of the great strains that priests had in their relationships with bishops and superiors. Priests seemed to be experiencing both a deep crisis of identity and a painful crisis of authority. One such priest, William DuBay of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, became the focus of the monk's correspondence about the troubles in the priesthood.

W. H. Ferry had discussed the challenge DuBay made to his archbishop, James Cardinal McIntyre, and mentioned to Merton DuBay's proposal to establish a priests' union. In his response the monk showed his awareness of the limitations of superiors in their relations with priests, and he saw these relationships as part of the reason for clerical immaturity. To Merton, the proposal for a priests' union seemed to be a symptom of such immaturity.

. . . [E]ven in the Council it was spelled out that the relations with ecclesiastical Superiors were not what they should be, and it was also said, in traditional terms, that the Superiors ought to get down to the business of mending their ways. The trouble is of course that they can't. They don't see the problems the way subjects do, especially if they have been in a Chancery Office for years, twenty, thirty, forty, some of them. And think of those characters who have been in the Vatican since they were teenagers practically. They just have no idea what the score is, and they don't know how to look squarely at the problems of subjects, especially they do not and cannot understand the difference between the real problems of creative initiative and the neurotic kid problems that, in fact, they generate in subjects and unconsciously like to perpetuate. The relations of Superiors and subjects, in religion and in the secular clergy, are very often completely puerile, centered on artificial and illusory problems which are almost deliberately kept going because they create an illusion of important decisions being made. All this nonsense could be avoided with a minimum of maturity.

. . . the Superiors are never going to solve it themselves. On the other hand, the Superiors respond only to pressure. And we cannot get higher Superiors to bring pressure on lower Superiors, they are all in cahoots like a gang of thieves, and all support one another in tricky procedures, secret power plays, cheating, etc. etc. Hence the only thing to do is to bring pressure from the secular arm so to speak. . . .

In my opinion, I think that the risks of this approach should be studied objectively. . . . Personally, I think that it will do a great deal of harm to the Church, if it is not handled with extreme tact and care. . . . But I think nevertheless, theologically and biblically, we have to ascertain whether the Church is the kind of body that can stand such a thing as a priest's union without getting into schism. I think that the fact that they start out uncritically making no distinction between a labor union and a "priest's union" shows that there is danger of being wrong from the beginning, because, however you look at it, the relation of a priest to his bishop is not that of an employee to an employer. Hence the problems that arise between them, and the very real question of the priest's rights, need to be expressed in a different form. . . .

My frank opinion on this is that instead of forming a priests' union and causing public pressure with a lot of noise in the press, priests should form a kind of private association for settling their problems in the more or less "regular" way, and it would be understood that instead of appealing to outside pressure they would make it understood that if they continued to get the runaround they would simply get out, get secularized, and use their talents in some other way where they would be less obstructed. The need of priests is considerable these days, but is presented in artificial statistical sort of language which is really bypassing all issues. Yet it scares the bishops. If they realize that they are just not going to have any decent priests left, and that they will be stuck with aged cranks, creeps, seventy-year-old infants and so on . . . they may think things over. (Ferry, 1.26.66 HGL 223–25)

The Trappist's proposal of a "private association" for priests to deal with superiors was a more reasonable approach than the concept of a priests' union. In places like the Archdiocese

of Chicago such a tactic was taken with success in the formation of the Association of Chicago Priests as they dealt with the authoritarian style of John Cardinal Cody during the 1970s. Two months later, in 1966, Thomas Merton wrote to Ferry with further expressions of opposition to DuBay's unionizing approach to ecclesiastical superiors:

. . . the kind of collision course with authority that he advocates is not going to get anywhere really. The whole situation is already so vitiated with politics that his ideas will only make it ultra-political. The whole source of the authority problem in the Church is precisely that Superiors act too much as politicians and manipulate subjects for purely institutional ends. Du Bay's course seems to point to an even worse kind of institutionalism in the long run. (3.11.66 HGL 225)

During 1968, the final year of life for Thomas Merton, he was offering what some in officialdom might have considered subversive advice to an anonymous priest who could not decide whether to stay or leave the active ministry. To "Father D.," the monk wrote something of the way he himself had come to understand and to live his own monastic and priestly vocation from his hermitage in the woods:

Couldn't you be a sort of "underground priest" in lay clothes, saying Mass in private homes among people you are at ease with, and perhaps also serving some tiny community, some convent, and helping out with shut-ins, people who are forgotten, who suffer, etc.? In other words it seems to me that in this Post-Conciliar period you might be called to a kind of hidden service in the sort of unofficial and informal life you desire. In short, be like a layman, live like a layman, but do some priestly work or service along with it.

I don't see that you have to stop being a priest just because the routine machinery of parish organization is bugging you. All the more reason to get out of the ordinary patterns and yet to be a priest nevertheless, and work in a quiet, relaxed relationship with people you can relate to without too much difficulty.

After all, you are always going to have to relate to people. See your priesthood not as a role or an office, but as just part of your own life and your own relation to other persons. You can bring them Christ in some quiet way, and perhaps you will find yourself reaching people that the Church would not otherwise contact. (3.14.68 SC 371)

The final words of Thomas Merton about priesthood that are found in his published letters are these short and cryptic remarks made in his characteristic and usual "unusual" style of correspondence with Robert Lax during the month of June, shortly before his death: "Brothers is all agog over the tempo. Was here a phalanx of novice masters a big drag an odious passatempo was come to the hermit box for a speech. 'You might as well all leave the clericals' I suggested with a wry leer. Was cheered wildly for this" (6.22.68 RJ 185).

At the time of his early and sudden death in Bangkok, Thailand, on December 10, 1968, Thomas Merton had surely shifted considerably in his sense of and reflections on the Roman Catholic priesthood, since the exalted experience of his ordination in May of 1949. And so had many of his brother priests around the world!

7

On Being a Hermit

Thomas Merton had always sought solitude and silence in his life. As he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

What I needed was the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be simplified out under the gaze of God more or less the way a plant spreads out its leaves in the sun. That meant that I needed a Rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God, not a Rule made to fit me to fight for God in the world. But I did not find out all that in one day. (*Reader*, 96)

As he was deciding, in the fall of 1941, whether to work with Catherine de Hueck Doherty at Friendship House in the slums of Harlem, or to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani, Tom Merton sought the Lord's will by opening the Bible as Augustine had once done in order to discern the divine mind. Whatever page he found, he thought, would perhaps help him to know his calling in life. He opened to the passage in the Gospel of Luke in which Zechariah was struck dumb by the angel. The words were: "you will be silent." He took this as a sign that he was meant to join "the burnt men" at the abbey of silence in the Kentucky hills. As he was to write in 1961: ". . . our life as monks is lived especially under the sign of a kind of inner

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