MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER SEVENTEEN

Edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO

Survival or Prophecy?

The Correspondence of
Jean Leclercq & Thomas Merton

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Rembert G. Weakland, OSB

Afterword by

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The vocation of the monk in the modern world . . . is not survival but prophecy.

— *Thomas Merton to Jean Leclercq, July 23, 1968*

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FOREWORD

Searching out the reasons for the flowering of monasticism after World War II, whether in the United States or in other parts of the New World, involves studying the voluminous writings of its proponents in that period. Among them, Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq take pride of place. Merton, the Cistercian, stayed close to his cloister in Kentucky; Leclercq, the Benedictine, traveled the world over. But both were in touch with monastic happenings everywhere in the world and influenced both the thinking and the aspirations of the monks of their day. To the general public in the United States Merton is the better known. However, one can see from this correspondence his deferential bearing toward Leclercq, who was his senior by only four years and who was better known among scholars and monasteries of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Jean Leclercq went to everybody and every place on the globe; everyone came to Thomas Merton at Gethsemani. Yet from the letters it is clear that the two men were following similar paths and had similar aspirations for the future of monasticism.

Elected Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order in 1967, a role that required much travel and attendance at many conferences on the future of monasticism, I came to know Leclercq well through the years. The first opportunity I had to come to know Merton personally was in Bangkok in 1968, a meeting that brought Merton and Leclercq together and was the occasion of Merton's unexpected and sudden death. Of the two, Leclercq was

easier to know and converse with. He was a delightful extrovert, not too complicated psychologically, and conversant on everything and everybody. His English was good, even if clipped in the French style. He could be blunt, but never rude. Like the monks of the Middle Ages, whom he studied so assiduously, he seemed to regard his learning as but the support system for his interest in contemporary monastic renewal. He had no "authority complex," and for me, even though I was the titular head of his Order, being with him was always a delight.

Merton was harder to come to know. He was psychologically quite complicated, full of inner quarrels about his public role and his monastic calling, and although he wrote a great deal about his interior spiritual life and about his opinions on many matters, he was much more reserved in speaking—at least around me, an authority figure.

What the two men had in common was their flair for writing. They poured out books and articles over several decades. They both wrote many letters—Leclercq's output reaching about sixteen hundred items! Merton wrote personal diaries or journals; Leclercq did not. Yet Leclercq's notes, written during his many visits to Africa and Asia but not meant for publication, were similar to journals, if perhaps less personal and more "objective." Reading Leclercq's letters is like being in a privileged observatory that affords a view of everyone and every place in the monastic world of his day.

What characterized this new flowering of monasticism in the postwar period, and what gave it such a vibrant new impetus?

The postwar monastic renewal was vitalized, first of all, by the "return to the sources." This renewal was not a complete rejection of the previous monastic renewal, that of the nineteenth century, but it did not rely explicitly on the "masters" of that first renewal. Dom Columba Marmion's *Christ the Ideal of the Monk* (English ed., 1922) and Dom Paul Delatte's *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Commentary* (English ed., 1921) were not forgotten, but, as we see in reading the letters between Merton and Leclercq, these works were not considered a common source for renewal, even though they were well known in all monasteries of the French

tradition. The German monastic writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—for example, Ildefons Herwegen (d. 1946), Odo Casel (d. 1948), and Anselm Stolz (d. 1942)—were likewise known but more or less ignored, as were the remarkable historical studies of David Knowles in England.

Rather, the driving force behind the postwar renewal was a return to older sources, to the origins of monasticism in the patristic period and to St. Bernard and the Cistercian reforms of the twelfth century. Merton and Leclercq had a common interest in these sources and saw them as pivotal for monastic reform in their day. Thus they so easily and eagerly shared in their correspondence new facets of the life and personality of Bernard and new insights into the early Cistercian ideals of community, solitude, the Rule, and the like. They approached history in the same way: as a vital source for the renewal of monastic life in their times. They hoped that a return to these monastic ideals of Bernard's day would be replicable in their own and felt it was absolutely necessary for any revival of monasticism.

Merton and Leclercq were not alone in thinking so. To make the picture of this monastic renewal in the second half of the twentieth century complete, one would have to add to the list of significant monastic authors the remarkable scholar Adalbert de Vogüé, OSB. His voluminous writings on the Rule of Benedict and its historical precedents were yet another source for this new flowering. A monk of La Pierre-qui-Vire, de Vogüé taught for many years in the Monastic Institute at Sant'Anselmo in Rome and thus, with Leclercq, influenced several generations of monks in the second half of the twentieth century.

Merton and Leclercq were well versed in the Latin Fathers but admitted their deficiencies in knowledge of Greek monastic writers. This lacuna in postwar monastic renewal was filled in by the magisterial writings of Jean Gribomont, OSB, a confrère of Dom Leclercq and also a professor at Sant'Anselmo at that time. The many students who were taught by Leclercq and these other masters brought back to their monasteries everywhere in the world the notion of a return to the original sources—a *ressourcement*—which has guided monastic reform ever since. Merton and

Leclercq were a part of this larger movement and had the advantage of strong convictions on how the ideals of those earlier periods were to be carried out in our day.

The other vital influence on the post–World War II monastic renewal was Asian monasticism. Leclercq had a great curiosity and a superficial and practical acquaintance with the Asian monastic traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, and the like); Merton had a more accurate theoretical knowledge but lacked contact with the living Asian monastic tradition. That is why his trip to Asia in 1968 was so important to him. His encounters with Tibetan monks in Dharamsala, with Buddhist monks of the Theravada tradition in India, and then with Asian Catholic monks in Bangkok were the fruit of a dialogue he had carried on inwardly and through his writings for more than a decade. Thus stimulated, the dialogue has continued in both East and West and, in its own way, has prompted Western monks to study their tradition's more contemplative sources in a desire to compare them with Asian manifestations. In this regard, the most important person responsible for bringing the two together was not Merton—he did not live long enough to do so—but Dom Bede Griffiths (d. 1993), who lived the mixture of the two veins of monasticism, East and West, in his own ashram and who was, in turn, to influence many other Western monks. He had an authenticity about him that came from lived experience that neither Leclercq nor Merton could match.

In reading the letters between Leclercq and Merton, one is struck by the influence that the young monasteries in Africa were having on the monastic renewal in the West. The descriptions given by Leclercq I can personally verify. During the many trips I made to Africa and the nascent monasteries there, I felt that I was returning to the early days of monasticism. There the Rule of Benedict could be lived out without perceptible adaptations and without commentary and added "bylaws." This return to simplicity continues to influence monastic renewal into the twenty-first century.

Both Merton and Leclercq accepted without question the best in modern biblical exegesis, using it to complement their

patristic and medieval approaches. For monks, the new biblical scholarship was an important postwar phenomenon, a scriptural aid to the "return to the sources." The rediscovery of the Benedictine *lectio divina*—a spirituality grounded in prayer that rose out of sustained attention to the scriptural texts—was not marked by a rejection of modern biblical insights that came from the new historical and form criticism, that is, from a new knowledge of the ways the Scriptures had been redacted from various fragmentary and often contradictory sources. Instead, these insights were integrated into the whole, producing a more biblically informed spirituality.

One could say the same about their approach to modern psychological advances. Merton in particular, perhaps because of his role as novice master at Gethsemani, which left him in charge of new monks' character formation, became quite fluent in these insights and applied them everywhere in his spirituality and in his writings. Neither author is antiscience or antimodern per se. Perhaps this is one reason why both were so appealing to the younger generation in the 1960s and 1970s. Their criticisms of modern culture had more to do with its lack of deeper and life-giving values than with its scientific advances, which they recognized and welcomed.

Both Merton and Leclercq saw an advantage in renewing in the Church the vocation of the hermit, so characteristic of Catholic monasticism in the early days of the Church, but discouraged later on. The reemergence of hermits seemed a strange phenomenon to many in those postwar years. Merton in particular felt misunderstood whenever he mentioned his desire to live as a hermit among the Camaldolese in Europe or in a simple dwelling in the woods near the Abbey of Gethsemani. Reading about Merton's struggle within his own monastery to realize this vocation for himself can be a bit tedious, but it is a significant part of the monastic renewal and its more patristic roots. Although Leclercq did not have the disposition or desire for the eremitical life, he appreciated it very much, influenced by his remarkable Abbot at Clervaux, Dom Jacques Winandy. Leclercq defended this vocation in higher places and changed the attitude of many Superiors

toward it. Their work was not without fruit. The possibility of the eremitical life was favorably treated in the revised Code of Canon Law (1983), and Catholic hermits are now found all over the world.

Finally, both authors, but especially Merton, saw their roles as prophetic witnesses. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of Merton's concept of monastic renewal was his interpretation of the *fuga mundi* (the flight from the world) not as a selfish and individualistic withdrawal from the trials and troubles of the world around him but as a "monastic distancing" of himself to help to bring about positive change in contemporary society. His criticisms of the United States and the culture of his day are acerbic and in the spirit of the prophets of old. He felt free, through his monastic vocation and the detachment from worldly life it offered, to make such judgments. Leclercq was less prone to negative assertions, but he was not without his sharp and unbending criticisms of European culture and European monasticism in particular.

The prophetic stance was one of the enduring and most attractive aspects of the monastic renewal in the last half of the twentieth century; and both Merton and Leclercq, cognizant that the Christian monastic tradition had first emerged as a form of prophetic witness against the ever more worldly Church, brought it to bear on the Church of their own day. They knew that the early monks had felt a need to witness to the Church first of all, especially against its tendency to compromise with the demands of the Empire and against its desire to seek power and prestige; and they sought to make such a witness with their own lives. The passion of many youthful candidates to monastic life, as well as many laypeople seeking deeper spiritual values in ordinary life, suggests the great appeal of this sort of witness, especially when described by a writer of Merton's caliber.

The publication of the letters of Jean Leclercq in the summer of 2000 and the final volumes of the complete journals of Thomas Merton in 1998 is proof enough that there is still a lively interest in the works of these two remarkable monks—their thoughts, their aspirations, their deep love of the monastic ideal, and their

blueprint for its renewal in our times. It is only fitting that the correspondence between them also sees the light of day. It is clear that their influence has lasted into this new century and will perdure.

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland

INTRODUCTION

> When the history of twentieth-century monasticism comes to be written, it is hard not to think that two monks will dominate the story: Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq. —Bernard McGinn[1]

The correspondence between Dom Jean Leclercq and Father Thomas Merton is a microcosmic history of the monastic renewal in the mid-twentieth century. When the exchange began between these two monks separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Thomas Merton was a Cistercian monk recently ordained to the priesthood (1949), already well known as a result of the phenomenal success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and becoming more and more involved with the monastic formation of the young monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Meanwhile, Jean Leclercq, in the Benedictine monastery of Clervaux in Luxembourg, was publishing articles on medieval monastic writers, preparing for the day when he would begin his work on the critical edition of the works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. So, naturally, the first letters dealt mainly with traditional monastic questions, but this later broadened to include renewal, social justice,

[1] From *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Essays in Honor of Jean Leclercq*, edited by E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

experimental monasticism in Third World countries, ecumenism, and the place of the monk in an increasingly troubled world.

The first exchanges concerned making a microfilm of some texts of St. Bernard that were discovered among the manuscripts of the Obrecht Collection at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Some seventy manuscripts and the same number of incunabula were eventually transferred from the Gethsemani vault to the Institute of Cistercian Studies Library at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. From the earliest letters it becomes evident that some letters are missing. In any case, Merton uses the occasion to invite Leclercq to come to Gethsemani the next time he is in the States.

In a Foreword to Bruno Scott James's volume of selected letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Merton wrote what could be an autobiographical statement regarding his monastic exchange of letters with Jean Leclercq: "The whole Bernard is not to be found in his letters alone: but the whole Bernard can never be known without them." Merton concluded his Foreword with these equally revealing words: "Let us at least gather from St. Bernard that letter-writing is an art which has been forgotten, but which needs to be re-learned."[2] St. Bernard carried on a vast correspondence in the twelfth century, even to the reigning Pope Eugenius III, a Cistercian monk whom Bernard considered his spiritual son. His reputation as a mediator between church and state has never been rivaled. He was truly "the last of the Fathers." For both Leclercq and Merton, St. Bernard was the preeminent embodiment of the Cistercian tradition with its human depth and contemplative wisdom.

What I find especially significant in regard to Merton's side of the correspondence is how he kept maturing both as a person and as a monk. It was undoubtedly due to his contact with persons like Jean Leclercq that his thinking evolved regarding monastic renewal and the essential place of the monk in the modern world. Robert Giroux, Merton's friend from his Columbia days and later his editor, spoke of this aspect of Merton's development at the

[2] From Thomas Merton's Foreword to *St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, by Bruno Scott James (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), pp. v–viii.

dedication of the new Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 10, 1997: "I have known many gifted writers, but none who developed and grew as fast and as deeply as Merton did."[3]

Dom Jean Leclercq was born in Avesnes, in northern France on January 31, 1911 (the same day as Merton, but four years earlier); Thomas Merton was born in Prades, in southern France, at the foothills of the Pyrenees, in 1915. Leclercq entered the monastery of Clervaux in 1928. After monastic studies and ordination to the priesthood, he became one of the most prolific historians of medieval Benedictines and Cistercians. (See the Appendix for a chronology of the main events of his life as well as the principal books he published on medieval subjects.) He was one of the best-loved scholars throughout his long career, which ended at his Abbey of Clervaux on October 27, 1993.

Although Leclercq was not eremitically inclined, he was open to the hermit life as an exception to the general rule in cenobitic monasteries; from his historical research he knew it was not foreign to the tradition. He encouraged Merton and others who he felt had a special vocation to a more solitary way of life, but within the framework of traditional monasticism, both Benedictine and Cistercian. Leclercq's responses to Merton's desire for greater solitude were always tempered with prudence and caution, and in obedience to the local Abbot. On the Feast of St. Bernard, August 20, 1965, Father Louis (as Merton was known among the monks) was finally granted permission to enter the hermit life full time in a small hermitage on the property of the Abbey of Gethsemani. When in America, Leclercq frequently visited Gethsemani to give talks to the community and to evaluate Merton's solitary vocation at close range.

In early 1968, after Dom James Fox resigned his abbatial office at Gethsemani and Father Flavian Burns was elected his successor, Leclercq continued his contacts, and was instrumental in arranging for the invitation for Merton to participate in the

[3] *The Merton Seasonal: A Quarterly Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1998).

conference of Asian monastic Superiors in Bangkok, Thailand, in December 1968. Leclercq and Merton met there for the last time. It was especially fitting that this final meeting of monastic friends took place in the midst of Asian monks and nuns gathered to discuss ideas the two of them cherished—the need to explore monasticism in the Far East and to take advantage of the wisdom of non-Christian monastic traditions of Asia for the sake of a revitalized monasticism in the West.

In the last letter that Merton addressed to Leclercq in this exchange, dated July 23, 1968, he writes: "The vocation of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy. We are all too busy saving our skins."

Thomas Merton was electrocuted by a faulty standing fan in his Bangkok room only a few hours after he delivered his talk on monasticism and Marxism to the assembled monks and nuns on December 10, 1968. Rembert G. Weakland, who was then Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, presided at the conference and gave the homily at the funeral liturgy in Bangkok, in which he eulogized Merton as a true monk at heart, always restless in his never-ending search for God, always moving forward to that farther shore. The same could be said of Jean Leclercq, who through his intellectual explorations never gave up the search for the one thing necessary.

It is our hope that this unique monastic exchange of letters will help readers to understand the essential meaning of this radical response to the Gospel, incarnated so well by these two gifted monks, and how we can in our turn live the call of Christian discipleship more authentically in the years to come.

Brother Patrick Hart

EDITOR'S NOTE

Several of the early letters of Jean Leclercq were written in French. In the years before his death Dom Leclercq entrusted the translations to his English-speaking secretary, Sister Bernard Said, OSB. After Leclercq's death several more letters written in French were discovered; Father Chrysogonus Waddell, OCSO, of Gethsemani Abbey was asked to translate these into English. Our thanks to both Sister Bernard and Father Chrysogonus for providing the translations.

In transcribing the letters, we have followed the editorial policy established in previous volumes of Thomas Merton's letters of inserting translations of foreign expressions in brackets. We have used headnotes and footnotes only when it was deemed essential to explain the context or a missing letter.

Thanks to numerous persons who have assisted us in this venture, especially Dom Michel Jorrot, the Benedictine Abbot of Jean Leclercq's monastery of Saint-Maurice in Clervaux, Luxembourg, for forwarding to me the entire correspondence that was found among Leclercq's papers following his death in 1993. A word of gratitude to Brothers Stephen Batchelor, Anton Rusnak, and Columban Weber of Gethsemani, who made up for my incompetence in the realm of computer skills. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Robert Giroux and Paul Elie of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, who were a great source of encouragement as the work progressed to a happy conclusion.

LETTERS

JEAN LECLERCQ TO THOMAS MERTON

This first extant letter from Dom Jean Leclercq to Father Louis (Thomas Merton) opens with a reference to a letter from Merton dated January 15, 1950. Apparently, the lost letter to Leclercq from Merton was in regard to what current research was being done on the Cistercian Fathers. Dom Leclercq was interested in the Gethsemani manuscripts that were kept in a vault until they were transferred to the Institute of Cistercian Studies Library at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo a decade later.

Munich
January 28, 1950

I am happy that you are doing a study on a collection of texts by St. Bernard. Never enough can be done to make him known, and it answers a real need of our contemporaries: a Swiss editor has also just asked me for a collection in German.

I am also in contact with the Reverend Bruno Scott James.

I will be happy to look over your *Collectanea* [*Cisterciensia*] articles when I get a copy of the issue. I think that the only important book about St. Bernard these last years was the one by [William] Watkins, *St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, which I mention in the bibliographical note in *S. Bernard mystique*. There is also a fine chapter in *Aufgang des Abendlandes* by Heer, ed. Europa, Wien [Vienna] and Zurich.

I studied Baldwin of Ford some time ago, especially his doctrine on the Eucharist, for a collection which did not appear, but I do not think that anyone has done any work on Baldwin since then.

So there is still a great deal to do, and I think that the Lord is expecting a great deal from a true monastic life in our own days and that the world stands in need of it. So you have a beautiful

mission. I would be happy to receive your books; I have heard them spoken about. If I can help you in anything, I am at your service, and I ask you to believe, my Reverend Father, in my devoted respect in Our Lord.

JEAN LECLERCQ TO THOMAS MERTON

Lisbon
[Undated—before Easter, 1950]

I did receive the films of your manuscripts of St. Bernard, and I thank you. The film of the *Sermones in Cantica* [Sermons on the Song of Songs] will be used very soon. Unfortunately, the film of the *Sermones* is unreadable; the photo is blurred.

I have not yet returned to Clervaux, where your books are waiting for me. I know that they arrived there, but I have not yet had a chance to read them. I have only seen your articles in *Collectanea Cisterciensia* on the mystical doctrine of St. Bernard. I will read them when I can do so. I am sure, according to what I have heard, that you have gone much deeper than I have into the mystical life and doctrine of St. Bernard. This I have done only very superficially. But perhaps later on, when I have finished the edition, I will be able to do something more mature, after having spent a long time with the texts.

For the moment I am leading a life completely contrary to my vocation and to my ideal, and the cause of it is St. Bernard. I am traveling all over Europe looking for manuscripts. They are everywhere. But this documentation has to be assembled once for all, and it can be hoped that St. Bernard will come out of it better known. It is an extremely difficult job. It is a major scientific responsibility, especially at certain times. For example, soon I am going to have to decide which manuscripts are to be retained to establish the text of the *Sermones in Cantica*: all the work that follows will depend on this decision. Please pray that this work be done well and that it be worthy of St. Bernard.

THOMAS MERTON TO JEAN LECLERCQ

A decade before Vatican II, Thomas Merton was already returning to the sources of monasticism with his conferences on Benedict, Cassian, Pachomius, Evagrius, and other writers of the earliest tradition. He was also moving into the twelfth-century Cistercian "evangelists": Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, Guerric of Igny, and Aelred of Rievaulx.

April 22, 1950

Another film of the St. Bernard Sermons is now on the way to you. This time I looked it over to see if it was all right and it was legible on our machine. I am sorry the first attempt was not too good: you must forgive our young students who are just trying their hand at this kind of work for the first time. Pray that they may learn, because in the future many demands will be made on their talents—if any.

I might wish that your travels would bring you to this side of the Atlantic and that we might have the pleasure of receiving you at Gethsemani. We have just remodeled the vault where our rare books are kept and have extended its capacities to include a good little library on Scripture and the Fathers and the Liturgy —or at least the nucleus of one. Here I hope to form a group of competent students not merely of history or of the texts but rather—in line with the tradition which you so admirably represent—men competent in all-round spiritual theology, as well as scholarship, using their time and talents to develop the seed of the Word of God in their souls, not to choke it under an overgrowth of useless research as is the tradition in the universities of this country at the moment. I fervently hope that somehow we shall see in America men who are able to produce something like *Dieu Vivant* [a French journal]. Cistercians will never be able to do quite that, I suppose, but we can at least give a good example along those lines. Our studies and writing should by their very nature contribute to our contemplation, at least remotely, and contemplation in turn should be able to find expression in channels laid open for it and deepened by familiarity with the

Fathers of the Church. This is an age that calls for St. Augustines and Leos, Gregorys and Cyrils!

That is why I feel that your works are so tremendously helpful, dear Father. Your *St. Bernard mystique* is altogether admirable because, while being simple and fluent, it communicates to the reader a real appreciation of St. Bernard's spirituality. You are wrong to consider your treatment of St. Bernard superficial. It is indeed addressed to the general reader, but for all that it is profound and all-embracing and far more valuable than the rather technical study which I undertook for *Collectanea* [*Cisterciensia*] and which, as you will see on reading it, was beyond my capacities as a theologian. The earlier sections especially, in my study, contain many glaring and silly errors—or at least things are often very badly expressed there.[1] If I write a book on the saint I shall try to redeem myself, without entering into the technical discussions that occupy E. Gilson in his rather brilliant study.[2] But there again, a book of your type is far more helpful.

Be sure that we are praying for the work you now have in hand, which is so important and which implies such a great responsibility for you.

I had heard that you were helping to prepare for the press Dom Wilmart's edition of Ailred's *De institutione inclusarum* [Institution for recluses] but perhaps you have put this on the shelf for the time being. Are the Cistercians of the Common Observance editing the works of Ailred? Where are they doing so and when is the work expected to be finished? By the way, about the spelling of Ailred: the most prominent English scholars seem to be spelling him as I have just done, with an "i." I wish there could be some unity on this point. My work on him is in abeyance at the moment, but when I get on with it I suppose I had better go on using this spelling. What do you think about that?

[1] Thomas Merton, "The Transforming Union in St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross," *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 10 (1948), pp. 107, 210; 11 (1949), pp. 41, 351; 12 (1950), p. 25.

[2] Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940).

Rest assured, dear Father, that I am praying for you and that our students are doing the same. Please pray for us too. I have too much activity on my shoulders, teaching and writing.

JEAN LECLERCQ TO THOMAS MERTON

Both Leclercq and Merton stressed the essential contemplative nature of monasticism and were interested in getting back to the original charism of the founders of monasticism, which made the contemplative life the monastic ideal. The Cistercian tradition, beginning with the foundation of Cîteaux in 1098, had its roots in previous Benedictine reforms, such as those of St. Benedict of Aniane, and actually could be traced back to the earlier tradition with Athanasius, Cassian, and Pachomius.

Clervaux
May 5, 1950

I was just going to write to you when I received, yesterday, your last letter. Thank you for the new film, which has already arrived.

Thank you also for your prayers and encouragement. I know that some scholars and professors criticize my books because they are too "human," not sufficiently, not purely "scientific," objective: but I do not care about having a good reputation as a scholar among scholars, although I could also do pure scholarly work, and I sometimes do, just to show that I know what it is. But I also know that many monks, and they are the more monastic monks, in several Orders—Camaldolese, Cistercians, Trappists, Benedictines of the strictest observances—find my books nourishing, and find in them an answer to their own aspirations. I thank God for that. My only merit—if any—is to accept not to be a pure scholar; otherwise I never invent ideas: I just bring to light ideas and experiences which are to be found in old monastic books that nobody, even in monasteries, ever reads today.

Since you seem to want me to do so, I am sending you today some offprints, just about "monastica." As you will see, I always say and write the same thing, because only one is necessary, and it is the only thing you would find in old monastic texts . . .

I think you have an important job to do at Gethsemani, first for America, and then for the whole Cistercian Order: to come back to the Cistercian idea. But there are two difficulties. The first is to keep the just measure in work, either manual or intellectual. Both forms of work, especially the second, entail a danger of activism (mental activism): that is a personal question which each monk has to solve for himself if he wants to work and stay a monk; some are unable to do both and have to choose to remain monks. The second difficulty is more of the historical order, if we want to study the Cistercian tradition. I am alluding to the illusion of believing that the Cistercian tradition began with Cîteaux. I am becoming more and more convinced that the Cistercian tradition cannot be understood without its roots in pre-existing and contemporary Benedictine—and generally monastic—tradition. That is why in my studies I never separate the different forms and expressions of the unique monastic thought and experience. For instance, if one begins to study the Mariology of the Cistercian school without taking into consideration previous and contemporary monastic thought at the same time about the Virgin, then one tends to think that the Cistercians were at the origin of all true and fervent Mariology. Yet if one recalls what St. Anselm and the monks of the Anglo-Norman eleventh century wrote, then possibly one might come to the conclusion that in this field Cistercians, far from making progress, may even have retrograded (I think, for example, of the Conception of Our Lady). The only way to avoid such pitfalls is to be quite free from any order-emphasis, any "order-politics," and to search solely for the truth in the life of the Church of God.

Since you ask me what I think about your books, then I will tell you, even though I am no special authority on the matter. I suppose that the condition of our relations resides in perfect sincerity and loyalty.

I arrived back at Clervaux a few days ago, and have just had time to read the Prologue and the first two chapters of *The Waters*

of Siloe. I shall read the rest and then tell you my impressions. So far, I must say that I thoroughly enjoy your pages: both what you say and the way you say it. I think that one immediately feels that you "believe" in the contemplative life, and this faith of yours is more forceful for convincing your readers than would be the most scientific treatment of the subject.

In my opinion, you point out the very essence of monastic life when you say that it is a contemplative life. The Benedictine tradition is certainly a contemplative tradition: the doctrine of Benedictine medieval writers (and almost always up to our own days—the twentieth century is an exception, alas!) is a doctrine of contemplation and contemplative life. But we must confess that Benedictine history is not entirely—and in certain periods not at all—contemplative. Nevertheless, even when Benedictines were busy about many things, they never made this business *circa plurima* [about many things] an ideal, and they never spoke about it; their doctrine was always that of the *unum necessarium* [the one thing necessary].

I think you are quite right when you say that we fall short of this ideal for want of simplicity. There have always been—and there still are today—attempts to get back to this simplicity. And one such attempt has always been writing. But the danger is always there, and even today Cistercians do not always succeed in avoiding it. For instance, from the Cistercian—and even simple monastic—point of view, Orval (the new Orval)[3] has been and remains a scandal. It is a sin against simplicity: first because it is luxurious, and then because, on pretext of observing the Statutes forbidding gold and certain other materials, they have used precious and exotic materials which give the same impression as would gold, without being gold, and so on. And the festival held in honor of the consecration of Orval was also scandalous and has been felt as such even by Cistercians and Trappists. In the same way, the noise and publicity made over Gethsemani on the occasion of its centenary, and the write-up in magazines that had,

[3] A royal monastery in southern Belgium. Since the king and queen were buried there, the place took on something of the character of a tourist attraction.

in the same issue, pictures of pin-up girls, were also scandalous and have been felt as such (but perhaps that was in keeping with the "American style"). You see, dear Reverend Father, that I do not spare you. But it is in order to show how great is the temptation.

I find your pages about Rome perfectly sincere and just. I am glad that you were allowed to write so freely. Others, I know, have not had that same liberty, nor do they even now. But I hope that the love of truth will make people surrender all "order-orthodoxy" and "order-politics."

I know the Procurator General of the S.O.C. [Sacred Order of Cistercians, or Cistercians of the Common Observance], Abbot [Matthaeus] Quatember, very well. He has, in my opinion, a good idea of what Cistercian life is and should be. He tries to promote this life in Hauterive [in Switzerland], and I think he succeeds. Fortunately, till now, Hauterive has continued to be a small monastery. The danger for spiritual enterprises is always prosperity. Is the union of O.C.R. [Order of Reformed Cistercians, or Trappists] and S.O.C. a utopian dream? I would like to think not. But this reunion of Brothers, who have sometimes been and sometimes remain fence-Brothers, must be prepared by prayer and study in an atmosphere of search for Cistercian truth, and in an atmosphere of peace.

I pray for you, your monastery, and the whole Cistercian Order (I cannot break the unity, so strong in the *Carta Caritatis*; psychologically I have never accepted the schism of the beginning of the nineteenth century . . .). Pardon me the liberty of speech I take with you, and be sure that I am very faithfully yours in Our Lord and Our Lady.

Excuse too my awful English, but my writing is so bad that it is easier for you to read me in English than in French.

JEAN LECLERCQ TO THOMAS MERTON

The opening lines indicate a missing letter of Merton to Leclercq, which dealt with the monastic approach to reading and meditating on the sacred Scriptures. Lectio divina *(or sacred reading) for the monk was the preamble to contemplative meditation on the Word of God, something which both Leclercq and Merton stressed in their writings. It should be noted that now Merton begins to confide in Leclercq his yearnings for a more eremitical life.*

Brussels
July 29, 1950

Returned in Brussels by the strike, I at last find time to answer your long and interesting letter of June 17.

I am glad you approve what I wrote about *lectio divina*. I do not think that we must try to settle an opposition between the spiritual and the scientific reading of the Scriptures: we must try to reconcile these two methods as was the case in the Middle Ages, when the same doctors explained the Bible using both methods. I tried to explain this in a paper to be published in the collection *Recontres* (Ed. du Cerf) about *L'Exégèse de l'Ancien Testament*:

1. In the Middle Ages there were two sorts of exegetics: scientific and spiritual;
2. But there were not two sorts of Scripture scholars: all used the two methods;
3. And these two methods of Scripture study supposed a same conception of Holy Scripture, and especially the relations between the Old and New Testaments.

I think that the way of teaching the Bible now common in our theological colleges is merely apologetic, which was probably very useful forty years ago. Now, thanks to a reaction against this apologetic reaction, we are finding the *media via* [middle way], the *via conciliationis non oppositionis*. One of the tasks of the monastic world today is to give a practical demonstration that

this reconciliation is possible: we should not reject the results of modern biblical sciences, but nor should we be satisfied with them.

Probably by now you have seen that Gilbert of Stanford is not Gilbert of Hoyland: he is one of the many unknown spiritual writers who, though not all very original, show the intensity of the spiritual life in the monastic circles of the twelfth century . . .

I quite agree that the time is not ripe for a union (I avoid the word "fusion"; I prefer "union," which supposes distinction and differences: Distinguish in order to unite) between the S.O.C. and the O.C.R.[4] Some members of the S.O.C. are not sufficiently monks to understand the O.C.R.; but I think that this union would be good for both Orders and should be prepared. Both parties should prepare an atmosphere of comprehension and sympathy, and the monastic element of the S.O.C. should come to have more influence. Dom [Matthaeus] Quatember is quite favorable to this monastic element. The next General Chapter of the S.O.C. in September will be of very great importance from this point of view. I think that some members of the S.O.C. have values of the spiritual and intellectual life which are quite in the Cistercian tradition.

Since I am preparing the edition of St. Bernard (and to start with, the *Sermones in Cantica*), I shall have to study his sources. If you have any information about his dependence on Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and so on, you would be very kind to share it with me to help me in at least some orientations of my research. I feel the full weight of the difficulty of my work! And I am

[4] The Cistercian Order currently is divided into two Orders: S.O.C. stands for the Sacred Order of Cistercians, more popularly known as the Cistercians of the Common Observance. O.C.R. (or O.C.S.O.) are the initials for the Order of Reformed Cistercians, known today as the Cistercians of Strict Observance, or simply the Trappists. There is a long-standing movement to unite the two Orders, but as of this writing (2008) it has not been achieved. The S.O.C. maintains schools and parishes in the United States, whereas the Trappists have remained strictly contemplative without an active ministry.

sometimes tempted to be discouraged. Everybody finds it natural to criticize, but there is no one who is willing to help.

I am not sufficiently acquainted with oriental mysticism to have an opinion of yoga and St. Bernard. But since all mystical experiences are fundamentally the same, there is surely some connection; and this not only in the experience itself, but also in the expression of it. From this point of view I think that depth psychology will shed some light on these profound and universal themes of the religious representation.

I do not know your *Spirit of Simplicity*, but I would be pleased to read it if ever I get the opportunity. I read recently the *Vie de Rancé* by Chateaubriand. It increased my desire to read Rancé.[5] I fear our judgments about him have been influenced by Chateaubriand and the romanticism of the monastic restorers of the last century. Whatever we may find excessive in Rancé is part of his times and is to be found also in Benedictines of the same generation; too much so for our liking. I fear that what we reprove in Rancé is dependent more on [Augustin] de Lestrange and other romantics.

I quite understand your aspiration to a solitary life. I think there has always been an eremitical tradition in the Cistercian and Benedictine Orders. In my opinion we are not to discuss personal vocations according to principles of community life, nor according to universal laws. We must always be very respectful of these vocations, provided they are real vocations and not illusions. Personally, though I am quite inapt for the eremitical life, I have always encouraged my confrères who aspire to such a life. Now, in France, there are some Benedictine monks who live as hermits in the mountains. Nobody knows it except God. The tradition of hermitages near monasteries or *inclusi* in monasteries seems very difficult to revive today. So we must find some new solutions to this problem. It is a permanent problem

[5] Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé (1626–1700) was the Abbot-reformer of La Trappe in France who stressed the penitential aspect of the monastic life. Merton and Leclercq were united in an effort to go beyond Rancé to the original charism of the twelfth-century Cistercians.

and one which is a very good sign of the monastic fervor of the times: whenever cenobia are what they ought to be, they produce inevitably some eremitical vocations. The eremitical vocations disappear in times and countries where monasticism has ceased to be monastic.

Practically, now, the solution for such vocations is nearly always to move to an eremus, a charterhouse, or the eremi of the Camaldoli, that I know for sure.[6] Last year when I was in the eremus of Camaldoli, the master of novices was expecting an American Trappist. (I shall probably have to go again this year to the eremus at Frascati in order to study the writings of the founder.) The revival of the eremitical tendency in France has led to the inquiry being made by CHOC [Commission on the History of the Cistercian Order] about eremitical life. I can quite understand that your Abbot would like you to find a solution within the Cistercian life. Perhaps it is a providential occasion to restore reclusion. This is still practiced in Camaldoli. I saw that last year.

I would like to consult the book G. B. Burch, *The Steps of Humility* by Bernard, second ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1940. I cannot find it in Europe. Could you find it for me and either sell or lend it to me?

THOMAS MERTON TO JEAN LECLERCQ

October 9, 1950

It is a long time since I received your July letter, which I read and pondered on with deep satisfaction. It is a privilege for which I am deeply grateful, to be able to seek nourishment and inspira-

[6] The Camaldolese (O.S.B. Cam.) are a branch of the Benedictine Order founded by St. Romuald in the early eleventh century that allows for hermitages or individual cells for the monks, although the Brothers live more of a community style of monastic life. This is especially true of Frascati, which is in the hills outside Rome.

tion directly from those who keep themselves so close to the sources of monastic spirituality.

Your remarks on St. Bernard's ideas of Scripture are extremely important to me. I have been meditating on your Appendix to *Saint Bernard mystique*, and also I have been talking on this very subject to the students here. I agree with your conclusions about St. Bernard and yet I wonder if it would not be possible to say that he did consider himself in a very definite sense an exegete. My own subjective feeling is that the full seriousness of St. Bernard's attitude to Scripture is not brought out entirely unless we can in some sense treat him as an exegete and as a theologian, in his exposition of the Canticle. Naturally, he is not either of these things in a purely modern sense. But I think he is acting as a theologian according to the Greek Fathers' conception at least to some extent (see end of [Vladimir] Lossky's first chapter: *Theol. myst. de l'église orientale*[7]). I think that is essentially what you were saying when you brought out the fact that he was seeking less to nourish his interior life than to exercise it. As if new meanings in his own life and Scripture spontaneously grew up to confirm each other as soon as Bernard immersed himself in the Sacred Text. Still, there is the evident desire of the saint to penetrate the Text with a certain mystical understanding and this means to arrive at a living contact with the Word hidden in the word. This would be tantamount to saying that for Bernard, both exegesis and theology found their fullest expression in a concrete mystical experience of God in His revelation. This positive hunger for "theology" in its very highest sense would be expressed in such a text as Cant. lxxiii, 2: "*Ego . . . in profundo sacri eloquii gremio spiritum mihi scrutabor et vitam*" [Deep in the bosom of the sacred word I shall search my spirit and my life]. He is seeking "*intellectum*" and "*Spiritus est qui vivificat: dat quippe intellectum. An non vita intellectus*" [The Spirit gives life: indeed he gives understanding. And is not understanding life?]. As you have so rightly said (p. 488), "*Sa lecture de l'E. Ste prépare et occasionne son expérience*

[7] *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957).

du divin" [His reading of Scripture prepares and occasions his experience of the divine]. But I wonder if he did not think of Scripture as a kind of *cause* of that experience, and in some sense, "*servata proportione*" [keeping due proportion], as a Sacrament is a cause of grace? Scripture puts him in direct contact with the Holy Spirit who infuses mystical grace, rather than awakening in his soul the awareness that the Holy Spirit who infuses mystical grace has already infused a grace to that spoken of in Scripture. Or am I wrong? In any case, words like "*scrutabor*" [I shall search] and "*intellectus*" [understanding] tempt me to say (while agreeing in substance with all your conclusions) that there must have been a sense in which St. Bernard looked upon himself both as an exegete and as a theologian in his exposition of the Canticle. Although I readily admit there can be no question of his attempting as a modern author might to "make the text clear" or to "explain its meaning." That hardly concerned him, as you have shown. But do you not think that in giving the fruit of his own contacts with the Word through Scripture he was in a sense introducing his monks to a certain mystical "attitude" toward the Scriptures—not a method, but an "atmosphere" in which Scripture could become the meeting place of the Soul and the Word through the action of the Holy Spirit?

Perhaps these are useless subtleties: but you guess that I am simply exercising my own thought in order to confront it with the reactions of an expert and this will be the greatest service to me in the work that has been planned for me by Providence. I am also very much interested in the question of St. Bernard's attitude toward "learning," and feel that a distinction has not yet been sufficiently clearly made between his explicit reproofs of "*scientia*" in the sense of *philosophia* and his implicit support of "*scientia*" in the sense of *theologia*, in his tracts on Grace, Baptism, and his attacks on Abelard, not to mention (with all due respect to your conclusions) his attitude to the Canticle which makes that commentary also "*scientia*" [knowledge] as well as "*sapientia*" [wisdom]. Have you any particular lights on this distinction between science and wisdom in the Cistercians, or do you know of anything published in their regard? It seems to me to be an interest-

ing point, especially to those of us who, like yourself and me, are monks engaged in a sort of "*scientia*" along with their contemplation! (It is very interesting in William of Saint-Thierry.)

I wish I could give you some information on St. Bernard in his relation to the Greek Fathers. I have none of my own; the topic interests me but I have barely begun to do anything about it, since I know the Greek Fathers so poorly. However, I can tell you this much: in [Jean] Danielou's *Platonisme et T. M.* on pages 7 and 211 there are references to St. Bernard's dependence (?) on St. Gregory of Nyssa. The opening of St. Bernard's series of *Sermons* so obviously reflects the idea of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa that the Canticle of Canticles was for the formation of mystics while Proverbs and Ecclesiastes applied to the beginners and progressives. I find Bernard's echo of this point an interesting piece of evidence that he considered the monastic vocation a remote call to mystical union—if not a proximate one. Then, too, Gregory's homilies on the Canticle of Canticles are full of a tripartite division of souls into slaves, mercenaries, and spouses. Gregory's apophatism is not found in St. Bernard, but in his positive treatment of theology Bernard follows Origen. I think Fr. Danielou also told me that Bernard's attitude toward the incarnate Word is founded on Origen—I mean his thoughts on *amor carnalis* [carnal love of Christ] in relation to mystical experience. I may be wrong.

A copy of *The Spirit of Simplicity* was mailed to you, but my own contribution to that work is confused and weak, I believe. I refer to the second part.

I agree with what you say about Abbé de Rancé and feel that my own treatment of him in *Waters of Siloe* had something in it of caricature. It is certainly true that Abbé de Lestrange was much more austere than Rancé.[8] To my mind the most regrettable thing

[8] Augustin de Lestrange (1754–1827), last master of novices at La Trappe at the time of the French Revolution, gathered twenty-one monks of his community and fled to Switzerland, where he introduced even greater mortifications and penitential exercises than Rancé's community practiced at La Trappe.

about both of them was their exaggeration of externals, their ponderous emphasis on "exercises" and things to be done. Nevertheless, perhaps that is a sign of my own tepidity. It is true that the monastic life does demand faithful observance of many little exterior points of the Rule. These can certainly not be neglected *en masse* without spiritual harm. But one sometimes feels that for the old Trappists they were absolutely everything.

The Desert Fathers interest me much. They seem to have summed up almost everything that is good and bad in subsequent monastic history (except for the abuses of decadent monasticism), I mean everything that is good or bad in various monastic *ideals*.

Your news of the *De institutione inclusarum* [Instruction for recluses]—which you tell me with such detachment—is sad indeed. Do not think that manuscripts are only lost in Italy. A volume of our poems was printed by a man whose shop was in the country. Goats used to wander in to the press and eat the author's copy. This fortunately did not happen to our poems. Perhaps the goats were wise. They sensed the possibility of poisoning.

I am extremely eager to get Fr. [Louis] Bouyer's new book on monasticism, but have not yet been able to do so. I liked his *Saint Antoine*. Still, I wonder if he does not overdo his interest in the fact that in the early ages of the Church people were so clearly aware that the fall had put the devil in charge of material things. Fr. Danielou's *Signe du temple*, in its first chapter, gives a good counterpoise to that view—for heaven still shone through creation and God was very familiar with men in Genesis!

The other day we mailed Burch's *Steps of Humility* to you and it should be in your hands shortly. If you wish to send us something in return we would like to get [André] Wilmart's *Pensées du B. Guigue*, if this is Guigo the Carthusian. I have never yet gone into him. His lapidary style fascinates me. He is better than Pascal. Yet I love Pascal.

Your page on the eremitical vocation was very welcome. Someone told me the Carthusians were at last coming to America. I know the Trappist who has gone to Camaldoli. He was with me in the novitiate here. I wonder if he is happy there. His departure surprised me and I think his arrival surprised some of the Camaldolese.

Cistercian monasticism in America is of a genus all its own. Imagine that we now have one hundred and fifty novices at Gethsemani. This is fantastic. Many of them are sleeping in a tent in the quadrangle. The nucleus of seniors is a small, bewildered group of men who remember the iron rule of Dom Edmond Obrecht and have given up trying to comprehend what has happened to Gethsemani. The house has a very vital and enthusiastic (in the good sense) and youthful air like the camp of an army preparing for an easy and victorious war. Those of us who have been sobered by a few years of the life find ourselves in turn comforted and depressed by the multitude of our young companions of two and three months' standing: comforted by their fervor and joy and simplicity, and depressed by the sheer weight of numbers. The cloister is as crowded as a Paris street.

On the whole, when the house is completely full of men who are happy because they have not yet had a chance to suffer anything (although they believe themselves willing), the effect is a little disquieting. One feels more solidly rooted in God in a community of veterans, even though many of them may be morose. However, I do not waste my time seeking consolation in the community or avoiding its opposite. There is too little time for these accidentals.

I close this long letter thanking you again for yours, which are always so full of interest and profit.

Pray for me in my turn to be more and more a child of St. Benedict—and if it be God's will, that I may someday find a way to be something of an eremitical son of St. Benedict! What of these Benedictines in the mountains of France? Have you more information about them? I am not inquiring in a spirit of restlessness! Their project is something I admire on its own merits.

JEAN LECLERCQ TO THOMAS MERTON

Paris
October 26, 1950

Of course, I agree that St. Bernard was a theologian in the traditional sense of the word: *loqui Deo de Deo* [to speak to God about God]. This meaning has been preserved in the monastic tradition, and I explained that in my *Jean de Fecamp* [Joannes, Abbot of Fecamp, 995–1078/9]. I am coming to notice more and more how much not only St. Bernard but the whole monastic world of the twelfth century, Cistercian and Benedictine, is full of Origen. I gave a lecture on this subject three weeks ago at Chevetogne [Belgian Benedictine abbey], and I have been asked to publish it in *Irenikon*. In it I pointed out this relation between the Greek Fathers and medieval monasticism. I had already dealt with the question in a very general way in 1945. Now I see things better. Maybe I shall collect everything I find on the matter and write a little article. The works of Origen which have been the most read by monks are his commentaries on Holy Scripture. And it is his exegesis, more than his doctrine, which influenced monks and Bernard.

Your distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* is quite exact. It is a very traditional distinction, which obliged Thomas [Aquinas] in the *In quaestio* also to treat *theologia* as *sapientia*, although in another meaning of *sapientia*. For him

> *sapientia* is *cognitio per altissimas causas* [knowledge through the highest causes];
>
> *scientia* is *cogniti per causas immediatias* [a more certain knowledge achieved through immediate causes].

For tradition, poets, and monks, and in the Franciscan school,

> *scientia* is *cognitio per intellectum* [knowledge through the intellect];
>
> *sapientia* is "*scientia sapida*": *recta sapere* [wisdom is science rightly tasted].

It is this savor, *gustus*, which we find so frequently in Bernard, William of Saint-Thierry, and all other monks.