

“The Most Hopeful and Living Kind of Message”: An Introduction to Charles de Foucauld and Thomas Merton

By Bonnie Thurston

He was born in France, orphaned as a boy, raised by grandparents, and offered excellent educational opportunities that he did not take very seriously. While a young man living an outwardly sybaritic life, very different things were going on internally. Reconverted as a serious Roman Catholic, thereafter he entered the Trappist Order and became a priest, but experienced tension in cenobitic life and with monastic obedience and his internal call to eremitic life. Eventually, he became a hermit. He was a prodigious writer of letters and of spiritual meditations, but took other religious traditions seriously, and was an important and seminal figure in Islamic-Christian relationships. He died suddenly in a non-Western country.

No, I am not recounting the life of Thomas Merton, who was born in France in January 1915, but of Charles de Foucauld, who died in North Africa in December 1916 and whose centenary was celebrated last year. Although the references tend to be brief, Merton’s journals and letters, from at least 1947 to 1964, indicate that Foucauld influenced his monastic life significantly. Indeed, writing to bishops in June 1959 as a Trappist priest making his case for “a more solitary and contemplative existence,” Merton appeals to the example of Foucauld. He hopes for “something along the lines of Charles de Foucauld,”¹ but says in another letter, “I have no pretensions to the austerity of a Charles de Foucauld, but the life I envision is somewhat the same as his” (*WF* 204 [6/9/1959 letter to Bp. James P. Davis]).

Who was Charles de Foucauld? He is an example of Samuel Johnson’s belief that every life is worth studying because human beings have so many motivations and experiences in common. Fortunately there are now good biographies of Foucauld in English.² The following is the sketchiest of outlines of a life well worth study. Foucauld was born to an aristocratic French family in Strasbourg in 1858; by 1864 both parents had died. Foucauld and his sister were raised by loving and indulgent grandparents, and he was offered a good education at a lycée in Nancy and a Jesuit school in Paris, from which he was dismissed. Following the family’s military tradition, he was sent in 1876 to St. Cyr (and graduated 333 of 386) and then to cavalry school at Saumur where he finished last in his class. Posted to Africa, he was removed from active duty “for actions unbecoming his rank, for breach of discipline, and for unbecoming conduct in public.”³ But Foucauld was smitten by North Africa. From June 1883 to March 1884, he traversed Morocco disguised as Jew, mapped the area and described its natural history and the customs of its people. His subsequent book on the exploration won a prestigious geographical prize and made him a celebrity in Paris. In Morocco he had experienced for a second time and was again deeply impressed by the faith of Muslims. Indeed, one of



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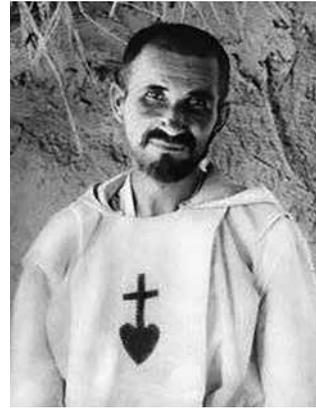
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his biographers wrote that God “had used the faith of the followers of Mohammed to make his first breakthrough to the soul of Charles de Foucauld” (Lorit 21). By the time Foucauld returned to France in 1886 he *wanted* to believe and prayed, “God, if you exist, let me know you.” Fortunately, he was guided by Abbé Huvelin (an extraordinary priest and Foucauld’s spiritual director for the rest of his life) and returned to the Church in October 1886. Foucauld reported: “Once I believed that there was a God . . . then I knew there was nothing else to do but live only for Him. My religious vocation was born the same instant as my faith” (quoted in Lorit 57).

After a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, in January 1890 Foucauld entered Notre Dame des Neiges near Akbes in Syria, the poorest of the Trappist houses, hoping that there he could live in closest imitation Jesus’ hidden life of poverty in Nazareth. Foucauld remained a Trappist until February 1897 when, with his abbot’s permission, he tried his vocation as a hermit, living as a handyman in a shed on the property of the Poor Clares in Nazareth. Ordained a priest in 1901, he felt called to be the presence of Christ where He was neither known nor represented, in North Africa. For the remaining fifteen years of his life, Foucauld lived in Algeria and Morocco, served the French army of occupation (never really abandoning his military training), and lived among the Muslim tribes in very primitive circumstances, often the only priest or Christian for hundreds of miles. Of that experience he wrote: “To receive the grace of God, you must go to a desert place and stay awhile. There you can be emptied and unburdened of everything that does not pertain to God. The house of your soul is swept clean to make room for God alone to dwell. . . . We need this silence, this absence of every creature, so that God can build his hermitage within us” (quoted in Lorit 101 and Ellsberg 24).

Foucauld compiled a Tuareg-French dictionary and translated some 6,000 lines of their verse. He made careful notes on the culture, and while convinced that it was the duty of France to convert those in her colonies to Christianity, never imposed his beliefs, but attempted to be the presence of Christ among them. His only “converts” were a Negro boy and an old Arab woman, both of whom he bought from slavery (which he abhorred). Living among the Tuareg as one of them, he came to be known and respected as a *marabout*, a holy man. On December 1, 1916 he was shot outside the fortress he had constructed at Tamanrasset to protect himself and the locals from marauders who had roamed the area since the beginning of World War I in 1914.

Before turning to Foucauld’s influence in Merton’s life, we might note that it was precisely when he seemed most dissolute that the seeds of faith were being sown in his heart by the ordinary, daily practice of Muslim believers. Sometimes one’s *kairos* moments are known by God alone. His presence among Muslims awakened something in him, just as later, he hoped his presence in an Islamic context would open something in his neighbors. Second, note the great fruitfulness of his apparent “failure” as a missionary. The popular Jesuit writer, James Martin, has aptly called Foucauld “the Apostle of the Hidden Life.”²⁴ Foucauld’s spirituality focused on living the hidden life of Christ in ordinary circumstances. This has held deep appeal for many, including the spiritual writer and Little Brother of Jesus, Carlo Carretto.⁵ Furthermore, Foucauld became a model of Islamic-Christian



Charles de Foucauld

dialogue and greatly influenced Louis Massignon (1883-1962) who seriously considered joining him in North Africa, and who, in turn, influenced many, including Thomas Merton. We do not know when we are most fruitful because spiritual growth is God's business. As Merton wrote to Jim Forest in February, 1966, "do not depend on hope of results. . . . The real hope . . . is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it."⁶

The twenty or so references to Foucauld I have found in Merton's letters and journals between 1947 and 1964 fall into two basic categories: first, parenthetical references to others' speaking of him and to Merton's own reading; and second, not surprisingly, from letters to or with reference to Herbert Mason and Louis Massignon. On April 1, 1947 Merton records that during his visit, the Cistercian Father General told "a long involved tale of Charles de Foucauld's nephew" and said he didn't think Foucauld would be canonized because "he did everything he wanted"⁷ (a point also made in Chatelard's 2013 biography). In an entry on October 12, 1947, Merton reflects on his own vocation and his continued tension about writing, and notes that it was the Abbot General himself "who told Charles de Foucauld that he had a special vocation and paid his passage to Palestine" (*ES* 125). Merton mentions Foucauld in tandem with the Lebanese hermit Charbel Makhoul⁸ in a February 25, 1952 letter to Evelyn Waugh: "I have a piece of wood from Charles de Foucauld's hermitage in Nazareth and I am getting ready to plant it secretly in the forest here, in the hope that a small hermitage will spring up after the rains in April."⁹ Clearly the model of Foucauld's life as a hermit intrigued Merton.

Merton, who was fluent in French, read Foucauld regularly. On October 31, 1948 he records that his friend James Laughlin had visited and had been reading a life of Foucauld (see *ES* 242). On March 9, 1950 he writes that "out in the beginning of a snowstorm" he had "dipped into the spiritual notes of Charles de Foucauld and was moved by their intensity. He speaks to God in a clear and vibrant voice, simple words, sentences of fire. This voice rings in the ear of your heart after you have put the book away and turned to others less saintly" (*ES* 417). In a letter to Louis Massignon on March 18, 1960, Merton recorded: "Often I read your little leaflet on Charles de Foucauld It moves me deeply. I am very sad at the lack of seriousness of my life compared with the lives of the men who have really listened to the word of God and kept it" (*WF* 276). An August 20, 1960 journal entry notes Merton had finished the book on Foucauld that Herbert Mason had left. Merton comments: "The voice and message of C[harles] de F[oucauld] mean very much to me. I think it is the most hopeful and living kind of message in our time."¹⁰

The spirit of Foucauld hovered over the Mason/Massignon/Merton connection which was critical for Merton's interest in and understanding of Islam, especially Sufism, which Massignon had helped to introduce to the West through his dissertation at the Sorbonne, "The Passion of al-Hallaj."¹¹ Sidney H. Griffith has written definitively on this in his essay "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam."¹² Griffith notes that Jacques Maritain had urged Massignon to visit Merton, but the person who actually connected them was a young American studying in Paris, Herbert Mason (see *WF* 261-74), who wrote to Merton about his own work on St. John of the Cross, sent him offprints of Massignon's articles, and gave Massignon Merton's work on Boris Pasternak. This led to the brief correspondence between Merton and Massignon from 1959 to 1962 when Massignon died (see *WF* 275-81). It was Massignon who encouraged the Pakistani Muslim student of Sufism Abdul Aziz to write to Merton, resulting in a seminal Islamic-Christian epistolary dialogue (see *HGL* 43-67), and

who introduced Merton to the Islamic concept of *le point vierge* which figured so importantly in Merton's thought in the 1960s.¹³

In the correspondence among and about Mason, Massignon and Merton from 1959 to 1964, Charles de Foucauld is mentioned frequently. Writing to Mason on August 24, 1959 about his correspondence with Massignon, Merton notes he prays for Massignon. "And Frère Charles de Jésus [the monastic name of Charles de Foucauld], he should pray for me that I receive some special graces I need, along his own line, a desert line" (*WF* 262). By January 14, 1961 in Merton's letters to Mason, Massignon has become "Louis," and the Abdul Aziz exchange of letters is underway. Merton writes: "I think more and more of simply being in contact, in friendship, with people of the Orient and of Islam." He continues, "This is very much the Foucauld universal brother idea" (*WF* 270). Merton understood that Foucauld's solitude was not for himself alone, but was a profound and appropriate witness to Christianity in the Islamic world.

Merton refers again to Foucauld in the context of his thinking on Christian mission in a journal entry of November 17, 1964. He begins with Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), a French priest who with Benedictine Henri de Saux (Abishiktananda) founded an ashram in India dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The entry continues: "Massignon and Foucauld – both converted to Christianity by the witness of Islam to the one living God." Merton quotes in French a comment about Foucauld which is translated in his published journal "his [Foucauld's] particular vocation was to sanctify the eternal Islam . . . in helping it to give a saint to Christianity."¹⁴

This is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the appearances of Foucauld in Merton's published writing, but I hope it gives a sense of the multiple points at which Foucauld's life and work bear resemblances to Merton's. Indeed, Merton must have found great consolation in his acquaintance with Foucauld. Beyond the biographical correspondences, both men struggled with monastic obedience and with the tension between communal and eremitic monastic life. Both lived monastic life in the context of being to some degree public celebrities. Both sincerely wanted to be hermits, but Foucauld's connections both social and military intervened as did Merton's position as a popular writer. There was tension for each of them between the "hidden life of Jesus" and the inevitable fame that came both with writing and with radical departures from mainstream life. Both had for their times unconventional ideas about what constituted "missionary" work in non-Christian environments. I personally think Foucauld was pivotal not only for Merton's interest in and reaching out to Islam, but to Asian traditions generally. Foucauld's desire to live as closely as possible Jesus' "hidden life in Nazareth," and his notions of the power of Christ's presence in a hermit's witness as a "universal brother" profoundly influenced Merton's own understanding of how to live out his vocation.

Foucauld prayed in 1897: "inspire in me the thoughts I should have about your hidden life" (Ellsberg 48). Meditating in 1898 on Luke 2:39 about "The Hidden Life of Jesus," he records in the voice of Jesus:

I was teaching you primarily that it is possible to do good to men . . . without using words, without preaching, without fuss, but by silence and by giving them a good example. What kind of example? The example of devotion of duty toward God lovingly fulfilled, and goodness toward all men, loving kindness to those about one, and domestic duties fulfilled in holiness. The life of poverty, lowliness,

recollection, withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him. (Ellsberg 47)
 He goes on to describe the poverty, humility, obscurity and obedience that characterized Jesus' life in Nazareth. These are touchstone concepts for Foucauld's life and Christian presence in North Africa.

These are also the very concepts with which Merton closes the final chapter of *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*.¹⁵ The publication history of that work is extremely complex and beyond the scope of this brief introduction.¹⁶ But it is worth noting that it draws to a close with a long passage on contemplative life in the world as exemplified by the Little Brothers of Jesus, the community founded by René Voillaume following the writings and example of Charles de Foucauld. Merton clearly approves of their experiment in living contemplatively "like the laypeople around them . . . dedicated to God" and seeking "to imitate the hidden life of Jesus Christ at Nazareth, where He was a common workman undistinguishable from the others around Him in the small Galilean town" (*IE* 142).¹⁷ Of Foucauld's model Merton notes: "It brings the solitude and dryness of the desert into the cities It is a redemptive, silent, and humble prayer which keeps Christ present" (*IE* 144). Foucauld's followers, Merton notes,

do not argue with people, try to convince them, try to convert them, try to make them amend their lives. They seek only to *be* with them, to share their lives, their poverty, their sufferings, their problems, their ideals: but to be with them in a special way. As members of Christ, they *are* Christ. And where they are present, Christ is present. Where He is present, He acts. Their being, their presence, is then active, dynamic. It is the leaven hidden in the measure of meal. (*IE* 144)

Merton explains that contemplative orders are "mystified by Charles de Foucauld" (*IE* 144), perhaps because the general view of the contemplative life is too narrow. Merton's conclusion is that in Foucauld's decision to leave a "sophisticated, and wealthy society in order to live among poor and primitive people in a desert" he has "left 'the world'" more completely than one who has "entered one of its wealthy, comfortable, mechanized, and highly respected monasteries" (*IE* 145).

These four pages of Merton's sustained meditation on Foucauld summarize his own mature understanding of contemplation and echo precisely what he was seeking in the difficult year, 1959, when he was exploring alternative monastic possibilities, not "a full missionary life. A kind of hermit mission like that of C. De Foucauld."¹⁸ On June 14, 1959 Merton concludes: "God is calling me to a kind of missionary solitude – an isolated life in some distant, primitive, place among primitive and simple people, to whose spiritual needs I would attend" (*SS* 293). Merton wanted this "Christlike . . . missionary solitude" (*SS* 301 [7/2/1959]). Just as Foucauld never abandoned his Trappist mentality – Chatelard notes, "The Trappist life would always be for him the model and ideal of perfection" and "He always used the vocabulary of monasticism to express what he was living" (Chatelard 271; see also 278, 291) – so also Merton expressed the ideal of the monastic/hermit life he envisioned for himself in the language of and aspirations reminiscent of Foucauld: a hermit/monk living a hidden life as a universal brother.

St. Paul frequently uses the language of familial relations and "sibling-hood" to describe the Christian's relationship to Jesus and to other Christians. Generally speaking, outside monastic or radical Reformation communities, we Christians have never taken very seriously Paul's teaching that we owe to one another exactly what we owe our biological siblings. But Foucauld took it very

seriously indeed, in the way he lived and in his frequent reference to “universal brotherhood” (which clearly included “sisters” as accounts of his interactions with Tuareg women attest; the Tuareg certainly treated him as brother when they saved his life and nursed him after he was bitten by a poisonous snake). Interestingly, it is the concepts of brotherhood and friendship that are most effective for a Christian witness to Islam.

Some years ago, the Muslim Professor of Arabic literature and civilization at the University of Lyon, Ali Merad, wrote *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World*, a fascinating evaluation of Charles de Foucauld from a Muslim point of view.¹⁹ It provides a helpful corrective to almost universally laudatory European biographies. Prof. Merad stresses that “in relations between Muslims and authentic Christians, the key word is *friendship*. For it is announced to Muslims in the Quran (V.82) that among men, Christians will be ‘the nearest in friendship’” (Merad 41). Merad explains that “To imitate Jesus, to strive at all times to act as he himself would have done; to treat each person as ‘not a man, but Jesus’ [here Merad is quoting Foucauld²⁰] . . . is, from the Muslim point of view, the most eloquent way to espouse the authenticity of the Gospel message” (Merad 21). “The great lesson that emerges from the solitary, silent life of Charles de Foucauld is his humility, his gentleness and his charity” (Merad 23). These qualities, of course, characterize Jesus of Nazareth and are at the heart of what Merton understood of and admired in Foucauld’s witness. As Foucauld wrote in 1897: “it is part of your vocation to proclaim the Gospel from the rooftops, not by what you say, but by how you live” (Ellsberg 79). Careful readers of Merton’s Asian journals will find in them that this was his own stance as a guest in the home of “Mother Asia.”

Sincerely to seek to imitate Jesus, to live among others as guest (if one is in their “home”) and as brother or sister (if they are in ours) is the challenge of Foucauld and of Merton to contemporary Christians. It suggests in this time when “other” is assumed to be “dangerous,” positioning oneself in open-ness as “friend” and in willingness to be of help and service is, as Merton wrote in 1960 of Foucauld, “the most hopeful and living kind of message in our time” (*TTW* 33).

An American born in and a Frenchman who died in the shadow of the Great War, neither Merton nor Foucauld was a perfect person. Biographers note their shortcomings, particularly in both cases, their imperfect self-knowledge and its consequences. But both were seeking to live authentically particular and perhaps peculiar callings, vocations which had much in common. Their lives and writings attest that they were, indeed, “with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord . . . being transformed into the same image” (2 Cor. 3:18) and radiating it in a darkening world. The example of their lives is a light in our darkness.

Appendix

Most Merton readers are familiar with his famous prayer found in *Thoughts in Solitude*.²¹ Fewer might recognize Charles de Foucauld’s “Prayer of Abandonment,” which bears striking similarities to that of Merton. Reading, and praying, the two prayers together is a fitting way to bring this reflection on these two figures to a conclusion:

Father, I put myself in your hands; Father, I abandon myself to you, I entrust myself to you. Father, do with me as it pleases you. Whatever you do with me, I will thank you for it. Giving thanks for anything, I am ready for anything, I accept anything,

give thanks for anything. As long as your will, my God, is done in me, as long as your will is done in all your creatures, in all your children, in all those your heart loves, I ask for nothing else, O God. I put my soul into your hands. I give it to you, O God, with all the love of my heart, because I love you, and because my love requires me to give myself. I put myself unreservedly in your hands. I put myself in your hands with confidence, because you are my Father. (Ellsberg 104)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 200 [6/13/1959 letter to Bp. Matthew A. Niedhammer, OFM]; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.
2. See, for example, Jean-Jacques Antier, *Charles de Foucauld*, trans. Julia Shirek Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); Antoine Chatelard, *Charles de Foucauld: Journey to Tamanrasset*, trans. Cathy Wright, LSJ (Bangalore, India: Claretian Publications, 2013) (subsequent references will be cited as “Chatelard” parenthetically in the text); Elizabeth Hamilton, *The Desert My Dwelling Place: A Study of Charles de Foucauld, 1858-1916* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968); Cathy Wright, LSJ, *Charles de Foucauld: Journey of the Spirit* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2005). For an anthology of Foucauld’s writings see the volume in the Orbis Press Modern Spiritual Masters Series: *Charles de Foucauld*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); subsequent references will be cited as “Ellsberg” parenthetically in the text.
3. S. C. Lorit, *Charles de Foucauld: The Silent Witness*, trans. Ted Morrow (New York: New City Press, 1966) 19; subsequent references will be cited as “Lorit” parenthetically in the text.
4. James Martin, SJ, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (New York: HarperOne, 2016) 72.
5. Carretto was a Little Brother of Jesus, the order founded in Algeria in 1939 by René Voillaume who was inspired by the life and writings of Foucauld. The Little Sisters of Jesus are often associated with Little Sister Magdeleine (Elisabeth Marie Madeleine Hutin, 1898-1989); for the story of her life see Kathryn Spink, *The Call of the Desert* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1993).
6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 294, 297; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 56; subsequent references will be cited as “ES” parenthetically in the text.
8. Merton told Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL that he was very interested in relics. She had secured for him one of recently canonized St. Charbel Makhlouf. See Bonnie Thurston, ed., *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010) 67. Merton’s journal entries of April 11 and 22, 1951 discuss St. Charbel (ES 454-57); see also Bonnie Thurston, “‘Hidden from Men in Glory’: Thomas Merton and St. Charbel Makhlouf,” *The Merton Seasonal* 37.1 (Spring 2012) 21-26.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 19.

10. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 33; subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text.
11. See William H. Shannon, “Massignon, Louis,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 287-88; subsequent references will be cited as “*Merton Encyclopedia*” parenthetically in the text.
12. See Sidney H. Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam,” in Rob Baker and Gray Henry eds., *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999) 51-78.
13. See Christine M. Bochen, “*Point Vierge, Le*” (*Merton Encyclopedia*, 363-64).
14. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 166.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003); subsequent references will be cited as “*IE*” parenthetically in the text.
16. See William H. Shannon, “Inner Experience, The” (*Merton Encyclopedia* 217-18) and Shannon’s “Introduction” to *The Inner Experience* (vii-xvii).
17. There are a great many correspondences between Foucauld’s and Merton’s thoughts on prayer, particularly contemplative prayer, but length prevents my treating that fascinating comparison here.
18. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 287 [6/7/1959]; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
19. Ali Merad, *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim’s View of Charles de Foucauld*, trans. Zoe Hersov (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); subsequent references will be cited as “Merad” parenthetically in the text.
20. “Be kind and compassionate. . . . See Jesus in all people” (Ellsberg 83); “everything we do for our neighbor we do for Jesus himself” (Ellsberg 95).
21. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 83.