

A CALL FOR ADDITIONAL ORAL HISTORY:

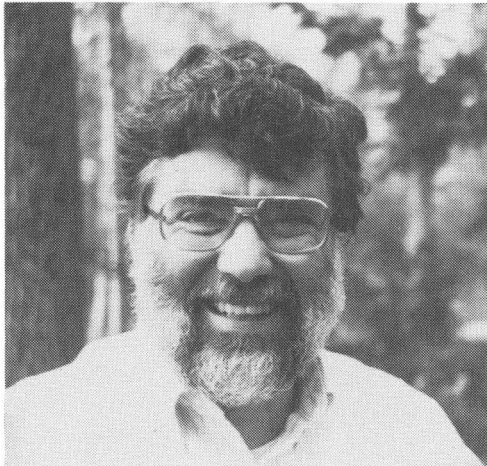
Merton, The Guestmaster, “The Fat Boy,” & Monasticism

by **Victor A. Kramer**

Additional oral history collections, both about Thomas Merton and about the nature of monasticism during the middle part of this century promise to be of importance to researchers of the future as they piece together Merton’s private years as a young monk, and as they study the development of monasticism during the rapid expansion of the 1940s and 1950s, and beyond. Such information would also help younger monks to understand the background of today’s monasticism. Interviews with both Father Joachim Tuerney and Jim Dodge, who began their careers as monks of Gethsemani, have demonstrated this. This article suggests some of the value of their insights and remembrances.

Neither of these two men had much immediate contact with Merton in the 1940s, yet all three were formed under the same circumstances. While, for example, there may not have even been occasions for any kind of extended direct discussion among the monks who lived in the community of the Abbey of Gethsemani during those years when Merton first lived there, all those men shared in the same atmosphere, one which was clearly of tremendous significance for Merton, his fellow monks, and all those who followed, to some degree, his example within other monasteries as well. Many comments by the two priests mentioned above confirm their love of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

The importance of collecting data on Merton *and* simultaneously on the nature of monasticism during his era is demonstrated by the following juxtaposition of selections from an interview with Father Joachim Tierney included in *The Thomas Merton Oral History* (1985) with those from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It illustrates the value of such collection. Father Joachim served as the Guestmaster when Merton first went to Gethsemani in 1941, and it was therefore Father Joachim who first greeted him when he made his retreat in the spring of that year and when he returned in December. Joachim must also have greeted Jim Dodge, who



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entered Gethsemani at about the same time as Merton. He took the name Linus, and later was a monk of Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina. Merton recalls those days of that first December:

Father Joachim, the guest master, came out the door of the monastery and crossed the garden with his hands under his scapular and his eyes fixed on the cement walk. He only raised them when he was near me and then he grinned.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said. I suppose he had been doing some praying for me too.

I did not give him a chance to ask if I had come to stay. I said: “Yes, Father, this time I want to be a novice — if I can.” He just smiled. We went into the house. The place seemed very empty. I put the suitcase down in the room that had been assigned to me, and hastened to the church.

(*The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 373)

Father Joachim, who has this brief role in Merton’s autobiography, is now a monk of Holy Spirit at Conyers, Georgia, the first daughterhouse of Gethsemani. He has recalled how he put the young Merton to work during the days when this potential novice waited to hear if he would enter the novitiate. In his remarks, part of *The Thomas Merton Oral History*, Joachim explained how he was so surprised to find Merton writing when he knocked on the door to tell him that the Abbot was ready to meet with him.

Question: And when you say putting him to work, you mean as a guest?

Answer: Yes, as an observer or a postulant. They also shared in work in the morning time and in the afternoon, and the jobs that were generally assigned to them would be cleaning of some sort, in the Tribune in back of the church, or the corridors, or possibly cleaning the guest rooms, and so forth.

Question: At this time there wouldn’t have been very many postulants there?

Answer: In 1941? Well, in the novitiate at that time, there could have been about ten or so.

Comment: Well, at any rate, then later, you went back to knock on Merton’s door.

Answer: I succinctly recall that. He was sitting at the table, I believe, and I asked him what he was doing, and he responded that he was writing some poetry. And I remember covering my face with my two hands in well, astonishment or . . . I really can’t distinguish . . . it was just different than I had ever expected. (pp. 261-262)

Merton himself has written in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about these same moments when he was waiting to go from the guesthouse to the novitiate. That very day he had been given some chocolate by Brother Fabian who, according to Merton’s account, must have felt life in the abbey in 1941 would seem pretty rigorous to a young person from New York City:

“Tom, I think you are going to be very disappointed with what you see on the table when you go into the refectory this evening . . .” That evening? It was the Feast of St. Lucy and a Saturday. I went back to the room and nibbled on the chocolate and copied out a poem I had just written by way of farewell to Bob Lax and Mark Van Doren. Father Joachim came in and hid his face behind his hands to laugh when I told him what I was doing.

“A poem?” he said, and hastened out of the room.

He had come to get me to wax the floors some more, so presently the Fat Boy from Buffalo [Jim Dodge] and I were on our knees again in the hall, but not for very long. Father Master came up the stairs and told us to get our things together and follow him. So we put on our coats and got our bags and started downstairs, leaving Father Joachim to finish waxing the floor by himself (*SSM*, p. 377)

Rigorous this life clearly was, and as indicated, Father Joachim had little contact with Merton in the months and years which followed.

The same would have been true for “the fat boy from Buffalo” who remained in the novitiate with Merton, became Father Linus, and eventually was sent to the Cistercian daughterhouse in South Carolina. In February of 1990, in an informal interview with Dewey and Victor Kramer, Father Jim [Linus] Dodge emphasized that the atmosphere at Gethsemani during those years was extremely important both for his priestly formation and subsequent life. He served

many years as chaplain at an orphanage in Imst, Austria, and he was formally interviewed and taped in August, 1990.

In 1944 Joachim was chosen as one of those to be sent to Georgia to establish the first daughterhouse. Father Joachim's comments about going to Conyers and the particular moment of the departure are, in this context, quite interesting, for we can see that there was a true sense of community felt among all the monks at Gethsemani. We know it was a life full of love, concern and compassion:

Question: Could you talk about the departure and the trip?

Answer: Surely. We knew that the Abbot, Dom Frederic [Dunne], was getting property and arranging for a new monastery, but the individual monks had no idea who was going. As far as I know, no one was ever asked, other than Dom James [Fox], who knew that he was the Superior, and that he was also preparing. Now, I heard later that the Abbot, Dom Frederic, asked someone. I never was able to confirm that. So, I know some of us had the suspicion, or suspected, that we were going, but it was not clear until the Feast of St. Joseph when it was announced publicly those who were to go. And then we packed what little things we had. Each one just had a little cardboard box of books and belongings, and we were ready and left on the Feast of St. Benedict.

That day, we had the blessing in the church and all of us received the blessing, and we came out to the front yard of Gethsemani, but there was no one speaking. Those who were staying could not say goodbye to us, other than an embrace and a smile and a pat on the back or something. But there was no talking at all. I do remember most of them were out in the front yard. I looked for Fr. Bartholomew and he wasn't there. He was in the infirmary. So, I went back, and I met him and we embraced, that's all. We couldn't speak, and it was my last goodbye to him. And then, when I came out, everyone had an overcoat and just the little box, books and so forth, and then we went to the train station and got on the train that night. (p. 266)

While Merton also writes about these same exciting days of departure for the foundation at Conyers in *The Waters of Siloe*, he does so only in general terms. What Joachim has provided in his oral history account fills in some of the details. Other monks who also contributed to *The Oral History of the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit* (a separate project) have made parallel comments. Gathering other information about life within Cistercian monasteries in the 1940s and 1950s clearly would help researchers understand that way of life.

When, for example, Father Joachim was asked about the growth of the new monastery in Georgia, several of his comments were made in relation to the great surge of vocations in the late 1940s and the possibility of Thomas Merton's relationship to that change. In answer to the question, "Don't you think a temporary vocation is something which provides a 'deeper foundation and faith'?" another question was framed:

Question: Don't you think that's true for quite a lot of people? They come and that stays with them.

Answer: Yes. At one time working on the building, we had ninety-five or ninety-six monks in the Community. Many of them postulants, and they . . . I do believe that Merton must have had an influence in this.

Why so many came down here and helped out? It must have been the war, too, but also after the war, but I always definitely felt that Merton had some hand in this. His books were being spread.

So we had ninety-five . . . or ninety-six, and they worked hard on the building. I think there were differences, as I see it, between Gethsemani and here. First of all, we were all thrown together in the barn in a close relationship, far closer than we were accustomed to after living in a big monastery [like] Gethsemani. We had no regular places. There were no rules . . . I mean you just couldn't follow the Usages. (p. 271)

In subsequent comments made by Father Joachim and his fellow monks they have stressed the change in spirit within the new monastery which, because of its size and its building program, allowed a considerably different community atmosphere to develop.

Still more interviewing of men who lived through such changes at Gethsemani and in other new foundations would assist scholars and monastics of this and future generations to understand that Cistercian monasticism of an earlier generation possessed a considerable amount of flexibility even during Merton's earliest years, while love of such an austere life helped monks to pursue their age-old love of God and others. Interviews with men like Father Jim Dodge, who remain members of the Cistercian Order, but who have found work outside monasteries, and perhaps with others who lived as monastics for some years but chose to leave, promise to provide valuable additional information about vocation, the Benedictine rule, and changes within the Church.