

A Novice and His Master

By **Randall De Trinis**

It was September 1955. Sitting in the long nineteenth-century chapter room, I watched the monks gradually filling the empty spaces across from me. I was a hefty seventeen-year-old, who had recently arrived at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the oldest Cistercian (Trappist) monastery in the United States, hoping to make the monastic life my own. As the monks filed in, many with smiling faces, one of them stood out like a beacon, a stocky fellow with his round face exuding joy like a wren in springtime. Though I had never seen him, nor even his picture, before, I knew who he was immediately. This was Thomas Merton, whose *Seven Storey Mountain* had led me to this quiet place in Kentucky at such an early age. It wouldn't be long before I was able to meet him, speak with him and begin to learn the freedom of the sons of God.

You may well wonder what possessed such a young person to choose the life of a cloistered monk in perhaps the strictest order in the Church at the time. It is a valid question and for me the answer is still shrouded in mystery. I was fifteen when I was given the green light by the Trappist abbot to enter Gethsemani Abbey. I had been raised in a three-story brownstone in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn with a supremely dysfunctional family, comprised of my my Italian-American father, Irish-Italian-American mother and her sister, my brother and myself, on the third floor of this wonder from the 1890s. The second floor was occupied by my father's parents from Italy and the ground floor by my father's sister and her Irish-American husband. This was a lethally potent mix rooted in the antagonisms of the Italians and the Irish. There was hardly a time when a knock-down drag-out fight was not in play. Upstairs my overbearing father would be furiously haranguing my mother for some perceived wrong like her going out and enjoying a drink with her girlfriends. On the middle floor my grandfather was taking my grandmother down for using too much garlic in something, and downstairs my aunt would be tossing plates at my uncle because he stopped by a bar on the way home from work for a snort.

From an early age I was an extremely sensitive, precocious fat kid who spent a lot of time reading rather than playing sports. I was also being taught piano by my Italian grandfather. The males in my father's family were all musicians and I was hooked by classical music very early in life; I remember listening to the Metropolitan Opera on Saturdays practically from day one. I did, though, have some street friends. My mother told me that when I first started going to St. Anselm's Church, I would cry when hearing the organ and the singing and this love of music has followed me through my whole life.

I expect the intense friction between members of my immediate family worked on my psyche, urging me to an unconscious decision to get out of that house as soon as possible. But why the religious bent? Why not the army? Why not just take off into the unknown? The pursuit of a religious

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Randall De Trinis

life began in earnest when I graduated from St. Anselm's Elementary and started to attend St. Francis Prep, the high school run by the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn, the first members of a men's religious order I had encountered. The simple habits of the brothers pointed to something quite different from the everyday world, something spiritual, something of simplicity, poverty and serious commitment. This experience started me on my quest to find answers to the great riddles of life.

I think that already at this age I no longer thought of the Deity as an old man with a white beard sitting on an ornate marble throne surrounded by troops of angels who, along with myriads of other folk who made it to heaven, stood there for century after century happily and ecstatically singing praises to Him. God help us! It did take some years of silent seeking to realize Its essence in the gentle majesty of trees, the innocent beauty of animals, the silence of the evening sky and the peace in distant mountains.

Back at the brownstone, this quest for meaning was bolstered by my Uncle Bernie, who had just finished reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* and was so taken with it that he recommended it to me, who at the time was probably fourteen years old. I was overwhelmed by this book and could see myself living at Gethsemani and seeking God above all as the only real choice in a world so confusing, querulous and tenuous. There was much more to this decision than just running away. There was a clear call – not clear in words but as an intense sense that this was exactly right for me and that I truly needed to follow this path. There was no denying its imperative.

Needless to say, my family did not see this in the same light I did. I could not get my father to agree to allow me to go to the monastery before my eighteenth birthday. I put him through a silent treatment for some months until he finally gave his permission. The first leg of my journey brought me to St. Paul's Abbey in Newton, New Jersey, run by German Benedictines who taught school and had missions in Africa. Here I was to concentrate on Latin, as required by Dom James Fox, the abbot of Gethsemani. This Benedictine enclave, surrounded by thoughtful monks and great fun-loving students, was a perfect place for me. Here I developed a deep love for Gregorian chant just having heard the simple melody of the hymn for the office of Prime, "*Jam Lucis Orto Sidere*" ("Now that the daystar glimmers bright"). Being out of the city, surrounded by trees and mountains, instilled in me a love of rural America, a love that had begun to develop earlier in my yearly trips with my parents to Lake George, NY in an attempt to escape the August heat of Bay Ridge.

Finally, in May of 1955, having just reached 17, I took a flight to Louisville, KY to start a new life at the monastery. I remember being shocked at the bus terminal when I found water fountains and bathrooms labeled for whites and blacks. I had never seen anything like this in New York and felt that already on my life's true quest, I had learned something important: racism was shockingly untenable and deeply unjust – another reason for prayer and solitude for clear thinking.

When you entered a religious order at that time, you were initially a postulant, someone checking out the monastery to see if he would fit in with the life of the place. My Novice Master was a Fr. Walter who, while pleasant enough, pretty much had no personality I could detect. He determined that I needed to study Latin some more, so I was made to go to the scriptorium (like a classroom) every morning when we arose at 2:00 a.m. to try to better my Latin while keeping awake at that ungodly hour. I did this with another fellow in the room, Frater Denis, who was attempting to do likewise. (This Denis has remained a close friend to the present day. He became a priest at Gethsemani sometime in the '60s, left the monastery, had a stint in the Camaldolese and now abides

in Texas as a hermit partially supported by the bishop of the diocese, who obviously recognized his spiritual depth and believed in the value of contemplation.) We were not allowed to talk to each other at all except in the presence of an authority, with permission. (To communicate between ourselves we learned the Trappist sign language with which we made up signs for just about everything frivolous but nothing of great import). We studied alone. Denis kept awake and I dozed as much as studied. I actually hated this arrangement, and had it gone on for more than a month, I probably would have called it quits. To my great joy, Fr. Walter was elected abbot of another monastery, and to my undying gratitude, Fr. Louis (Thomas Merton) was appointed Novice Master.

At our first private meeting he pointed out a few lines from the psalms in Latin and asked me to give him a translation. I did. Within a week I was accepted as a novice and became a temporary member of the community, with the name Frater Sebastian. So instead of staying for a month, I would wind up staying close to four years. This development I lay at Louis' feet. His honest concern for the individual and his sheer joy made life at Gethsemani, at least initially, one of growth and happiness.

The monastery at this time was guided by Trappist usages. We ate no meat, fish, eggs or butter. We never had conversations with peers other than in sign language. No "particular friendships" were allowed wherein one could really commune with another in a truly meaningful manner (probably because of fears of sexual activity). The day started at 2:00 a.m. and went through many hours of chanting the office, meditation, manual labor and some free time for reading. The reading could only be of the "spiritual" kind: novels were banned. We were only told of news from the outside world through the abbot, who also told us how to vote in elections. He always preferred the conservatives. As a result I automatically voted for the other guy. We were allowed to write two letters four times a year on major holy days and were only allowed one three-day visit a year from our families. No music was heard other than in the abbey church during our chanting of the office and celebrating the Mass. This was particularly difficult for some of us who were classical music devotees. Still, the organist, Fr. Chrysogonus (who recently passed away), was a fine musician and I experienced some of Bach's great preludes and fugues there. Gregorian chant became for me the most beautiful music of all.

The long hours of chanting the office were grinding at times, especially from 2:00 a.m. to about 6:00 a.m. with a half hour of meditation in between Matins and Lauds. In that half hour I used up more energy trying to stay awake than trying to meditate. As I grew into the life of the abbey, I discovered that I could find a sheltered nook in the church where I could fall asleep without getting caught. I'm not particularly proud of this but so it was. After all I was still a teenager. In a couple of years I did reach the point where I could stay awake and meditate.

This is not to say that we who entered were not aware of how difficult this life would be. I chose it because I wanted to be an example like Leon Bloy, described by Raissa Maritain as "The Pilgrim of the Absolute"; I adopted the title (substituting "A" for "The") as a description of myself. Bloy wanted to go to the nth degree to seek the Divinity and so did I. I wanted to experience God as a one on One and firmly believed that the utmost discipline was necessary to do this. In many ways the Trappist regime did lead to this kind of intimacy if you didn't fall into the snares of being told what to do every minute of the day and automatically accepted everything the abbot said as gospel truth. The life provided seclusion and austerity. It made the seeking easier because of the utter lack

of diversions which might make one stray from the path to unity with the Other. This life was right for me at the time and I have always been glad that I followed this path.

Merton addressed the difficulties of the Trappist monastic life at this time in one of the last letters he wrote, at Easter, 1968, which I received as a mimeograph copy.

We who entered cloistered orders ten, fifteen and twenty-five years ago were certainly chilled by the sense that there was something warped and inhuman about it. We were not totally blind and stupid. We knew that we were getting into something hard, even unreasonably hard. But we also knew that this counted for very little in comparison with something else which in our case was decisive. We believed that we were really called by God to do this It is true that we were told absurd things, made to behave with a stupid and artificial formality, and put through routines that now, as we look back, seem utterly incredible. How did we ever stomach such atrocious nonsense?

It must even be admitted that the climate of Catholic spirituality, perhaps especially in contemplative . . . life has proved for many to be unhealthy, both physically and mentally. We carry deep wounds which will prevent us from ever forgetting it. . . .

Thomas Merton¹

The most wonderful part of my experience at Gethsemani was having Fr. Louis as a spiritual advisor. Each of the novices met with him individually quite frequently and he gave us all the time we needed to let out our frustrations and desires and to seek help with meditation and monastic tensions. In my case I found that we laughed a lot and the conversations strayed to many non-spiritual areas. We often spoke of New York City, me being a Brooklynite and he a sometime resident. (Some of the novices signed me that they used to sit around near Louie's office just to hear the laughter when we were having our time together.)

During one session he told me that Charles De Gaulle had written him begging him to come to France to become part of his government. At another time he told me how concerned he was about Boris Pasternak's tortuous life in Stalinist Russia. But within all the superficial chat, one learned much about how prayer, meditation and solitude led to a healthier mental outlook and brought us closer to the Ineffable. None of this instruction in prayer and monastic living was proffered by Fr. Louis in a direct way. He never openly instructed a novice in a "how to" mode regarding prayer, silence and monastic living in general. His teaching was subtle though completely centered and a novice hardly knew how very excellent his spiritual guidance was.

Fr. Louis had a quite distinctive walk. He could often be seen with three or four books under his arm, heading for a quiet spot in the woods. He sort of bounced when he walked and the novices had many good laughs imitating his hop. (He was affectionately known as Uncle Louie to some of the monks in later years.) When you were sitting outside his office and the door was open you could hear how fast he was reading a new book from France by how quickly he cut through the folios when the pages had not been cut at the factory. Zip, zip, zip! Phenomenal speed.

Fr. Louis' personality was outgoing, warm and full of humor. When you were speaking with him you felt as if you were the most important person in his life and that his honesty and good will

sprang from the depths of his soul. His temperament was perfect for the cenobitic life. In that life, getting along with others was perhaps the most important factor, given the many grades of animus which could arise from the silliest of infractions. Though as he progressed spiritually and had for years taken the cenobitic insensitivities and frequent pettiness in stride, his love of solitude led him to seek the life of a hermit on the monastery grounds. He was, toward the last years of his short life, given permission for this new undertaking.

Having left the bottomless cornucopia of Brooklyn where I was sated by the amazing array of ethnic foods, I discovered to my chagrin that the monastery provided little in this area. Their incredible cheese melted on boiled potatoes was my favorite dish and their brown bread was luxurious; still, I no longer had the pastas and cannellini of my Calabrese grandmother nor the fresh bagels of the nearby deli. My weight went down precipitously, so much so that Fr. Louis saw to it that I received food supplements: an egg or two and perhaps some extra cheese – I hardly remember now. (He himself never ate in the main refectory with the rest of the monks but in an adjacent smaller dining room provided for those who could not eat the normal fare. I believe he had digestive problems.)

One time he was off to the hospital in Louisville for some time and upon his return I saw him sort of creeping along in the novitiate and was overjoyed to see him back with us all. He greeted me with a big hug and told me, “Sebastian, if you ever develop piles, keep ’em.”

When my family visited, I was able to see them a couple of times a day over a three-day period and could go out with them in their car. We would find a comfortable site in the woods or along the side of the driveway up to the monastery entrance under the magnificent sweet gum trees, sit around on folding chairs and talk. There I could eat some of the food they had brought like mixed nuts, chocolate, and my Nonna’s wonderful Italian meatballs. What a treat. On one visit Fr. Louis met us in the woods with a sweaty straw hat full of blackberries he had picked on the way. I introduced him to the family and he stayed a few minutes chatting with them. He was never one for small talk.

Merton’s talks to the novices are well known. He covered many topics not always in the Trappist canon: Buddhism, Sufism, racism, Native Americans, the Cold War, yoga (even having us do many of the positions from a list he typed out for us – you should have seen him standing on his head!), literature – even Faulkner, etc. He must have worked hours on these meetings and his presentation was always flawless and as always jeweled in humor.

At one point, I had been able to contact the Smithsonian to ask for some books on the music of the Native Americans. How I did this, since we were not to send letters without permission, I cannot recall. I was never much of a rule-breaker, but on occasion I could break a rule and not suffer from any kind of regret. In any case I made contact and they sent me several books gratis. That prompted this note from Fr. Louis.

Dear Fr. Sebastian,

Now dearie [the abbot’s normal address to young monks] I want you to sit down and read this carefully before we all get thrown in jail. Your own bank robberies I leave to your own seared conscience, but what I am concerned with are the felonies into which you and I have entered as accomplices, to wit the procuring of library books under false pretenses by impersonating a librarian. Now this is the point. With the Louisville library there is hardly a problem since Josie Johnson is our passive instrument and utterly subservient to our felonious wiles. She loves

me *madly*. But all normal libraries which have not yet been brought under the sway of our hidden power, demand that books on interlibrary loan be asked for by the librarian. Well, all right. I know what you are going to say [that neither was he the official librarian], but DON'T SAY IT, THE WALLS HAVE EARS. For all intents and purposes, in several reputable libraries I am known as the librarian, and requests coming from me are respected and put through our secret agents. But now what will be the consternation when one morning the agents wake up and discover that there are two librarians, one of whom is the dastardly Sebastian [written deliberately with a small "s"]. So here is the point, (Alcuin [a novice] is beating on the door with inarticulate sobs) what we gotta do is get organized and if you want books from any place (except the Smithsonian where you are now the recognized librarian of O L of Geth.), better get them through me, even in Louisville, so that the quota is kept down to reasonable limits and everything is under control. Alcuin is here, he is seated before me and the place is flooded with tears. Good bye for now, dearie. The Sioux books are all in the hands of Ivanov [I took this sobriquet to mean Fr. Abbot].

Respectfully yours,
frmlouis²

I made a few appearances in Merton's journal from those days:

April 29, 1958

Fr. Sebastian is in the hospital for a nose operation. He has assured us that he wanted to have it. He suffers continually with an allergy. And with philosophy. Is a touchingly good and simple person, and another one of those for whom there appears to be no special place anywhere and who nevertheless stay. I hope. What he loves: birds, the garden, the brethren, chant. What he hates: philosophy, Trappist spirituality, and *all* spirituality, probably some of the brethren. But I doubt if he would hate a *person*.³

As a result of the operation for a deviated septum, I had to go to Louisville for monthly checkups. One time I went with Fr. Louis who often went to town to see his doctor as well as to tend to the publication of his many writings. We each went to take care of business and would meet at the Louisville library where our driver would pick us up to return to the abbey. Once we were able to dally there for a bit of fun.

May 18, 1958

Had bad luck [in the Louisville library] with the record music piped up from the cellar – Couldn't get Hopis and Navahos as I wished – but a little Art Tatum (yes) and later, with Fr. Sebastian, some Villa-Lobos and Fr. S. who is exceedingly sensitive to music, liked it. (SS 203)

One day on the return to Gethsemani, he said that we had some money left and why shouldn't we have a beer at the Blue Bird Inn in New Haven (a little town close to the monastery). We did so,

and I, not used to alcohol at that time, felt it strongly. We rushed back so that we would not be late for Vespers. He and I, on opposite sides of the choir, were turning the pages of the huge books in front of us which contained the office we were chanting. I occasionally looked over toward him and he toward me and we both had a suppressed laughing fit each time our eyes met. That was the last time we drank together.

During Chapter one morning the Abbot raved on about fiction and classical music, attempting to keep the monks and brothers from wasting their time on fruitless pursuits. Fr. Louis' reaction follows:

January 2, 1959

For Rev. Fr., incidentally, all novels are "love-stories," and that is that. . . . However I did spend some fruitful hours this Summer sitting in the straw and reading *Dr. Zhivago*. I know Fr. Sebastian is enthusiastic about Sigrid Undset and he looked a bit disgusted. (SS 245)

The novitiate is normally a period of two years and led to simple vows. I took my vows in December of 1957. As a prelude to such a serious decision, you were given time for a retreat in which you were exempt from certain duties so that you could go off into the woods or wherever to meditate on the ramifications of such a decision. At the beginning of my retreat Fr. Louis asked me if I would like to look at his manuscript of *Thoughts in Solitude*⁴ while walking in the woods. This was quite exciting for me and having read it, I told him that it was wonderful and I meant every word of it. I was never a fan of any of his heavy theological books. This one was different, more down to earth and kind of hands-on.

My aversion to philosophy and theology was boundless. My deep love of the monastic life at that time was not in reading explanations of how prayer worked, nor the foundations of Church doctrine nor half-assed explanations of what godhood was theologically, nor how many spirits could dance on the head of a pin. (Nor was my life enhanced by the spiritual aphorisms which were painted on walls just below the ceilings of many of the monastic gathering places – as though one could not allow one's mind to be empty of spiritual propaganda every minute of the day. God forbid your mind would be empty of all thought and just soaking up the silence of the spiritual.) All empirical knowledge meant little to me in reference to the truth of living and love of whatever you want to call the Source of creation. I found simple joys in everyday living in the monastery: walking in the woods, loving the chant and being a part of the schola cantorum, working in the novitiate garden, getting in the hay, planting tomatoes, working in the woodshed to provide heat for the abbey and really just being in a place which seemed sacred and so blessedly steeped in silence.

I remember that during one of my spiritual direction encounters Louis bemoaned having written *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a book so very important to so many Catholics, especially those brought to Trappist monasteries because of it. He said he had been a self-righteous prig at the time and that his view had changed greatly since then. He didn't want to be remembered as author of that book alone. He would then be too narrowly defined, too conservative. As I see it, he had grown more and more into wisdom and humanity culminating in his great revelation while walking down a street in Louisville where he suddenly realized that monastic contemplatives were not in any way above the common man, that we were like all of humanity.⁵ We are all in this life together and the monk's responsibility was

to help everyone toward a greater awareness of the love surrounding us. No one was better because they locked themselves away in monasteries. They just had taken a different path from others. In many ways I agreed with him that his autobiography was flawed but it still is a powerful book, and his life story has brought joy and enlightenment to so many people trying to make sense of life.

After making simple vows, one was to go on to the “other side of the house,” the professed side, where the permanent members of the choir resided. Fr. Louis delayed my going for as long as he could since he feared seeing the true Gethsemani would be a shock to me. The “permanent” community was an amalgam of a few truly saintly men, some very nutty men, and the rest of us in between – much like those living outside the walls. When I did “go over” I was faced with being pretty much on my own though I could, if needed, commune with Fr. Louis in written notes and could ask to see the abbot or prior if necessary. My relationship with the abbot was always strained. His attitude toward monastic life was that it should not be too easy (!) and his famous New Year’s hope for each year was to wish us all the crosses we could bear. He was overbearing, humorless and tedious. His favorite saying was “All for Jesus, through Mary, with a smile!” Dom James steadily worked hard on affording us these crosses. The one which galled me the most was not turning the heat on in the abbey church for Matins on very cold winter mornings. The novices supplied the fuel, spending many hours splitting logs in the woodshed. We needed to be toughened up, especially after having slept our designated seven hours in an unheated dormitory on straw mattresses. By morning in winter the holy water in this huge room was frequently frozen.

Having arrived on the professed side, I was surrounded by this mix of saints, nuts and the everyday guys but since Louis was almost entirely concerned with the novitiate and his writing and reading, the absence of someone as personable as he was seriously debilitating for me. But when I became depressed I wrote to Louie, and he would write back. (His handwriting was inscrutable and I sympathize with the fellow who had to read and type up his journals for publication.) One such note was the following:

Dear Fr. Sebastian:

What, do you mean to say you don’t *like* it around here? I have no intention of trying to “solve your problem” because that is your problem: you go around looking for solutions. Life is very nice as it is, without solutions. If you want to be a living question mark, by all means go ahead and be one. But if you expect answers you defeat yourself. What will happen to the question mark if the question is answered? You don’t *want* an answer. But you haven’t the courage to face that situation, because you still depend so much on everybody else and everybody else says you have to have an answer. I won’t tell you either to leave or to stay: that is for you to decide. But it will be useless to stay here asking yourself day after day “why why why” unless you are content to ask why without expecting an answer. I’d forget the question. Incidentally, have you ever heard about God? Maybe He can run your life better than you can. You have never let Him.

Keep smiling dearie. Yrs in Xto

F m Louis

Having gone through a grueling period of interior suffering, an experience something like St. John of the Cross’ “dark night of the soul” where everything bottoms out and you’re as alone and

godless as if you were completely abandoned by all things physical and spiritual, I wrote him again telling him of my plight. His response:

March 13, 1959

Dear Fr. Sebastian,

Thanks for your note. I hope it won't be too rough on you but it is possible that you are just starting to climb back up out of a deep hole. I am certainly with you but it is not going to be easy – you have made it tough on yourself by systematically destroying the normal ladders on the theory that you could get out of the hole through a secret tunnel without having to climb.

You have to have a very large amount of courage, patience and humility and you are weak especially in the first two of these. However it is basic humility to accept the fact of being in the same boat as everybody else and trying to make the best of it.

You are going to feel tragic about it once in awhile. OK but not too much now. It is the *ordinary lot* of all men. And of Christ on earth and above all, what we go through here is very trifling. It is a sin to exaggerate it as much as we all do. However, you are right to face it. And for heaven's sake if you do find a little joy in the ordinary things of life again don't go and reject it. Be humble enough to take anything good from anybody even if it is far short of perfect – anyway – lots of love and prayers.

In Christ Our Lord F m Louis

Even when this dark cloud passed, I began to more deeply question remaining at Gethsemani as a lifetime vocation. Being on the “other side,” I was thrown deeply into a life with little real communication. The warmth of the Mertonian novitiate transformed into a cold desert of a very long humorless future. Trappists often live very long lives. Not being able to truly mix with the other monks and speak of issues important to one's life in one-on-one discussions was forcing me to understand that this life lacked the human touch. Making signs for communication was practical for everyday communications but you couldn't really relay anything important. How does one sign the nuances of spiritual meaning? I saw that remaining in the monastery would mean unending years of a regimen of conformity and silence which simply didn't dovetail with my outgoing personality. Many in the community seemed like automatons without any feelings at all. I knew this was not true of everyone, but the future looked pretty grim to me. I finally fully realized I could not spend my whole life so secluded from the world in a place which to me at that point seemed without the slightest warmth of human affection. I certainly believed that the contemplative life was of great value to some and they needed the wall to stay sane and directed. It was just not for me. Much later in my life I came to realize that my monastic years were analogous to the Buddhist tradition of spending part of one's youth closely seeking spiritual truth before plunging into the everyday world. I decided to leave. I was blessed to say goodbye to Fr. Louis though the abbot would not have approved. Unfortunately we had just a couple of minutes. His only caveat was, “Don't take drugs. They're bad for you.” I left Gethsemani and there is a note in his journal: “*June 9, 1959*. . . . Frs. Sebastian and Vincent . . . left this morning. These two were professed . . . very disoriented with

the community which they think, and perhaps rightly, is crazy” (SS 289). In the Trappist obscurantist tradition of the time, I never knew this other guy was leaving the same day I left. When you finally got up the courage to really leave a Trappist monastery at that time, you were surreptitiously taken to the station and put on a train for home. None of the community was told publicly about your leaving and everyone was forbidden from any communication with you. It was as though you were a pariah and had never made any friends in the community; you had never existed and were a terrible example for those remaining behind the walls.

Happily, my family was mostly understanding, especially since they had never been happy with my decision to go to Gethsemani. I don’t think they ever really understood why I ever left home or, for that matter, returned home. After working for a year in a bank (ugh), I made my way to a college education, first at Catholic University in Washington for a year and a half studying piano, and then spending my last two years at Columbia in Liberal Arts, Comparative Literature, on full scholarship. After graduating from Columbia I then taught for a few years on the Upper East Side in a ritzy private Catholic school, St. David’s, which catered to the wealthy folks like the Kennedys and Buckleys. During these first years I was quite happy having the freedom to live pretty much as I pleased, or should I say as much as my meager income would allow. Living “in the world” was good but it didn’t take long for me to realize that for so many, life was a shallow, meaningless experience. While the abbey was too far away from everyman’s experience, the constant pursuit of money and good times stretched too far into mindlessness. I slowly became disenchanted with constant glitter, noise and rush. Periodically I would write Fr. Louis just hoping one would get through Dom James’ clutches. Here’s one that did. The date is somewhere around 1963:

Dear Randy,

Your note got through since Dom J. is away imposing his ideas on other monasteries of the Order. Glad to hear from you, and am not surprised that you feel dejected about everything. This is partly in you and partly in the society we all live in: a meaningless, self-defeating and pointless society that is probably not good for much except to blow itself up. But that does not mean that we have to surrender passively to our fate. Even Sartre knows enough to see the futility of a completely negative “right wing existentialism.” If you can ever begin seriously to take responsibility for our share of history, grey as it is, and can begin to live more for others. . . . I know this is no solution and words are cheap. Nothing will ever make you really happy, but you rather enjoy being unhappy and realizing it. It is a kind of freedom and distance. As to the poems I write these days they go over better in Latin America than they do here.

I don’t think you have a vocation to come back here or any monastery like this one (I know you were thinking of that, one of your cards got through). . . .

God bless you always in Xt fmlouis

I continued to have problems with life in the modern world, everything too shallow, consumerist and empty. I still felt the pull of monastic life and thought that this might still be had in a monastery or friary where peace and silence would nurture the spirit. I truly enjoyed the pleasures of everyday life but thought depth was sorely missing. These pleasures were quite simple and boiled down to listening

to music, eating great bagels, having a drink with friends after work while discussing the complete collapse of humanity and living alone in Manhattan safely away from our Brooklyn brownstone.

I applied to the Dominicans. I chose this order because it was old and in spite of the order's having just about run the entire Inquisition, I thought of them as somehow carrying on the spirit of Thomas Aquinas (who toward the end of his life had a deep spiritual experience and determined that in comparison to this wondrous revelation, all he had written was virtually worthless). This sounded to me like a man who had arrived at the spiritual depth I had always hoped for. Maybe the Dominicans were the answer.

I was vetted by them through several visits to a psychologist who marched me through a series of tests, including Rorschachs and one having me draw pictures of a naked man and woman! (I will say that while my artistic skills, other than those involved in playing the piano, are less than minimal, I was able to do better than stick figures.) For some reason I passed them all and was accepted by the Dominicans.

As the Trappists opened up more and loosened up a bit due to Vatican II, I was able to get a letter to Merton. I had written to him telling him that I was with the Dominicans and complained about some of the not-so-hot changes fostered by the Council, namely the virtual loss of Gregorian chant in Latin. The new "folksy" church music in the language of the country was just about completely unbearable. By this time the Trappists were able to speak to each other, a very propitious change in Trappist usages or so it seemed to me.

Aug 31, 1967,

. . . Things aren't as bad as they sound here. Well, they can talk. But they always talked anyhow so. . . ? Now they don't bother to make signs with their words. But it is no *worse* than it was. The machines are now silent for a while since work renovating the church is finished. I suppose it will all start up again in a couple of weeks on something else. Church simple, light, peaceful except for two (2) organs.

TWO ORGANS!!!! And air conditioning. I won't be around except for an occasional concelebration. I say Mass in the hermitage now. Sunday the bishop will consecrate the new altar which looks like something dragged out of Mexico, from an Aztec pyramid or perhaps from a druid circle in Wales. Strictly adapted for human sacrifice first and foremost. Maybe that's the next thing on the list of changes [stemming from the Vatican Council]. In which case I'll stay away altogether.

Maybe you're right: when they have thrown out everything good they'll try to get it back again, realizing that it was really worth while. I think a great deal of trouble with the progressives is that they lack imagination, and some of them don't know the difference between having ants in the pants and having an idea. But on the whole I think as you do that the renewal is ok, and in any case the old was no longer viable.

Pray for me too. I'll keep you, the OP's [Dominicans] in all in my Masses.

Best always, in Xt

fmlouis

Unfortunately the ultimate reality of being with the Dominicans was far less satisfying than what I expected. While I found the friary a very friendly place and the novices mostly wonderful kids, the dinner table was more than I could accept. I remember having lobster tails there and was really shocked. When I had taught at St. David's School in Manhattan, I could hardly afford a hamburger and here I was in a mendicant organization where such foods were being eaten when most of the people in the US would never enjoy such opulence. In addition the Dominican liturgy was heavily geared to popular devotions like Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament where one spent long periods viewing the monstrance with the host in it as well as the stations of the cross and interminable recitations of the rosary. None of these devotions interested me after the simplicity and comparative fullness of the monastic liturgy swathed in Gregorian chant. (Also I must not omit that the guy who ran the Friary looked much like my father, a man with whom I could never see eye to eye.)

Upon return from Dominican novitiate I found that my parents were getting ready to leave the nut house which was their Brooklyn home. While the only remaining denizen of 265 86 St. Brooklyn, our old brownstone, was my well-meaning but impossible Aunt Maymie, my Mom, Dad and Aunt Flossie were moving to Florida. Aunt Mame's hurtful mouth was enough to make you believe that life in San Quentin (or perhaps a monastery) would be an improvement. Since I had no particular ties in NYC I thought I would go with them and help them to get settled. We went to St. Petersburg, not much to my mom's liking since she hated the heat.

My last stab at the religious life was my plan to enter the Christ of the Desert monastery in Abiquiu, New Mexico, a Benedictine monastery which is situated in the desert and maintains a contemplative lifestyle. Benedictines are known for interest in knowledge as well as prayer, whereas the Trappists in the days I was with them looked down at acquiring knowledge other than theology. Also the Vatican Council had opened things up a lot and I thought this would make a great difference in daily monastic life. Not the least was the fact that this place was located near where Georgia O'Keeffe lived – not that that meant very much except that surely the place must be a topographical wonder to somehow satisfy the soul of such a wonderful artist.

I asked Fr. Louis for a recommendation. He responded:

April 9 1968

Dear Randy:

Sorry to delay answering your letters. First of all, I'll get busy and send a letter of recommendation to Christ of the Desert. I still think it would be a valid solution though you seem so restless that you may not settle down in any such milieu. I think you are in an impossible hang-up, seeking something that will support you from the outside when you have to produce that support from within yourself. When you do that, you will probably be better able to accept some more or less unsatisfactory situation and live with it.

But the whole place is one grand mess right now, and it is going to get immeasurably worse. If you can stand a monastery, I'd say you ought to get in one and stay there.

As to me going into the guru business: I obviously can't do it by mail as I have far too many letters already. And there isn't much I can do here. Nor do I intend to move in on some budding small community and play guru there. If I do, my first

choice will be Ernesto Cardenal's place in Nicaragua, he asked me years ago. I hope all will work out ok with you. Blessings, peace, in the Lord,
Tom Merton

But in the meanwhile, I met Bonnie, and my monastic plans fell apart for good. Finding a job was not easy in St. Petersburg at that time, especially for an ex-monk with little experience. I wound up teaching at St. Jude's Elementary School and there found Bonnie, who was Sr. Peter Ellen, a Dominican nun at the school. We met in the company of others after school at meetings between the laity and clergy, an offshoot of the Second Vatican Council, when the Church seemed to want to grow and develop into something more than a fiat-run organization. We soon learned that we enjoyed this much more than we expected. We've been married now for 39 years. Our union created quite a stir in St. Pete since at the time we were interviewed for the religion section of the local paper. Many readers wrote in that we would never be happy and that our marriage wouldn't last two years. We're glad to have proved them wrong. Bonnie and I go on, mostly joyfully, though this world is certainly a difficult place to make any real sense of. Bonnie has taught in elementary schools most of her life. We have two children, one adopted at age ten and one of our own. I've been much more eclectic in my pursuits. I found that I really hated teaching. Being on stage six or more hours a day was just too grinding for me. I started working for the Dept. of Health and Rehabilitation in Miami back in the mid '70s. Later we met our adopted son, John, in Imokalee, a migrant community in south central Florida, where I was working in welfare. In the mid 1970s we moved to Brevard, NC to try to live in a really rural place, grow our own food, etc. — all of the sort of back-to-the-land hippie kind of stuff. I started a nursery growing ornamentals, vegetables etc. In 1976 we learned that Bon was pregnant and in 1977 Joel appeared. Some years later we moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia in a very rural area where I've run an old rose nursery for 16 years. We have been happy with our lives for the most part and have always been politically active in supporting progressive issues.

The last letter I received from Merton was to his many correspondents, dated Fall 1968, telling us that he was leaving on a trip to Asia for a meeting with the Abbots of Catholic monastic orders in that area. He ends the mimeographed letter this way:

Once again, let me say I appreciate the loyalty of so many old friends and the interest of the new ones. I shall continue to feel bound to all of you in the silence of prayer. Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action. I pray we may all do so generously. God bless you. With all affection in Christ,

Thomas Merton (*RJ* 118).

His trip was not only to attend conferences but to broaden his already open view of the Eastern religions, most especially Buddhism about which he had written widely. While there he met with the Dalai Lama, the same fellow who is in that position today. (This Dalai Lama visited Merton's grave at Gethsemani many years later and said that this proximity to his home brought him to a closer tie with his spirit.) When Merton visited the great Buddhist shrine at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, while viewing the huge statues of Ananda and the reclining Buddha he experienced a great enlightenment:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . Surely . . . my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.⁶

In his last official talk he touched upon a point that I think is very telling. He used a quote from a Tibetan lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, who, when having to leave Tibet due to the Chinese takeover asked an abbot friend what they should do now. He answered "From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet." Merton says of this tale: "To my mind, that is an extremely important monastic statement. If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future: 'From now on, everybody stands on his own feet'" (*AJ* 338). Later in the talk he goes on to say that Christianity and Buddhism overcome their differences when "in their original purity point" (*AJ* 340). I gleaned from this that pure spirituality transcends 'isms' and salvation may be had for all beyond the established churches. He died shortly after this talk in a bizarre accident near Bangkok on December 10, 1968 at age 53.

After reading *The Asian Journal* several times I had an epiphany sparked by this meditation of Merton's composed while contemplating the mountain Kanchenjunga near Darjeeling: "Testament of Kanchenjunga. Testament of fatherless old Melchizedek. Testament from before the time of oxen and sacrifice. Testament without Law. NEW Testament. Full circle! The sun sets in the East! (*AJ* 157). From this I found myself questioning all of the Catholicism I had been following my whole life. I began to feel that it was just one religion in the world, not the only true one, that God was above and beyond any organized religion and that Catholic exclusivity was a delusion. I still believe this and have grown into a more understanding person, embracing diversity in beliefs, shunning all organized religion as dead ends on the way to understanding, to enlightenment. My faith in God has not faltered, though I find trying to understand this world far beyond me, belief being something, as has been said, irrational and unexplainable.

Nowadays, atheism is increasing in cultured societies and it speaks volumes about our divorce from nature and any spiritual underpinnings due partially to lack of time, materialism and greed no less than to the shabby and often criminal behavior of so many in organized religion. It seems belief in something outside of the purely empirical is an absurdity. Understandable to some degree, but when one considers the reality of our situation, that we billions are living on a revolving speck of dust, hurtling through an inconceivably gigantic universe of billions upon billions of suns, planets, etc., at unheard of speeds, belief in something Other seems no more absurd. (Personally, I prefer an honest atheist to a phony priest.)

I often wonder what Merton would think of the current state of the world: the sexual abuse of children hidden by the hierarchy, the condemnation of gay people, the never-ending disputes between religions, the utter depravity of governments, Iraq, etc., etc. He surely would not have been happy or silent. He grew out of the monastic narrow-mindedness of his early years into a completely open attitude to all the world offers in spiritual growth. He was able to continue at Gethsemani

because he was allowed finally, after many years, to live on his own as a hermit (who loved visitors), releasing him from the daily regime. I suspect the abbot was getting nervous that Merton might one day move on and then the royalties from his writings would be forfeited. Thus, after many pleas from Merton, he had to grant him his deep desire for solitude and separation from the community which had so grated on him.

As far as I know, not too many avatars roam the earth, but this amazing man, Thomas Merton, was surely a sign of the abundance and wonder of the Other. I am astounded that I was given the great gift to have met him and listened to him. He pointed ever toward the truth and the need for understanding, compassion and love in the quest for meaning in our short lives. We have all been made richer having had him with us in this insane and wonderful universe. Thanks to what, to whom and especially to Uncle Louie.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 112; subsequent references will be cited as “*RJ*” parenthetically in the text.
2. All unpublished correspondence by Thomas Merton is printed with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
3. 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) 197; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958).
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233, 235-36; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.