

Introduction: The Roses at the Hermitage

Thomas Merton: monk, writer, cloistered hermit and public intellectual, prophet and poet, social critic and Zen calligrapher, marginal man and trickster, solitary and lover, a man of flesh and blood. A wealthy orphan with a fractured childhood, then a carousing university student, he found in his twenties the faith and meaning that led him into a lifelong monastic commitment; by the end of his life he had grown into a transcultural, trans-religious spiritual teacher. Spiritual director *in absentia* to thousands if not millions, myself included, and the outstanding Christian spiritual writer of his century, he is the man of whom Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, speaks when he says, as he regularly does, that he never understood Christianity until he met Thomas Merton. Or, as he most recently has said, “His death was a great loss. If Father Thomas Merton were still alive, I am sure we would have been comrades working closely together to further the dialogue between religious traditions and to help bring real peace to our world.”¹



It's summer 1952. Thomas Merton has been a monk at the Trappist abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky since 1941, almost eleven years. He is thirty-seven years of age. His great desire is for a life of silence and solitude in which without impediment he could seek God and his own soul. It isn't happening, and he is restless. The abbot is building factories, for cheese and fruitcake: he wants to set the abbey on a firm financial base, and when the royalties for Merton's bestseller, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, begin to arrive in the spring of 1949, this is a big help. Along with the factories, however, come tractors

1. An encomium in Henry and Montaldo, *We Are Already One*, 358.

and jackhammers and air compressors, and the noise is driving Merton crazy. This is not, he tells himself, what he had signed up for in 1941, when Gethsemani was a quiet, bucolic place. He is a very large personality in a small institution; some of his friends are telling him that he has outgrown the abbey, that it is time for him to go somewhere else.

In August, Arcadio Larraona, secretary of the Vatican's congregation dealing with members of religious communities, visited Gethsemani. Merton conversed with him in Spanish, in which he was fluent, and their conversations gave him a strong sense of the universality of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church, after all, was bigger than the abbey of Gethsemani, something he had always known; but Larraona's visit brought that wider world vividly into Merton's cloistered environment—and a door opened.

On September 11, he wrote to Dom Anselmo Giabbani, prior of the ancient monastery of Camaldoli, in Italy, and prior general of the Camaldolese Order. He told Giabbani that he wanted to join Camaldoli's community of hermits, the *eremo*. Giabbani responded promptly and positively: there would be a place for Merton at Camaldoli if he decided to come (and was able to come). Both those letters have been lost; but the first extant letter in what I am calling the Camaldoli Correspondence reveals how serious Merton was about this, how intensely he felt he was in the wrong place, and how deeply he desired the life of solitude that he believed would never be his at Gethsemani. His letters to Camaldoli launched him on a track that continued through his journey of the next sixteen years, in which, already a well-known author, he became a public intellectual, a social critic who looked through the lens of contemplation at the urgent social issues that concern us still—racism, nuclear weapons, the environment.

In the years covered by the Camaldoli Correspondence he was tormenting himself with many questions. Was he seeking this change for the right reasons? Was he being honest with himself about his motivations? Could he be sure that it was the will of God that he leave Gethsemani? (His abbot was very sure that it was the will of God that he *not* leave.) These deeply monastic questions were utterly personal to Merton at this time. They also have a more universal character, as they point us to the process, often very mysterious, by which we *come to know* (that is, not know-all-at-once) what is right for us; in Christian spirituality this process is called discernment. It is in this sense that Merton's very personal questions may open new perspectives for us on our own questions. How in fact do any of us respond at moments of confusion or impasse? What do we do when the salt of our job or our marriage has lost its savor? Where is the solid ground in our lives, and where the sinking sand? How can we live with authenticity, with integrity? Do we—do I—still know who God is, or did I ever know?

Merton's questions reached fever pitch in the three letters he wrote on April 25, 1955. The letters he received in response in August and September of that year told him that his request for an authorized transfer to Camaldoli had been denied. Camaldoli as the focus of his hopes faded, but the restlessness continued. Perhaps there is no one of whom St. Augustine's aphorism "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you" was more true than Thomas Merton. His restlessness sprang up again two years later, with Merton asking himself all the same questions in a second attempt to leave Gethsemani, this time to go to an experimental Benedictine community at Cuernavaca, near Mexico City. This too was not to be realized. But in 1965, still, amazingly, a monk of Gethsemani, and still sparring with his abbot, he was authorized to become a hermit on the abbey grounds. For the last three years of his life he had as much solitude and silence in his hermitage as he needed. Ironically, it was while living as a hermit that he fell in love, and so experienced the challenge of how to bring together his love for M—Margie—with his life of solitude. The relationship ended, as it had to; but out of it he learned that the deepest meaning of solitude was love.



In our present time, a time even more fractured than Merton's, I believe we need deliberately to make the acquaintance of women and men who inspire, challenge, sometimes irritate, astonish, and encourage us. We need to encourage *ourselves* by standing back from the superficiality of so much of the media, indeed so much of the culture, and by spending reflective time with the great ones, as we understand them—people who can awaken in us our own capacity for deep humanity. Thomas Merton, I have no hesitation in saying, is one such person. One prime example of his humanistic thinking and modeling is found when Merton brings together perspectives from psychoanalysis, Sufi mysticism, and Christian spirituality in his description of what he calls the "finally integrated" person.² The concept of final integration comes from a book that strongly engaged Merton—*Final Integration in the Adult Personality*, by Iranian psychoanalyst Reza Arasteh.³ Merton didn't apply the concept directly to himself, but many of his readers are ready to make that connection. Such a person "apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical

2. Merton, "Final Integration," 219–31.

3. See on this Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 287–88.

ego and yet entirely his own.”⁴ (We will revisit this concept in chapter 2.) Characterized by “transcultural maturity,”⁵ the finally integrated person is one who can help us, in a culturally shrinking world, in our need to stretch and develop our intentional capacity for encounter with persons different from ourselves without “othering” them into stereotyped categories, often simply for the sake of convenience in our busy lives. When Merton wrote an article about Thich Nhat Hanh the day after meeting him, for example, he didn’t title it “Thich Nhat Hanh: Exemplary Buddhist”; he called it “Nhat Hanh is my Brother.”⁶ Our historical moment calls us to renew and live out a primal sense of our shared humanity, which Merton alluded to when, in an informal talk in Calcutta (now Kolkata) shortly before his death in 1968, he said, “We are already one.”⁷ This is one of Merton’s great gifts, and indeed a mandate for our own spiritual growth: that he invites us to go ever deeper into our own humanity and thereby equip ourselves for transcultural, transreligious and thereby deeply human exchange. At the same time, by his own example he calls us to self-acceptance, something that he himself only painfully achieved. And lest this challenge discourage us, it is good to remember that he also invites us “to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.”⁸

Merton, of course, was also a flawed human being. There are many comments in the Camaldoli letters that testify to his fretfulness, anxiety, and vulnerability, and to the smallness of attitude that often characterized the institutional context in which he had freely chosen to live. They give us the backstory to the many intriguing, sometimes oblique references in his journals to the Camaldolese, the Carthusians, and Latin America. As you read through them, you will encounter some very unattractive moments in Merton’s life; there is a sense of rawness and confusion in many of the letters, as Merton opens his heart and soul to his correspondents. Yet within and beneath the manifest level of his struggles with himself and with the authorities of his Trappist-Cistercian order are to be found the larger issues that Merton explored and with which he struggled throughout his monastic career, issues that concern us all: personal integrity; the value of silence and solitude in a hyperconnected time; the search in that solitude for the True Self; the recognition that in finding the True Self, we are finding God, in whose image according to Jewish and Christian tradition we are made (cf.

4. Merton, “Final Integration,” 225.

5. Ibid.

6. Merton, *Thomas Merton on Peace*, 262–63.

7. “Thomas Merton’s View of Monasticism,” in Merton, *Asian Journal*, 308.

8. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 297.

Gen 1:26); and, not least, the question of love. By naming the questions and concerns that I observe as active in the life of Thomas Merton, I offer an intuition and hope for myself: that the universal can become personal in my own life; indeed, that if I will listen to Merton, open my eyes, recognize it and live from it, I will see that this has already happened, on the level of love.



Camaldoli is the name of a *frazione*, a tiny hamlet, in the *comune* or municipality of Poppi, a few miles/kilometers due north of Arezzo, in Tuscany.⁹ It is also the name of the monastic community established there in 1012 by St. Romuald (951–c. 1027), a nobleman of Ravenna; Camaldoli celebrated its millennium in 2012.¹⁰ It was here, according to legend, that, already himself a monk, he was met by a nobleman called Maldolus, who after describing to Romuald a vision he had had of monks in white habits ascending a ladder to heaven, offered him a field for a monastic settlement. The gift of the field was readily accepted by Romuald, who built there the hermitage in the place afterwards known as *Campus Maldoli*, “the field of Maldolus”—*Camaldoli*. In the same year he received from Maldolus a villa at the foot of the mountains, where he established a monastery. Thus from the beginning Romuald’s foundation was composed of two coordinate cohorts, monks and hermits, and so it continues to this day.¹¹ There is very little else in the hamlet, tranquil and secure in its setting in the Appennine hills, and embraced on all sides by the forests of the Casentino. A stream of traffic, it is true, moves relatively quietly along the road between the façade of the monastery and the large fountain that faces it, erected in the fifteenth century in celebration of another ancient name of the place, Fontebona. A busier road runs past the entrance to the *eremo*, the hermit village, some three miles/seven kilometers up the hill from the monastery. But to the casual visitor or observer, this does not diminish the general peacefulness of the place.

Such a casual visitor to Camaldoli was I in the summer of 2008. I had not come on retreat in a formal sense. I was simply wanting some down time after an intense ten days of teaching in a study program on Thomas Merton in Rome sponsored by the Thomas Merton Society of Canada.¹² I settled into my room, identified by the plate above the door as being under the patronage and protection of St. Pachomius, founder of cenobitic (i.e.,

9. Frigerio, *Camaldoli*, 63.

10. See Appendix I, San Gregorio section, note 6.

11. monasterodicamaldoli.it.

12. merton.ca.

communal) monasticism, and prepared to enjoy with his encouragement and oversight a time of prayer and rest.

As I recall, it was two days after my arrival that the guestmaster, realizing from my telling him what I had been doing before my arrival that I was interested in Thomas Merton, asked me if I would care to see the contents of “a file of old letters” from and to Merton, kept for more than fifty years in the monastery’s archives, and, to my knowledge, untouched since they were filed there. Of course I did so care—and soon held in my hands a file of letters from the 1950s that testified to Merton’s attempt to transfer his monastic stability from the abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, where he had lived since 1941, to the Camaldolese branch of the Order of St. Benedict, indeed to the very monastery in which I was a guest.

It was a great moment for me to come so close through these letters to the agonies and ecstasies of someone whom I had been studying for more than thirty years (now more than forty). There were two particular prizes among the letters. One was Merton’s letter of May 3, 1955, to Anselmo Giabani, the prior (LETTER 20), in which, in what I am calling variant (a), we find a handwritten postscript as follows.

Dom James [Merton’s abbot] will be back in a few days. If you write me, don’t say anything about this matter [his hopes for a transfer], even in Italian. But if you want to tell me that you have taken steps to obtain the *transitus* [the official permission for a transfer], tell me something like “We have planted the roses at the hermitage.” And if you have obtained the *transitus*, tell me that “The roses are *in bloom* at the hermitage.”

Here we encounter Merton as trickster. Yet he saw this deception as necessary if Dom James, who in those days, as did all abbots, read all the mail coming in and going out, except for letters marked “conscience matter,” was not to discover the extent of his attempt to leave Gethsemani. As we shall see, Merton’s conscience soon got the better of him, and the matter came out into the open between himself and Dom James.

The second particular prize was the *eight-page, handwritten* letter to Merton from Giovanni Battista Montini, then archbishop of Milan, later Pope Paul VI (LETTER 27). The letter is pastoral and empathetic, but it is also very clear in giving Merton the archbishop’s considered view, that his place of sanctification is Gethsemani, not Camaldoli. That someone with as demanding a position as archbishop of Milan would give time to write a personal, pastoral and handwritten letter of this length and thoughtfulness to someone he had never met remains to me remarkable.

From the discovery of this file of letters, then, only some of which were held in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University (TMC), in Louisville, Kentucky, the major repository of Mertoniana, has come this present study. To the letters in the file, I have added the others held in the TMC, and others in the Merton Dossier of the archives of the archdiocese of Milan, so that what I am calling the Camaldoli Correspondence now consists of thirty-six letters, seven of which are not extant. Reading these letters, you will encounter Merton himself, who of the twenty-nine extant letters wrote seventeen, and was the recipient of six others. The remaining six were written *about* Merton, by James Fox, his abbot; Anselm (Joseph) Steinke, in 1955 prior of Gethsemani; Archbishop Montini; and Anselmo Giabbani, prior of Camaldoli and prior-general of the Camaldolese order. It was a letter of September 1952 to Giabbani, no longer extant, that initiated the correspondence, and a last letter to him from Merton that concluded it in March 1956. A complete listing of the letters, and brief biographies of their authors and recipients, you will find at the beginning of this central section of the book. (I have added to the heading of these brief biographies the words *Dramatis Personae*, because it seems to me that a fascinating play could be written on the basis of the struggles and interchanges that the letters offer.) Following the letters you will find the text of two appendices related to them; a note on the languages in which the letters and the appendices are written; a note on Merton's fluency in the languages represented in the letters and appendices; and a note on orthography.

And what do the letters tell us? I go into this question in detail in chapter 3. To speak generally here, they tell us about a critical time in Merton's life, a time when he was very much afflicted, in my view, by the monastic malady that the ancient monastic writers called *acedia*, and that I am using as an interpretive paradigm for Merton's experience. They saw this as the work of the noonday demon to which Ps 90:6 in the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome refers (Ps 91:6 in contemporary English versions), and about which I write in chapter 1. The monks and hermits of that ancient time—St. Anthony the Great, St. Benedict, and others—exteriorized and personified their spiritual difficulties and challenges as demons to which they attributed metaphysical reality. At the same time they recognized the close connection between their interior fears and terrors and the demons so conceived. We still speak of people wrestling with their demons. Merton, as did his monastic ancestors, essentially understood them as interior, as parts of himself, with no need to exteriorize or personify them. In chapter 1 we will also encounter the work of Kathleen Norris, who asserts that she finds it likely

“that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of *acedia* in modern dress.”¹³ So it is a paradigm that can illuminate our contemporary experience, cultural and personal, as well as that of monks and hermits ancient and modern. For Merton it was a time when he worked out some crucial matters for himself, which would manifest themselves in the years following in mature living and writing.

I see this particular demon—if in using this word we can suspend our postmodern disbelief and attempt to enter the thought-world of the fourth-century monastic theorist Evagrius Ponticus, whose teaching was very much alive for Merton—as having visited Merton on three particular occasions. The first such occasion was the mysterious period, beginning after his ordination in 1949 (a post-ordination sag being a not uncommon phenomenon) and ending in December 1950, about which he writes in *The Sign of Jonas*; this I call the time of the preliminary *acedia*, and I deal with it in chapter 2. This period¹⁴ I see as critical for Merton’s spiritual and theological development, a time after which his perspectives expanded from the narrow focus on life in the monastery that had marked the years since his arrival there in 1941. I see this time as revealing the first identifiable appearance of the noonday demon, and a time that manifestly presages its later visitations (cf. Luke 4:13). The second visitation, what I am calling the *greater acedia*, coincides with the time of writing of the Camaldoli Correspondence, 1952 to 1956, a three-and-a-half-year period, with its first and last letters to Giabbani (LETTERS 1 and 36) acting as brackets to that period. The third visitation, the *lesser acedia*, which I describe in chapter 6, begins in the year after the end of the second, and concerns Merton’s attempts to find a way of moving to some place in Latin America, the Caribbean, or the American west, eventually settling on Cuernavaca, in Mexico, a period ending in 1960.

Merton’s vulnerability to *acedia* may be likened to the way a virus operates in the body. It is there all the time, and when the immune system is diminished, it flares up and wreaks its specific havoc. We see it rising in the post-ordination period, the summer and autumn of 1949, falling at the end of 1950. Recognizing after a few months that Merton has to a large extent recovered, Dom James appoints him as Master of Scholastics, that is, the officer of the monastery responsible for the theological education of

13. Norris, *Acedia and Me*, 3. Basset, *The Noonday Devil*, is a pop spirituality/pop psych book that deals with some of what Norris mentions here in the context of the challenges of midlife. He makes no mention of *acedia*.

14. The third phase (1949–50) of his time at Gethemani, the time of his “critical sickness,” or breakdown. See SJ, 226.

those among the younger monks who were studying for the priesthood; and this responsibility for others keeps the virus under some control. But it rises again and breaks out in September 1952 with the writing of the first letter to Camaldoli. It remains active until September 1955, when the letter from Cardinal Larraona, secretary of the Congregation for Religious in Rome, provides a definitive denial of his hopes for a transfer, and when he is shocked by the realization that Dom James and the abbot general are ready to authorize his entry into the hermit life so long as he becomes “a hermit one hundred per cent.”¹⁵ Instantly realizing that he is not ready for this, he offers himself to Dom James and to the community as novice master. Again there is a time of respite; but by 1957 the virus is again active, and remains active until the letter of December 1959 from Cardinals Valeri and Larraona communicating their official unwillingness to authorize a transfer. I would argue that it remains relatively inactive for the rest of his life, meaning that I do not see his time with M, his late-life partner in love, something completely unexpected although to some extent foreshadowed, as related to *acedia*. Evagrius would simply have called it *epithymia*, lust, his name for one of *acedia*'s fellow-demons; but as I say in the last chapter, it cannot be so simply accounted for.

As I have noted, the correspondence spans some three and a half years. It is significant, I believe, that thirty-three of the thirty-six letters were written between March 10, 1953, and July 17, 1956, dates that mark the beginning and end of a three-and-a-half-year gap in Merton's journal of the time.¹⁶ I would posit in this regard that during this gap, much of the energy that Merton typically invested in his journal writing was redirected to his transfer project and to his correspondence, of which the Camaldoli-related letters represent only one layer. Another such layer consists of the letters he wrote to his friends, soliciting support for his hopes—Jean Leclercq, monk of Clervaux, in Luxembourg, notable among them.¹⁷ Another layer, an intra-Trappist one, includes his many letters to his own abbot, and to the abbot general, Dom Gabriel Sortais,¹⁸ their letters to each other, and their replies to him not included in the Camaldoli Correspondence. It will be clear that all the writers and recipients of the letters other than Merton have

15. Letter of Dom James Fox to Dom Gabriel Sortais, October 18, 1955 (TMC).

16. *A Search for Solitude* (SFS) covers July 1952 to March 1953, and from July 1956 to May 1960, with the notable three-and-a-half-year gap in the middle.

17. Merton and Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy?*

18. Oury, *Dom Gabriel Sortais*. It is noteworthy, given the very large number of letters that passed between Merton and Sortais, that there is not a single reference to Merton in the book. It is also interesting to note that Merton and Dom James wrote each other frequently, even though they lived in the same monastic house.

a strong and direct, and to a large extent institutional interest in the working out of his vocational struggle, not that this excludes personal and pastoral concern on their part. The letters also give us a benchmark, a beginning point from which to trace the spiritual growth of their author/recipient/subject from the restless and unhappy man that he was at the time of their writing to the far more peaceful and self-accepting person that he was at the end of his life. His order, the Trappist reform of the Cistercian tradition, began in France in the seventeenth century; and there is very little in the letters, with a few exceptions (notably LETTERS 15 and 18), that could not have been written in that century. The ecclesiastical relations of that time, in the matrix of which, culturally and spiritually, Merton was to some extent living, are vividly represented, for example, in the letters' flowery and (to the contemporary mind) overly submissive, even subservient, complimentary closings. He had a lot of work to do to become the autonomous man of the wise heart to which one of his favorite mystics, Julian of Norwich, pointed him, and to become such a man in the contemporary and future-oriented way in which he did so. My own take on this is that when he died in 1968, he was operating, so to speak, from about 2050. It will take us some time to catch up with him.



I give an account in chapter 1 of the concept of *acedia*, from its first extant treatment, by Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century, through some of the high points of the Western humanist tradition to contemporary times, and the work of Andrew Solomon and Kathleen Norris. In chapter 2 I offer, not a full biographical treatment, but rather a biographical framework for Merton's life, with particular attention to the critical time in 1949–50 that I have called the time of the preliminary *acedia*. Then comes the Camaldoli Correspondence itself. In chapters 3 and 4 I set out my close reading of the letters, what I read in them about Merton's soul journey of those years. Chapter 5 is concerned with what I think of as the fading, indeed the ending, of Merton's long-cherished dream of Camaldoli. In chapter 6 I attempt to weave together the threads of enquiry that I have followed in the previous chapters, as well as exploring the challenges of the hermitage years. It will not be until chapter 6 that we will be able to have a sense of the entire trajectory of Merton's journey of solitude from the way he conceived it when he was writing to Camaldoli to how he understood it in the hermitage years, especially after his time with Margie. I note here that in quoting from Merton, I have not changed his sometimes hypermasculine style into something

more inclusive. If everyone writing about Merton tinkered with his style, we would end up with a variety of emendations rather than hearing him speak from his own time to ours. I am certain that had he lived into our time, he would have understood why inclusive language is important and written accordingly.



James Finley was a novice under Merton, and is now himself a noted spiritual teacher, author, and retreat leader. I close this introduction with what he says about the most foundational aspect of Merton's "wise and trustworthy guidance." It is located, he says, in

Merton's emphasis on the importance of grounding our search for God in our customary experience of ourselves as human beings. The ring of authenticity that resonates in Merton's writings flows, in part at least, from the honesty with which he shares with us his own struggles and breakthroughs in the day by day realities in which he searched for and found God in his life. His down to earth honesty lets us know he is like us and in doing so lets us know we are like him.¹⁹

Yes, we are like him and he is like us: not that we are comparing ourselves to him, but the likeness is there in the foundational, creational reality that we are all human beings. In this age of so many forms of dehumanization, few things, I would hold, are more important to affirm than this, our common humanity.

19. Finley, "Turning to Thomas Merton as our Guide in Contemplative Living" (in press).