Hagiographic

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During the revolutionary but also quite desperate 1960s – desperate above all because both the United States and the Soviet Union were working as hard as they could to perfect and place at hair-trigger readiness the means of incinerating the entire planet – it was inevitable that a liberal, Catholic-leaning English Lit major such as myself should have become an admirer of Thomas Merton: Cistercian monk, writer, and peace advocate, it was his voice that was the most effective (or so it seemed) in rallying us from a state of despair, and it was his "Prayer for Peace" that was read into the Congressional Record in 1962:

> Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us.
> Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction.
> Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us.
> Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing . . .
> Teach us to wait and trust.

But I also knew Merton as a literary figure: among the trade samples being showered at the time upon domestic English Lit departments by James Laughlin's New Directions Press – and several of which, in an unexpected and life-altering gesture of encouragement, were loaned to me by my freshman LSU English instructor Barabra Sims – was at least one volume of Merton's early poetry. From such beginnings he would of course go on to become a publishing phenomenon whose only parallel in the twentieth century was perhaps Teilhard de Chardin: a prolific writer on serious religious subjects who seldom lost his freshness or intensity, and whose every manuscript was coveted by at least one – and sometimes two or three – publishers. In consequence, I will mention only a trio of my own favorite Merton books: The Seven Storey Mountain*, his best-selling spiritual autobiography in the tradition of John Henry Newman's* Apologia Pro Vita Sua *(which was also a best seller);* The Sign of Jonas*, a supremely lyrical account of Merton's early years at Our Lady of Gethsemani abbey near Bardstown, Kentucky; and* The Wisdom of the Desert*, his collection of the sayings and stories of the earliest Christian monks – and among them this gem:*

> Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation, and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and

stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?

If I can claim a Merton connection, however, it began to take on some real credibility only in 1971, when I had the opportunity to engage in independent post-graduate research at the University of Louisville, and where librarian and future friend Tim Hellner soon reminded me that I was in "Merton country"; and although I never had the sense to visit the monastery itself, I soon enough became acquainted, via a "back to the land" initiative, with the Kentucky landscape of "knobs" and "hollows" that was for Merton what the Umbrian countryside had been for St. Francis of Assisi.

That back to the land initiative was in partnership with the person who first got me really interested in Eastern religions, John Kilpatrick, a University of Louisville PhD candidate in psychology, son of the pastor of Broadmoor United Methodist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana (and therefore a fellow Louisianian) – and a no-nonsense student of Zen who had been granted more than one interview with American Zen master Philip Kapleau. But here again it was Merton who had helped pave the way: the late 60s and early 70s explosion of interest in Eastern spirituality owed much not only to his several books on the subject (including The Way of Chuang Tzu*,* Mystics and Zen Masters*, and* Zen and the Birds of Appetite*), but also to the welcoming hand he had extended to – among many others – Japanese Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki; Algerian Muslim mystic Sidi Abdeslam; Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh; Bengali poet Amiya Chakravarty; and, of course, the Dalai Lama.*

And on one April Sunday in 1982, I myself was never happier to have run into an old friend. As local co-chairperson of the nation-wide Groud Zero Week, organized in passive resistance to Reagan's fanning of the cold war flames, I sat with the congreation of LSU's United Methodist Church to hear pastor Philip Woodland deliver his sermon in honor of the observance, and with the special knowledge that Phil had been the first community leader to offer himself as a member of our organizing committee, and with the special knowledge also that, this being the Deep South, many other Methodist congregations would entirely ignore Ground Zero Week despite the fact that the Methodist Church itself had been an early and enthusiastic advocate. As a graduate of Yale Divinity School, Phil had the confidence to reach out to another for his closing words – and the prayer he read indeed brought down the house: Merton's 1962 "Prayer for Peace".

So in some sense history had come full circle, and this was confirmed by the appeareance, in 1984, of Michael Mott's superb biography The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*; and hence it was that, four years later, when* Southern Review *Assistant Editor Jo Gulledge expressed an interest in Merton – he had now been dead for some twenty years, and his place in history secure – I bequeathed to her the bulk of my Merton library.*

I

My wife Dianna had become friends with Kathleen, a cherubic eighty year old who was our fellow tenant and who, more to the point, knew all the gossip – this latter by virtue of working several hours per week in our apartment building's tiny convenience store; and so the moment that Dianna shared with me the intriguing fact that Kathleen had once been a nun, we made a promise to ourselves to invite her up for a glass of wine.

When, therefore, Kathleen appeared unexpectedly at our door, draped regally in a knit amber smock, and with a gift for our cat of canned cat food that her cat would not eat, I literally yanked her and her walker into our apartment, shoved the pre-ordained glass of wine into her hands, and began throwing out questions; and although I have often since had a tape recorder turned on when Kathleen has been our guest, that initial conversation I must now attempt to reconstruct:

"So we understand that you were a nun at one point."

"Yes."

"But that you had left the church."

"Yes."

"But that you were now back in the church."

"Yes."

"And what order did you belong to?"

"The Poor Clares – that's a contemplative order founded by St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi."

Hmmm! I stood up from our small dining room table, stepped back several paces with wine glass still in hand, and lit a cigarette.

"Well I hate to tell you that Dianna and I are both very much interested in St. Francis and the other saints. And one of our favorite movies is *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. And – of course – we are really into Thomas Merton."

"Well I actually met Merton."

A pronouced drag on the cigarette – and Dianna now lighting up one of her own:

"Really?"

"Yes – Mother Francis Clare and I went to a conference for nuns that Merton organized at Gethsemani, and there were several other contemplative orders – Carmelites; some Passionist sisters; some Sisters of Loretto . . . "

This was dharma combat! I quickly countered with my own bona fides of having read most of Merton's major books, and the 600-page Michael Mott biography as well – but Kathleen was not done with her own bombshells:

"I'm pretty certain that I'm in the biography – I've been told that there's a 'Sister Kathleen'; but I need to get my own copy and go through it."

How amazing, I thought to myself: unless Kathleen was spinning a mighty tall tale, we now knew someone who was actually part of the Merton legend! And how opportune, as well: here was a chance for Dianna and I (she the muse and myself the hack) to write a charming little human interest piece as part of the still-booming Merton industry!

A few weeks later – on St. Patrick's day of 2014 – Dianna was diagnosed with small cell carcinoma of the lungs.

* * *

"Just another white speck on the pile of chicken shit."

That had been Dianna's country girl response to the pulmonologist who had remarked on her compusure in hearing that she had an inoperable type of lung cancer (and also, as I was to realize later, an example of the "piss and vinegar" that had endeared her to the mellower and more jovial Kathleen); but we were now experiencing our first visit to the oncology department itself – and Dr. Sachin Pai's beautiful English/Hindu sing-song seemed to coat in honey the brutal truth:

"This cancer, you know, responds well to chemotherapy, but – "

We sat side-by-side on small plastic chairs in the small examination room, and looked up at him, and focused on his words with the hope that the intensity and maturity of our attention might now work miracles; but in truth, it was not so very difficult to concentrate on this dark, angelic face, resplendent above an immaculate white medical smock:

"It comes back. And when it comes back" – here Dr. Pai seemed to half-close his eyes in concentration, and one could not help noticing his long eyelashes – "it is very resistant to treatment."

And though grave he struggled to remain, he now seemed almost excited to be able to say, "But Dr. Theodossiou will be able to tell you more."

There was, in fact, not a single goddamned element of certainty that Dr. Theodossiou would be able to add – but that didn't matter.

What did matter to these practitioners of chemotherapy was a certain sure-footedness in working on the slippery slopes of medical ethics. One did not wish to gain a reputation for unwarranted optimism, but this was not surgery – and make no mistake, there is little that medicine can do for the body chemistry of someone who has given up hope.

And these guys had it down pat. Indeed, Dr. Pai had been but the first of a brilliant trio from central casting: the bubbly understudy sent in to soften us up, to hint at the bad news, but also to demonstrate that we would be in the hands of a capable and caring *team*; and now, after a short wait – the chance to contemplate one's finitude a thing not to be despised – Dr. Chris Theodossiou himself tapped thrice on the door and let himself in.

Once again an immaculate white medical smock, but now as part of an irreproachable ensemble with ivy league coat and tie; a graying crew-cut that spoke worlds about training and discipline and endurance: these elements no more than the backdrop, however, for a countenance which seemed itself pared down to the very skull from staring long into the face of death – but a countenance as well to which compassion and perhaps even a hint of mischief still clung.

"Let's be realistic," he said, looking down and grinding the heel of one his expensive leather shoes into the floor, and then quickly looking up again: "Your cancer has not spread beyond the left lung. If it were to spread, we could keep you comfortable with pain medication; but as it stands right now, there is a twenty percent chance that chemotherapy and radiation can be effective."

"I'll be up there," the country girl pipes up again – and my own heart nearly broke, because I understood the odds; but here perhaps from Dianna the evidence of a fighting spirit for which Dr. Theo had been waiting:

"I can say, however, that I've seen nothing which would rule out the possibility of a cure."

How unexpected – and how courageous! – it had been of Dr. Theo to use that other C-word; and upon that single slim syllable we floated out of the clinic, and down the elevator, and out to our car in the already hot March parking lot.

* * *

Although I had long since been a "collapsed" Catholic (the stage beyond "lapsed"), and although in concert with educated Westerndom I had long since ceased believing in an anthropomorphic God, I nonetheless remained an essentially literary being, and so had never gone so far as to disavow Hamlet's warning to Horatio that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy"; nor, with Joyce as my model, had I ever given up the idea that the veneration accorded the saints – the collective action of millions of minds – might not be able to create actual and effective eddies in the matrix of particles of which we are all composed.

Lucky me! Without violence to my intellectual integrity, it would be possible for me not only to "do" something against the menance which threatened Dianna, but also to take advantage of the fact that Merton had just come back into my life in the person of Kathleen, and this by the obvious step of convening a small evening gathering at which Kathleen, who would be our guest of honor, had volunteered to offer up a prayer to Merton himself for intercession on Dianna's behalf. Our other guests would include Dianna's daughter Monique; her sister Syl; and Syl's boyfriend, Dr. Michael Bellamy – a retired University of St. Thomas English Lit professor and great-grandson, no less, of utopian novelist Edward Bellamy; and the gathering would of course be held around our now venerable dining room table.

Except for that prayer – and except for the presence atop an adjacent glass-doored bookcase of a growing altar of dedications to Dianna's recovery (these including at present a native American necklace and talisman of her late father provided by Monique; a calligraphic plea for recovery hand-lettered by my mother; and one of the few of my Merton paperbacks not bequeathed to Jo, and displayed now on a folding book-stand because of a black-and-white photo of Merton himself on its cover) – except for those elements, our gathering had the outward appearance of a typical wine-and-cheese party.

But it had been our goal to place Dianna at the center of a little nuclear reactor of cosmic attention; and granted that we had found Kathleen to be thoroughly delightful when it had been just the three of us, it became apparent in this group setting that our unassuming friend was in fact made of solid plutonium – the purification and refinement to which she had been subject as a contemplative shining forth forty years after having left her order – for it was her down-to-earth warmth and radiance, and her lively intelligence and humor, which powered our tiny reactor, and which made the evening into a grand success.

As to the prayer itself, I must first attempt to wrest ownership of that term from the pious and superior few and return it to the possession of every creature which draws

breath; and I must then offer two caveats in respect to our own situation: first, that Kathleen had allowed me to write the prayer which she was to read – but this essentially a charitable recognition on her part of my own desperate need to be as involved as possible in Dianna's recovery; and second, that while I may seem to have stooped in this prayer to a crude anthropomorphism, a more charitable interpretation might focus on my respect for a traditional literary form.

And although I've suggested that the idea for this prayer was a slam dunk, it was, at another level, total incongruity: six twenty-first century beings sitting around a table and attempting to influence via prayer that which was strictly a matter of biochemistry and genetics; and not only praying, but attempting a tricky combination shot, i.e., a prayer for intercession; and not only attempting a prayer for intercession, but choosing as their intermediary Thomas Merton – someone who, to my knowledge, enjoyed not a single connection with the Catholic tradition of saint as healing agent, and who, indeed, enjoyed very little consideration at all in official circles as a potential saint, although Mott had dedicated a long and critical section in his biography to the subject.

But here, at any rate (and with the advisory that "Louis" was the name Merton took upon ordination), is the prayer that our dear Kathleen offered up in a clear and steady voice :

> Dear Father Louis,
>
> Speaking humbly as one who has stood near you and with you, I ask you to hear our prayer to intercede with the Lord on behalf of our sister Dianna, that He may continue to give her the outstanding grace and courage which she has shown thus far in facing her affliction; and further, if it His will, that He may pour out His special blessings on the work of her doctors and nurses; and we ask also that you seek the intercession of our Lord's mother the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the other saints.
>
> Amen

There is an iron-clad tradition among almost all of the world's religions that the efficacy of prayer depends not a whit upon the psychic effects which may or may not accompany it, but rather upon the humility and sincerity with which it is offered; but I nonetheless attempted, as Kathleen spoke, to visualize Merton himself: Merton the man, and not the legend; the flesh-and-blood individual who had welcomed her to Gethsemani, and who might therefore be imagined as concerning himself with the fate of another flesh-and-blood creature; and when our guests had left, Dianna and I made another promise to ourselves: if she were to recover, i.e., if we were to find ourselves in a position in which we could not turn our backs on the possibility of having experienced a cosmos with which we had been able to establish an enhanced connection – if not, in fact, a cosmos filled with celestial beings! – then we would surely have to follow through with our Kathleen/Merton writing project; but there could no longer be any possibility whatsoever of a casual or superficial treatment.

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One of the hidden mercies of a medical regimen such as that which Dianna was undergoing is that time passes quickly amidst the schedule of procedures and tests and consultations, and so we now seemed to have been catapulted forward in a blink of an eye – though it had in fact been some months – to the appearance on stage of the last of our brilliant trio from cental casting: Dr. Mini Elnaggar, the lively and diminutive medical scientist who controlled the giant white instrument which would first inject radiation into Dianna's chest to help kill the existing cancer, and then into her skull to prevent its spread; but though scientist she may have been, Dr. Mini could also share a woman's laughter with Dianna at Dr. Theo's legendary *gravitas*.

And just as quickly Dianna found herself being inserted into the bowels of another giant white instrument – the PET scanner that would deliver the initial verdict on the success or failure of her treatment.

When she bad been supine with eyes closed in the cross-hairs of the radiation machine, she had prayed thus to our personal pantheon: "God and the Universe; Jesus and Mother Mary; St. Francis and John of the Cross and Thomas Merton: come down and help me, you sons of bitches;" but inasmuch as going into a PET scanner resembles nothing so much as being entombed in a tradtional sepulchre, Dianna now experienced the Virgin Mary herself coming to her and enfolding her in a robe of the finest muslin . . .

"Dr. Theodossiou has some results for you!" The speaker was Dr. Pai, inserting his head at 45 degrees from the vertical into the examination room, and with an absurd grin on his face.

"This must be good news," we thought out loud to each other, and indeed it was. To take that next step beyond a one-in-five chance of survival, the combined program of chemotherapy and radiation must have eliminated all traces of the original cancer – and Dr. Theo confirmed that this is what the PET scan had shown. "If you make it to the two year mark without a recurrence," he said, "you can assume that you're going to die of something else."

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Kathleen was once again our guest, but this time, nestled upon a folded towel between the plates of crackers and cheese and grapes and chocolate biscuits, was a quietly spinning cassette recorder: those two years had in fact passed without a recurrence of Dianna's cancer – and Kathleen's words now seemed well worth recording.

We had been, in brief, the recipients of an extraordinary beneficence; and although not a "miracle" under the strict Catholic definition of the term, a world of credit was nonetheless due to the skill and diligence of her doctors and nurses, and another world of credit due to the brilliant and patient work of medical science. But even medical science seems at times to have benefitted from a mysterious and merciful influence, as with the uncanny series of coincidences that allowed Louis Pasteur and his colleagues to cure, in 1885, a viral disease – rabies – whose type of causative agent would not be understood in some detail until well into the following century.

Nor could we ourselves deny that we had perhaps just experienced a similarly mysterious and merciful influence, and one in which we recognized Kathleen as having

played an irreplacable role – but what, in respect to that experience, could be said to constitute fidelity?

The truth is that this question was for me purely rhetorical: I had already decided to dive into Kathleen's story with the suspicion that it might deserve a significant place within the tapestry of Merton history. This would involve not only our recorded conversations but also a partial re-building of my Merton library – and with an important new stone in its foundation; and, needless to say, Dianna would maintain a more than casual interest in the proceedings.

And truth *is* stranger than fiction: as we were soon to discover, the gathering at Gethsemani of which Kathleen had been a part – a conference with Merton and fifteen cloistered nuns to discuss the growing crisis within the comtemplative orders, and which conference was held in early December, 1967, and thus falling almost exactly one year before his untimely death in Bangkok – had been described by Merton himself as one of the most profound experiences of his life.

Indeed, the case can be made that this heretofore neglected gathering represented something of a Last Supper in respect to his own ministry, and at which almost all of the great themes in his life had come together at one time: his concern to preserve the contemplative vocation in a world experiencing explosive growth and change, and in respect to which the just-concluded Second Vatican Council had been both witness and symptom; his insistence that we were all "ordinary people" who could nonetheless accomplish great things if we were able to discover ourselves as part of the very fabric of the universe; his dedication to plain-spoken, colloquial discourse, which, like the Shaker furniture he admired, could often achieve in his hands an extraordinary eloquence; and – inasmuch as it is evident that these women religious had brought out the pastoral Merton in a way that his hard-legged brethren could not – his willingness to acknoweldge the feminine as something utterly precious and irreplaceable in the cosmic scheme of things.

Here, in short – and if such a thing can be said to exist – was Merton the contemporary saint; and as Mott had in fact documented, our own dear Kathleen had been front and center!

II

Even by the standards of what she herself has described as "a very devout Catholic family", Mary Kathleen Burke entered the Monastery of St. Clare in New Orleans at an extraordinarly young age. The year was 1951, and she was just fourteen – younger, even, than the fifteen at which her role model St. Thérèse had joined the Carmelite community of Lisieux in 1888, although it is important to note that Kathleen was made to wait until her twenty-first birthday before being allowed to make solemn and perpetual vows.

And devout indeed was the family which had allowed its eldest child to set out on this journey: Kathleen and her six brothers and sisters shared an uncle who was a missionary priest in India and two aunts who were nuns; no less than three of those brothers themselves entered religious life at one point or another, and, remarkably, did stints at Gethsemani; but the family, in a foreshadowing of its association with Merton's combined literary and spiritual dimensions, seems to have preserved a particular reverence for maternal grandfather Michael Joseph Lyons, a celebrated Houston

bookman whom the famous Irish tenor John McCormack himself sought out on his visits to that city.

But of course there is no such thing as a family in which everything happens smoothly and without friction:

"Everybody says, 'You were really too young to know what you were doing,' but I really did. I didn't know at fourteen all the implications, but I knew that it was the right thing for me to do. When I told my mother that I wanted to be a Poor Clare, she laughed and said, 'They wont keep you five minutes;' but the Mother Abbess got hold of my father and told him it was the will of God – which it was; and my father said, 'What do I know about the will of God?' So they let me go."

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Of supreme importance here is the fact that the institution which Kathleen entered in 1951 was not a convent – i.e., a domicile for sisters who go out daily into the world to teach the young or administer to the ill – but rather a monastery, and one which, because founded on the same thirteenth century model, was in all respects the counterpart of the monastery which Merton himself had entered in 1941, although the former occupied a full city block in fashionable uptown New Orleans and was of course for women, whereas the latter stood in the Kentucky countryside and was of course for men: a place dedicated to the proposition – and a proposition shared by many other cultures – that society could, and should, afford to have a tiny subset of its members engaged in a more or less constant effort to shut out its own cultural noise in an attempt to commune with some greater reality.

In the Christian west, this has meant a life lived according to the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and – undergirding all of these – stability: although it was sometimes possible to be transferred to another foundation within the same order, the man or woman who entered a monastery with the intention of making solemn and perpetual vows did so with the expectation that he or she would die, or at least be buried, within its walls. And all of this was taken quite seriously, with the Poor Clare's compound in New Orleans, for example, including a mortuary chapel with niches to receive the bodies of its deceased members.

One is tempted to dwell on the fascinating details of this life – the arising from bed at midnight to pray and sing in the chapel for an hour and a half; the breakfast taken standing up and consisting of a piece of bread and a cup of coffee; the cell window from which even looking down onto the street below is discouraged as a risk to one's being apart from the world – but such a focus would be to deflect attention from the crisis in which the monastic life was just then being engulfed, and in the midst of which monasticism itself stood as the mere canary in the coal mine in respect to the entire Western spiritual enterprise.

Even before embarking on an exploration of this recent church history, however, it must be disclosed that monasticism has been subject throughout its entire life to a built-in crisis: the attempt to institutionalize that which is essentially a non-linear process, i.e., the quest for the infinite; and hence it is that friction between tendencies toward the solitary and mystical on the hand, and toward the communal and bureaucratic on the other, has been a constant theme in monastic history; and here also we are taken back to the story of

the perfunctory Abbot Lot and the incendiary Abbot Joseph. This conflict will be a backdrop, as well, for all that follows: already dragging already its ball-and-chain of institutional rigidity – and one which Merton felt acutely about his own ankle – monasticism was in the throes of attempting to negotiate a quite contemporay minefield.

What is perhaps the major aspect of the crisis of modernity has been well rehearsed, i.e., the ever-accelerating appropriation by a reductive science of those phenomenon formerly attributed to the Godhead, and, in particular, the miracles of conception, birth, and maturation – all of those former sources of awe and wonder were being snatched away, which is to say further that there was a relentless contraction in that which could be considered the context for a traditional spiritual life.

Monasticism, however, was also registering the effects of a more systemic challenge, and this to its own isolated form of spirituality: unlike the individual who entered a monastery in the thirteenth century with the certainty that the world would remain little changed during his or her tenure therein, Merton and Kathleen confronted a world at the time of their 1967 conference that was vastly different from that which they had left behind in, respectively, 1941 and 1951. In Merton's case, the nuclear genie had not yet been let out of its bottle, nor the computer as we know it – that device which has changed *everything* in man's psychic universe – yet been invented; and neither of them had witnessed first hand humanity's discovery of the genetic code, or its leap into outer space.

In response to the obvious morale problems which such a situation must create – not only confinement within the walls of a monastery, but also a sense of being left behind by history – it would be reasonable to ask, "If these folks were in fact communing daily with the eternal Godhead, why should they have cared about what was happening in the outside world?"; and this question would be worth pursuing were it not for the fact that a rapidly changing outside world also represented a legitimate spiritual and theological dilemma. A critical part of the monastic discipline – and one particularly appropriate for members of communities that were not often financially independent – was to keep sight of the fact that one was but a specialized member of a larger church, and which church, in turn, thought of itself as "the people of God"; but in what sense could one be said to speak for, or pray on behalf of, a society very much different from that with which one had been familiar?

Yet for those dedicated to a church that was in turn dedicated to charity as one of its core principles, there was an even more bothersome aspect of the tradtional monastic isolation, and one highlighting even more starkly the contrast with the original conditions under which monasticism had been founded. If, in the thirteenth century, the idea of changing the social order or abolishing war had been unthinkable, the October 1945 founding of the United Nations could be said to have placed an official stamp of approval on the pursuit of peace and social justice. Priests and nuns of the active orders became stalwarts in protests against nuclear war and racial segregation – and yet the men and women of the monasteries were still to do no more than watch and pray.

Here is Kathleen on the problem:

"It takes a special person to actually be able to do that – a real calling – and it's rare. To live a life of total separation from the world in a sense – and yet, to be involved in what the world is, also. And I've known many a holy person who could pull that off very well . . . and I also think that, maybe, you should do that, and then be able to somehow go

out in some way and share the fruits of your contemplation with the rest of the world – Merton certainly did it through his books."

So there is a hint here, and with Merton as the example, as to what a potential solution to the crisis of stability might look like; but given that it can take the church centuries to make known its own formal stance on things, our story must necessarily continue, not with a focus on the specifics of a solution, but rather with a focus on the tiny but historic gathering for which this question was the centerpiece – and its larger historic setting.

* * *

A common view of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council – so named not because it was the second major council in church history (there had been some twenty previous church-wide councils), but rather because it was the second to be held at the Vatican itself – is that it was convened by Pope John XXIII "out of the blue", and that it had gone on to usher in a new age of openness within the church and a new focus on peace and ecumenicism in respect to the outside world; but there is an alternate understanding which perhaps adds some useful shading to this picture: as opposed to having convened Vatican II as a function of divine inspiration, Pope John was in fact ripping the top off of a vessel that was about to explode from its own internal pressure; and once the contents of that vessel had been exposed and acknowledged, hundreds and thousands of priests and nuns felt that the justification now existed for them to follow a path other than that which had been prescribed by the church and/or their respective orders – whether some newly blazed trail within the church, or outside the church entirely – and hundreds and thousands of them took the leap.

And according to a story – whether true or false – circulating within the ranks and related to us by Kathleen, John's predecessor Pope Pius XII had played a critical role in making this era of détente possible, and this by offering himself as a lightning rod in respect to the eternal sanctity of solemn vows: "You could never be released from solemn vows. A Dominican priest asked Pius XII to be released from his solemn vows, and he did it. All the cardinals said, 'You can't do that,' and he said, 'I just did it.'"

As we have already been informed, moreover, Merton himself was not immune from questioning the rigid interpretation of the ancient rules under which the contemplative life was still being governed – or his own fitness to conform to them; and in fact, he had been something of the poster boy within the church for the idea of monastic renewal, and for taking a new look at things.

But even this might be an understatement: already plagued with an active and questioning mind, and – as the world's most famous (and profitable) monk – beset as well with a constant stream of offers to take up residence at one or another monastery outside of his own order, and where he might hope to find some relief from the infantilized regimentation which was often passed off as the *via dolorosa* of the spiritual life, Merton seemed constantly on the verge of jumping ship during the latter half of his career as a monk (this most often in favor of the Camaldolese, who lived as hermits within somewhat loosely-organized communities) – and thus echoing in his own life the schizophrenia that had characterized monasticism itself.

And now the gasoline of Vatican II was being poured onto the smoldering fire that was the church in the mid-twentieth century, and in respect to which action Merton could well think of himself as having had one hand on the pump: at the institutional level, his writings on ecumenicism and the precarious position of the contemplative life within the modern world had clearly helped set the agenda for the Conference; and at a more personal level, he could point to a long-distance friendship with Pope John himself, who had sent this famous and popular Catholic author a gift of one of his own papal stoles, and a much more direct friendship with Mother Mary Luke Tobin, Superior of the Convent of the Sisters of Loretto in nearby Nerinx, Kentucky, and one of only fifteen women – and the only American – invited to Vatican II as official auditors.

(And here a short answer to the question that must have come to mind at this point, i.e., as to the prevalence of Catholics in this part of otherwise Protestant Kentucky: the original Catholic foothold of the colonial era having been Baltimore, history does go on to record that the Bardstown region was the first major center of Catholic influence west of the Appalachians, and this a circumstance not unrelated to the fact that it was to become the epicenter of the distilling business. Corn could be changed into the far more portable and profitable whiskey – and thank God there were some Papists around to do the dirty work.)

* * *

So the church, no less than civil society, was caught up in the revolutions of the 1960s – and in the midst of this turmoil, it is to Thomas Merton's eternal credit that he remained on a path which others less gifted than himself might find it possible to follow: although he died on December 10, 1968 in far-off Bangkok while attending an international gathering of monks, he remained at the time a loyal member of the Gethsemani community; it was from that community that he had set out on his final journey; it was to that community that his body was returned to be buried within its wall; and – if we may be allowed to back up almost precisely one year in time, to December 3, 1967 – it was to Gethsemani as well that he and Sister Elaine Bane of the Allegany, New York Franciscans had been able to welcome a group of her fellow contemplative nuns for a three-day conference to discuss the growing crisis of stability within their own orders.

And there was yet another December in the mix. Vatican II itself had been adjourned on December 8, 1965; and now, almost exactly two years later – and in the new spirit of independence attendant upon it – Merton and the nuns had convened their conference without having sought permission from church authorities; and while most of the nuns were in fact the prioresses of their respective communities, this was still a daring step.

All of which is not to imply that this was Merton's first Gethsemani conference – far from it. He had presided at hundreds of internal conferences in his appointed role as master of novices, and there had been, in addition, periodic conferences within his own order at which delegations from other foundations would gather to discusss Cistercian business (and during which Merton was often called on to serve as a translator); ecumenically-oriented conferences with the likes of Vanderbilt divinity students; and politically-oriented conferences with his fellow activists such as that of November 1964 on non-violence.

Nor does Merton himself seem to have expected that there would be anything special about the December, 1967 conference, since – as we shall see – his subsequent account of it in his journal fairly explodes with surprise and enthusiasm. To be sure, this would be perhaps Merton's first time serving in an almost purely pastoral capacity, i.e., as a spiritual leader apart from his responsibilities to his order or the various initiatives with which he was involved; and to the extent that there was an agenda and a constituency to be addressed, it involved the most central and spiritual of his concerns: the comtemplative life.

If, however, we are to fully account for the magic of this conference – and, beyond that, if we are to give ourselves a glimpse of the promised tapestry, with the friendship between Kathleen and Dianna in one corner and the great social revolutions which were just getting under way in the 60s occupying the center – we must bring into the picture another factor, and one already alluded to: although Merton was once again to have an audience consisting entirely of his fellow religious, they were all women.

* * *

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread": Ricky Nelson's 1963 hit song notwithstanding, this is a line from a poem by Alexander Pope about scholarship as opposed to the relationships between men and women – and foolish indeed the writer who would presume to add to the literature regarding the much-contested status of women within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Even so, it is interesting to note that women have perhaps played an even greater role within that tradition than one might expect: in the Old Testament book of the same name, for example (and one which was a favorite of Merton's), "wisdom" is apotheosized in the manner of the Chinese "tao" as that mysterious and life-giving element that animates the universe – but is personified throughout as female; and interesting also the complementary corrections (or, depending on one's point of view, delinquencies) of the Catholic and Protestant churches: the former, unlike the latter, has essentially incorporated a woman into its pantheon in the person of the Virgin Mary; and the latter, unlike the former, has given women a role in its sacramental life.

And while still on the subject of women and the institutional church – but now zeroing in on Merton himself – we cannot fail to mention his personal devotion to the Virgin Mary in her role as Our Lady of Mount Carmel, nor fail to spell out the full and complete name of his monastery: "The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani".

But we must at some point leave the safety of the institutional – and we might begin by conceding the point that, while perhaps not quite in the lusty mold of a St. Augustine, Merton was definitely not one of those bloodless men for whom "woman" was something of an abstraction. Unless a mountain of anecdote is to be ignored, he had fathered an illegitimate child while a student at Cambridge; and there was of course his 1966 infatuation with a young and pretty nurse, and which he ended in the same way that he had ended his infatuation with the idea of moving to a different and more exotic monastery.

The upside: first, that Thomas Merton was a human being – paradoxically, perhaps the most important qualification for sainthood; and second, that he enjoyed the company

of women, and fifteen of whom were now, one season after our 1967 "summer of love", headed in his direction.

* * *

Although Kathleen had been a member of the New Orleans Poor Clares for more than sixteen years, she was at the time only thirty – a vibrant and lovely young woman with an irrepressible smile, if we can judge from one of the few pictures of her to have emerged from within the cloisters – and so the question arises as to why she was selected to accompany her abbess Mother Mary Francis Clare to the conference instead of a more senior member of the community.

And the ultimate answer to that question might well be an aqua green Chrysler station wagon owned by the New Orleans monastery: a huge boat of an automobile able to carry eight people in a pinch and for that reason placed in its possession – and whose designated driver was our youthful and adept Kathleen! (But let us also hasten to add that, designated driver or not, the Reverend Mother would never have permitted her young nun to accompany her on this long and historic journey if she had not felt that Kathleen was up to the challenge.) The aqua green station wagon, moveover, was to bring not only Kathleen and Mother Francis Clare to Kentucky: arrangements had been made to stop in Jackson, Mississippi, to pick up the prioress of that city's Carmelite community – Mother Jane – and the one additional member of that community who would consider herself quite lucky to be making the trip.

And with our outbound itinerary now established, let us pause for a moment to consider the extent to which these nuns might have had some real familiarity – despite their isolation within their own communities – with the person who was to be their host at Gethsemani. Of the reality of that isolation there can be little doubt: Kathleen recalls, for example, that "once every four years the abbess would tell us who the new president was;" but Merton was one of their own, and it is likely that word would have spread through ecclesiastical channels of, in particular, his gift from Pope John.

More to the point, however, it seems to have been a universal practice within both male and female monasteries for devotional literature to be read out loud during meals in the refectory; and although Merton's famous first book about his early life and conversion might have been considered too worldly for cloistered ears, he had also written a series of books specifically for contemplatives both east and west, and which books had gone into some detail regarding the modern-day challenges to the contemplative life – and we can be certain that these, in their many translations as well as in their original English, were staples of refectory reading throughout mid-twentieth century Christendom.

(And here perhaps another sign that Dianna and I had stepped, however briefly, across some threshold: as I was to discover later, the final book in that series, *Contemplative Prayer*, was in fact Merton's very last book. Indeed, it had been published a year after his death, and as such seemingly beyond the scope of our present narrative; but it was that very book – held back from bequeathal to Jo Gulledge because I had thought it too minutely religious for her to have found it interesting – from whose cover Merton had posthumously looked down on our wine-and-cheese-and-prayer party.)

* * *

For our party of nuns, in summary, Merton's current status was that of the larger-than-life figure of celebrated Catholic monk and author; but if we can credit the possibility, there had already been placed in Kathleen's path several opportunities to experience a more initimate connection with Gethsemani and its holy man.

Remarkably, for example, the only African-American nun among the New Orleans Poor Clares had established a correspondence with Merton, and two letters from which are preserved at Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Center. A former entertainer and self-described member of the demimonde, Sister Marie Pius had been admitted to the monastery in the late 50s but had died not long after of cancer – but not before having endeared herself to Kathleen and the rest of the community: "We were all so crazy about her, she was so much fun . . . she was having mystical experiences, so she wrote to Merton – and he wrote back . . . and he told her that he would rather correspond with her than cardinals and archbishops . . . so they had a correspondence . . . she really profited by his direction . . . but we never knew what he said or anything . . . it was very private between them . . ."

More central to the Kathleen/Gethsemani/Merton axis was Father James Fox, Merton's abbott at Gethsemani for the greater part of his twenty-six years as a monk, and between whom there had been the inevitable differences. Fox would have had not-infrequent occasion to travel on monastery business to New Orleans – then and still one of the most Catholic cities in the United States; and on those occasions he was put up by none other than our very own Poor Clares.

(But to digress a bit in reference to the question of lodging, the term "Poor Clares" is somewhat misleading! Although the accomodations of the nuns themselves within the monastery might have been spartan, the monastery itself represented a rather imposing base of operations for a visiting abbot: the building perhaps not quite the magnificent chateau-style Notre Dame Seminary where Pope John Paul II was to be housed on his 1987 visit to the city – but close enough; and the neighborhood was certainly better: as previously noted, a full city block in uptown New Orleans, and one that was studded with magnificent live oak trees and enclosed within a high brick wall.)

With Abbot Fox in town, at any rate, the nuns would have been straining their ears for any mention of the great Thomas Merton; but it was of course our Kathleen who had the occasional opportunity to chauffeur Fox around the city: "He didn't talk about Merton that much, honey . . . when we first met Dom James we said, 'Tell us about Merton, tell us about Merton!', and he said, 'Well, he says he writes out of obedience, but I cahn't stop him' – he's from Boston, so he says 'cahn't' – 'I cahn't stop him' . . . they had a love-hate relationship . . . they loved each other and they didn't . . . but Merton was a handful . . . he was sheer genius, you know . . . and he had ideas galore . . . but Dom James was running a monastery with two hundred men . . . he had to keep some control . . ."

Abbot Fox, in turn, had been the key to the most remarkable of Kathleen's before-the-fact links to Gethsemani: her first abbess, Mother Margaret Mary, had written to him with the request that Kathleen's younger brother Mike be admitted to Gethsemani as a lay brother, and which request had been honored; Mike had then convinced their still younger brother Jerry to come to Gethsemani; and Mike and Jerry together had recruited their even younger brother Dennis. None of them ended up staying permanently – this a not uncommon and not dishonorable outcome, and especially in respect to those who

were planning to serve as lay brothers as opposed to choir monks like Merton; but it is nonetheless the case that Merton and the rest of the monastery would have been very well familiar with the Burkes of New Orleans.

This fourth Burke, however, was a woman – and she would perhaps be there more to give than to receive.

* * *

Nuns still wore their black and white habits in 1967; but even so, the sight of four of them speeding north through Mississippi in an aqua green Chrysler station wagon might have been a bit difficult to take in at one glance!

Far less effort is required to imagine their excitement: travel was a quite rare experience to begin with, and here they were setting their own itinerary; the sense of a revolution in progress would have been further enhanced by the presence within the station wagon of nuns from two separate but allied communities, and who were sharing torrents of church gossip; and at the end of their journey, the great Thomas Merton himself was to welcome them to the legendary Gethsemani!

And at this critical juncture, we will let Kathleen herself pick up the story:

"When we got to Gethsemani it was in the afternoon . . . we stayed in the women's guest house . . . it was up on a hill – it was walkable to the monastery . . . and the lady in charge of that – she and her husband, he was in charge of the men's retreat and she was in charge of the women's . . . they had a nice little house that Dom James had built for them, and we had all our meals at her house . . . but she came out and she said, 'Is it possible that ya'll could drive to ___' . . . I don't even know . . . it was far and yet it wasn't that far [probably the Louisville airport] . . . so she said the Carmelites were there – some Carmelites from another monastery, and they needed to be picked up . . . so we went [after dropping the prioresses off], and I drove . . . and I know the poor Mother Superior, she was so sick – from the plane ride – and we had to get back in time and I was going fast, and rushing over these hills . . . and every time we did that she said 'Ooh' . . . but anyway, we had the first conference with Merton that evening . . . and then we had two or three conferences a day . . . Mass every morning . . . I know the second day I was there – when he found out who I was – he remembered my brothers very well . . . I was in the gift shop and here comes Dom James, and I was so glad to see him, and I hugged him and I hugged him . . . and Merton came by and he [Dom James] said, "You know who this is," and Merton said, "Yeah, I just found out."

* * *

And what was Merton's take on the conference? With the understanding that the nuns had arrived at Gethsemani on Sunday, December 3; that the formal conference meetings were held on Monday, December 4 through Wednesday, December 6; and that the nuns had left on Thursday, December 7 – and with the further understanding that Merton had at this point in his monastic career been granted the use of a small cinder-block hermitage that also doubled as a retreat center – here is his journal entry for that Thursday:

December 7, 1967

The last four or five days have been quite fantastic: among the most unusual in my life. I hardly know how to write about them. There should be a whole new key – and a kind of joy unusual in this journal – where I am usually diffident and sad.

I have to change the superficial ideas and judgements I have made about the contemplative religious life, the contemplative orders. They were silly and arbitrary, and without faith.

The retreat, or meeting, or whatever you want to call it, with the fifteen contemplative nuns who were here from Sunday evening on has been a wonderful thing. Much more than I expected.

First of all – their obvious *quality*. All of them – or almost all – real contemplatives, and were really human (all of them certainly that) – completely simple, honest, authentic people. I have never before had such a sense of community with any group – including when Sr. Luke and Sr. Jane Marie came over from Loretto – and two of our own monks, Br. Maurice and Br. Wilfrid up here this morning for Mass. Mass at the hermitage today was unutterably good, something I simply can't articulate. People who should have been undisposed finding themselves completely united – for instance as we ended up singing "We Shall Overcome" with a sense that our own revolution was well under way! Sounds silly enough. But it was very real.

Sitting together in silence after Communion, with the rising sun shining into the cottage, was indescribably beautiful. Everyone so obviously happy! I was tired only on the first day. After that it was all easy.

I'd like to write about them all – but perhaps shouldn't try. But I do feel very close to all of them – each in a special way. A sense of awe and privilege at being able to come together with such people.

First of all Sr. Elaine Michael from the OSF at Allegany. Intelligence, earnestness, response – someone you enjoy working with (we organized this together).

The two Passionists from Scranton – Sr. Elizabeth, Sr. Louise, both beautiful people (especially in their black habits), ardent, deep, articulate, contemplative, alive! Mother Jane from Jackson (Mississippi) Carmel – a very special person. All of them! Very impressed with Mother Mary Francis Clare, of the New Orleans Poor Clares, also intelligent, witty, sharp, and a real mystic (though obese – as if that had anything to do with it!) Mother Agnes, the old, silent, little bent-over Abbess of the Poor Clares in Newport News, taking everything in bright-eyed. It all sounds silly, but they are all better than the best you find anywhere. Immensely encouraging, because they are what they are not just *in spite of* the communities to which they are commited, but because of them. I am completely confident in the contemplative orders once again. There is a lot that needs changing, but our life is fundamentally one of the soundest and most healthy things in the Church, and I am sure has all kinds of promise. It was a great help to me to see and experience this.

. . .

These four days have been very moving and I feel completely renewed by them: the best retreat I ever made in my life.

Two days later he was still thinking and writing about the conference; and the last paragraph of his December 9 journal entry was to find its way verbatim – and Kathleen along with it! – into the Mott biography:

December 9, 1967

Yesterday, Immaculate Conception, I was pretty tired. Went down to Concelebration, came back and lay down for an hour (sort of drugged sleep), then got up and went for a quiet walk and some meditation by the lake beyond St. Bernard's field. Springlike sun. No one around. I needed the silence. Coming back – the small footprints of my nuns still in the mud of the road by the sheep barn. I remembered their happiness, especially when they were at Mass in the hermitage.

. . .

I remember the Sisters leaving on Thursday – one car after the other and finally the green station wagon from New Orleans roaring off with Sister Kathleen at the wheel. Last I saw of her she was barreling down the middle of the highway.

* * *

In reference to a life filled with extraordinary experiences, and from a man who was seldom at a loss for words, the two sentences with which Merton begins these journal entries must be considered the prologue to a description of a profound spiritual experience – and the prologue, therefore, to a profound spiritual testament – and one which we must learn how to take at face value if we are to claim an overall understanding of Thomas Merton as man and potential saint: "The last four or five days have been quite fantastic: among the most unusual in my life. I hardly know how to write about them."

And if we are to take this testament at face value – and with the further belief that the profound is also inevitably simple and down-to-earth – then we might do no better than to think of this conference as our own wine-and-cheese-and prayer party writ large. Instead of our one Kathleen, Merton had walked into a reactor with fifteen Kathleens: fifteen beings whose innate warmth and energy and intelligence as women had been sharpened by a life of prayer and contemplation – the shock troops, in short, of hope and joy!; and if there is one quality in his depiction of all of this that marks Merton as both a candidate for sainthood and as one of the great ambassadors between East and West, it is his willingness to "be still and know that I am God"; i.e., there is a very real sense in these passages of Merton's happiness at simply being in the presence of "my nuns".

In truth, we are in the midst here of the ultimate significance, not only of the December 1967 conference, but also of Kathleen's presence in our own lives – but Merton's immediate preoccupation was with the boost that had been given to the contemplative life. Yes, the system needed reform; but if these women had come out of

it with the decency and energy and wit that had been on display at the conference, there could be no doubt that there was something in it worth preserving.

But Merton was also certainly aware that life within the cloister could have served only to amplify something that was already present – and, more than that, omnipresent – and to which he had in fact borne decisive witness in his December journal entries. I refer, of course, to those qualities which have given to woman the truly essential roles in human affairs: as bearer and representative of the bounty of creation; as nurturer and teacher; as sparkplug and organizer; as muse and peacemaker; as source of hope and encouragment; and – above all – as dispenser of compassion and consolation.

And it is at this precise point that we must jump from the universal back to the particular of our own gathering around the dining room table, and note that Kathleen had provided for Dianna a critical moment of dignity and recollection – and for the rest of us an opportunity to honor her grace and courage in the face of affliction – that had been entirely independent of her eventual cure. We had witnessed, in short, *two* miracles: a dramatic cure on the one hand; but on the other the everyday miracle of people living their lives with courage and composure – and coming to each other's aid when there was no real hope of a payoff.

Kathleen's compassion, moreover, had been but one of the everyday virtues which are the domain of the female, and which panoply of roles it has been one of the glories of the Roman and Eastern churches to have recognized and celebrated in the person of the Virgin Mary – and this on top of the willingness of Christianity in general to acknowledge the humble and the quotidian. And so among many other treasures, we have in consequence inherited the great vertical Renaissance and Baroque paintings whose subject is the "Assumption of the Virgin" – the magnificent Titian altarpiece at the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice and the Rubens altarpiece at the Antwerp Cathedral of Our Lady, in particular – in which the Virgin is surrounded above by the heavenly host and a host of cherubim, and below by the assembled apostles and disciples; and it may come as something of a surprise to learn that this vertical format was inspired by the hanging tapestry – itself an evolved product of the humble loom.

So the traditional female virtues have been defined on the basis that being at the very center of human life has meant a focus on the daily, the detailed, and the domestic; but with the disclosure that Dianna is the first and only one of the nine children in her family to have graduated from college, and that my only child, Nicole, is a PhD academic – which is to say further that I would never, ever wish to draw a box around "woman", or imply some limit to womanly aspiration – it must be added that we are perhaps only now beginning to allow their full potential to be unleashed, and this some three or four million years after ape-like men first walked erect upon the surface of the earth; and more to the point, the period of their initial liberation had corresponded exactly with Merton's life and ministry.

* * *

Having just sung the praises of the Catholic church, I must now take the risk of casting a shadow over the conclusion of this narrative by acknowledging as well the legitimate grievances of those two multitudes which still cry out to it for redress:

In the first instance, the victims of priestly sexual abuse, and who cry out above all for an end to the evasions and posturing:

Lord, hear our prayer!

And in the second instance – and ironically! – the female religious of the church who are still fighting a desperate battle to be heard, and most often on behalf of the marginalized and voiceless:

Lord, hear our prayer!

* * *

Any narrative having Thomas Merton as its subject must also be suspect if it does not touch on some literary outcome, and so it is therefore immensely gratifying to be able to report that, as the most enduring evidence of its place in church history, the December 1967 conference gave birth to both a book and – in all likelihood – a literary magazine.

The reel-to-reel tape recorder having become a generally available consumer device at the time of the 1967 conference, all of the sessions were recorded, the recordings later transcribed under the editorship of Sister Jane Marie Richardson of the Sisters of Loretto, and the transcript eventually published in 1992 by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux as *The Springs of Contemplation*, and with an introduction by none other than Sister Mary Luke Tobin: a beautiful, Mediterranean blue volume with gilt lettering – the used copy that I acquired as part of my Katleen/Merton research having once belonged to the public library of elite Boca Raton – and whose existence is a more than adequate excuse for not burdening our already overly-long article with details of the conference proceedings, and regarding the general tenor of which we must already have a fair idea.

One thing we can say about the proceedings as recorded, however, is that Merton placed quite a bit of emphasis on the importance of the contemplative communities staying in close touch with one another during that era of crisis and instability; and so one cannot help but suspect that his one plunge into publishing – a literary magazine *by* contemplatives and *for* contemplatives, and first mentioned in a letter by Merton less than a week after the conference had ended – had sprung directly from it, although the Mott biograpny speculates as to alternate origins. And as if in prophecy of his own untimely death at the end of 1968, Merton had specified in that same letter that *Monk's Pond* was to have only four issues (as he well knew, the historic importance of the typical literary journal almost in reverse proportion to its longevity), and which four issues he someone managed to complete in the run-up to his fateful Asian journey.

* * *

Given that Merton, in his journal, had taken leave of Kathleen as she was "barreling down the middle of the highway", it is perhaps appropriate that her own strongest reaction to the conference had come while she was still behind the wheel on the way home, and even more appropriate – as the result, apparently, of a hastily-arranged side trip to the community of Poor Clares in Travelers Rest, South Carolina – that she had also been in the midst of the vast "knobs" and "hollows" of the great Smoky Mountains: "So we were going back . . . we had to go through the Smoky Mountains and the Mother Abbess is like, 'I don't want to go up through the Smoky Mountains at night', and we kept

saying, 'Come on, Mother, come on' – we were in a little town named Maryville . . . I guess it's in Tennessee . . . or maybe it's North Carolina. . . it's like the gateway to the Smokies . . . and finally she said 'OK' . . . and we said 'O look at the mountains!' and she said 'I'm looking at what's coming out of them!' . . . so anyway, we drove through the Smoky Mountains for a long time, and I felt so . . . high . . . and I knew I had a oneness with everything in the universe . . . I felt that oneness with the car, with the wheels, I knew we would have no accident . . . I felt at one with the road . . . and . . . I knew that I had been in the presence of a holy man . . ."

III

The date: September 24, 2015, and Dianna had rushed down to our small convenience store to tell Kathleen the news: Thomas Merton was one of the four Americans – along with Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Dorothy Day – to have been recognized by Pope Francis in his historic address to Congress, and in these words:

> A century ago, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a "pointless slaughter", another notable American was born: the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote: "I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers." Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.