

PURSuing THE MONK'S TRUE LIFE

# A Search for Solitude

THE JOURNALS OF

## Thomas Merton

VOLUME THREE 1952-1960

Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham



Thomas Merton

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# *A Search for Solitude*


*Pursuing the Monk's True Life*

EDITED BY LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM

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BOOKS BY THOMAS MERTON

*The Seven Storey Mountain*

*The Sign of Jonas*

*New Seeds of Contemplation*

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*

*The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*

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*Love and Living*

*The Monastic Journey*

*The Asian Journal*

*Run to the Mountain (Journals I)*

*Entering the Silence (Journals II)*

*A Search for Solitude*

What it all comes down to is that I shall certainly have solitude but only by miracle and not at all by my own contriving. Where? Here or there makes no difference. Somewhere, nowhere, beyond all "where." Solitude outside geography or in it. No matter.

*December 17, 1959*

## *Acknowledgments*

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This volume is dedicated to the Cistercian Community of Our Lady of Gethsemani and its abbot, Father Timothy Kelly. If one wishes to experience monastic hospitality deeply, that is the place to go.

## Introduction

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A monk is a man who is separated from all and who is in harmony with all. *Evagrius of Pontus*

A monk should be like the seraphim and cherubim: all eye. *Abba Macarius*

This third volume of Thomas Merton's private journals covers, sporadically, the period between July 1952 and 1960. When he wrote his 1952 entries, Merton had already been at the Abbey of Gethsemani for over a decade. He made his final vows as a Cistercian monk in 1947 and was ordained a priest on Ascension Thursday in 1949. The publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) had already made him a household name in the Catholic world.

Merton kept rather brief journals in the last months of 1952 and in 1953, with a hiatus in 1954–1955. It was in this period that Merton gave up his position as master of scholastics, training the young monks in preparation for final vows (he was appointed to that post in 1951) to become, in 1955, master of novices. In 1956 he again began keeping his journal on a regular basis. The journal entries from 1956 through 1960 must be read against his role as novice master, as he saw to the formation of the many young men who were coming to Gethsemani to try their hand at the monastic life. Since he was in such a crucial position, it is no surprise that his thought constantly focused on who and what a monk was. It was André Louf, I think, who once wisely said that a monk is a person who every day asks, "What is a monk?" It was a question that was very much on the mind of Merton in this period.

These journals were written in those brief moments in his crowded schedule or on those days in which he had a bit of freedom to go for a few hours either to the little woodshed that he called his "hermitage" and named in honor of St. Anne, or into the woods that were part of the abbey property. What the journals mention only in passing is that he kept the full



monastic horarium, taught, did his share of manual labor, kept up an enormous correspondence, and continued to write for publication. Not counting pamphlets, essays, and reviews, Merton published ten books between 1952 and 1960.

Merton wrote on legal-sized ledgers, dating his entries either with a calendar notation alone, or with a mention of the feastday of the liturgical calendar. Like all good monks, he was frugal. Every line was filled and, not infrequently, he wrote on the wide white top of the page. His daily entries were often separated with a series of crosses. He rarely crossed out words, and only in a very few places was his rather tight handwriting illegible; erasures and illegible words are noted in the text in brackets.

He rarely wrote in parallel columns (mostly when doing literary "experiments"), but when he did I have tried to reproduce the columns as he wrote them. He often used abbreviations (for example, John of the Cross became John of the †; Frater [Brother] was usually Fr., and so on) and these are retained in the text.

It is very difficult to specify the contents of this journal. Sometimes he was speaking to himself in reaction to his reading, or musing about possible strategies for a project. In other places he commented on what he was researching or what he did on a particular day. Some of his most beautiful lines are impressions of what he saw, people he met, or snatches of conversation. Finally, there were arguments with himself, pleas to God, or un verbalized comments to others.

In order to let Merton speak in his own voice, I have only added notes where it was necessary to clarify matters under discussion or to add the final titles of Merton's own works, which often had other working titles while in the process of being written. No attempt was made to identify every book or article he mentioned in passing, even though I have tracked down most of them. Rather than clutter the text with footnotes, translations are put in brackets immediately after the original citation; they are my rather free translations except in those few cases where Merton himself did the translation as preparation for a published work. I resisted correcting Merton's sometimes hasty annotations or miscopying from a book or article; in places where he says something is on a particular page, it might, in fact, spread over to an adjacent page.

A glossary of commonly used monastic terminology is appended to this work to aid those readers who might not be familiar with the more arcane usages of religious and monastic nomenclature.

Assiduous readers of the published works of Merton will benefit from these private journals in a quite particular fashion: They will see in raw form his own reflections and observations and be able to compare them with their finished form in some of his published work. A not insignificant portion of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) makes a first appearance in these pages, while the seeds of such works as his essays on Boris Pasternak as well as his translations from the Spanish are portrayed in an unfinished fashion. Other published works, such as his translation of the desert solitaires entitled *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960) and his *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), appear on these pages as embryonic projects struggling to mature. Some will note that his duty on the night fire watch (which is so movingly described at the end of *Sign of Jonas*) is the subject of more than one entry in his journal.

Beyond all these matters of interest to the serious student of Merton there is something more elemental reflected in these jottings: the voice of the man and the monk. I have lived with these journals for well over two years, and hope you will indulge me in a few reflections about what struck me as they were being transcribed from his page to my computer.

First, there are the wonderful passages where Merton lets his poetic eye capture the natural environment in which he lived. Everything from the patois of the monastery's neighbors to the "knobs" (hills) and woods within which they live get set down with a sympathetic and uncondescending accuracy. He had a feel for the sky and the flight of birds (recall that contemplation first meant to look for portents in a portion of the sky); for the trees planted or culled on the monastery grounds; for the emergence of spring flowers; for the brush fires that would erupt in the knobs around the monastery; and for the avian and animal life of the woods that he loved so much.

That same discerning eye could be turned to the monastic community itself. He had the fiction writer's sharp eye and ear for the beauties as well as the idiosyncrasies of his brethren; for the rhythms and tediums of regular observance; for the strengths of the monastery and for its weaknesses. If he could be judgmental at times, it was only in the journal that he could be so; after all, vagrant conversations were hardly the norm in the Gethsemani of that day. So much of the journal is a form of talking to himself. Indeed, one is led to think that some of these entries would not be here at all if sustained conversation with another person were the rule rather than the exception in a Trappist monastery.

However vexed Merton could be with his monastic life, it is quite clear that he took it with utmost seriousness, both in terms of what he

demanded of himself and what he expected of those under him (as well as those over him). It is important to note that when he pursued his readings in everything from literature to Marxist philosophy, he did so with this imperative question in mind: How can a contemplative monk in the twentieth century not be concerned with these issues?

In fact, it was his preoccupation with the question of what it meant to be a monk in his own time that gives this journal its most lasting value, both because it does honor to monasticism in its own right, and because it is instructive for all who value the contemplative life.

Merton, in fact, had a rather original angle on what we might call "ecumenism" as it derives from, and finds nurturance in, the contemplative life. During 1956 and 1957, he was reading widely in the writings of Russian Orthodox theologians and thinkers. Through those readings he came to the conclusion that he could, at a deep and interior level, join within himself East and West by a sympathetic openness to the best that the East could offer. He set out that program for himself on April 28, 1957, when he wrote: "If I can unite *in myself*, in my own spiritual life, the thought of the East and West of the Greek and Latin Fathers, I will create in myself a reunion of the divided church and from that unity in myself can come the exterior and visible unity of the Church." (Merton's emphasis; these lines would reappear in *Conjectures*.)

His eager embrace of the writings of Boris Pasternak, after all, derived from his sense that beneath the prose of *Doctor Zhivago* he could detect a strain of sophianic christology, Christ as the Wisdom of God, which he had discovered more explicitly in the writings of Berdyaev and Bulgakov in the same period. His eager desire to correspond with Pasternak was a kind of enfleshment of this interior desire to be in communion with those who were by temperament and work fellow seekers.

That desire to combine in his heart Eastern and Western Christianity (through a contemplative synthesis) also motivated his passionate concern for the world of Latin America. Spurred by his friendship with Ernesto Cardenal (then his novice), Merton read Latin American writers, corresponded with them, translated their poetry, commissioned their art, and eagerly welcomed them as novices at Gethsemani. He mentions in passing that he was taking lessons in Portuguese to add to his linguistic repertoire of French, Italian, and Spanish. Frequently, he writes in his journals of his desire to bridge the gap between North and South America; to become a builder of a view of a single America in which human solidarity and love would replace the tensions between the two Americas. Further, let it be

noted, he wanted to do this from his perspective as a monk. In a very real sense, Merton was a liberation theologian *avant la parole*.

These were not the only projects of reconciliation that preoccupied him. We see him wondering how, as a contemplative person, he might cross over to the world of Zen and existentialism and the serious Marxism of his day. Careful readers of this journal will note that these were not mere fancies of a promiscuously restless mind (although his mind *was* restless). These interests were grounded in his intuition that at the base of reality was the transcendental presence of God's Wisdom (*Sophia*) present in the world from the beginning and, to quote from a source he loved and referred to constantly, beside God "rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world" (Proverbs 8:30–31).

The figure of Sophia/Wisdom is at the heart of his discussions with his artist friend Victor Hammer, whose own attempts to depict the figure of Sophia would inspire Merton to write his wonderful liturgical poem, "Hagia Sophia." It was the Sophia that he found in the Orthodox theologians, in the art of his friend, and in subtle but detectable ways, in the great intellectual debates of his time. It is, in short, in Sophia that one finds the thread that holds these journals together.

In the late 1950s, Merton records a kind of vocational crisis. He is unhappy in the monastery, finding it too successful and too busy (its success and busyness, ironically, caused in part by his own books' and articles' celebration of its life and virtues). His old desire for a more retired life with its attendant temptation to look to the more eremitical Carthusians and Camaldolese comes back with a vengeance. The chance visit of a Benedictine prior who offers him a new life in a Cuernavaca (Mexico) monastery unleashes a frenetic year of correspondence, plans, poring over maps for suitable monastic sites in Latin America, canonical strategies to leave Gethsemani for other places – either in the rural areas of the West, or more likely in Central or Latin America.

This restlessness not only brought forth moments of faintly hilarious enthusiasms (as he dreamed of far-away islands and idyllic monastic settlements), but painful and sometimes uncharitable private criticisms of his superiors in general and his abbot in particular. Transcribing those entries could be an irritating business – one wants to give him an avuncular scolding when criticism veers off into moments of self-pity. Notwithstanding those moments of irritation, one does appreciate what he himself noted in an entry dated May 21, 1960: that in the journal he "could speak freely,"

and what he wrote for others was, in contrast to these journals, "more controlled, more responsible, more objective and therefore better . . ."

It was while working on those entries that I stumbled on some pages in the *Institutes* of the old fourth-century monastic writer John Cassian. Describing the temptation to *acedia*, Cassian (borrowing rather freely from Evagrius of Pontus's *Praktikos*) sets out the symptoms of monastic *acedia* (boredom; listlessness) with almost clinical exactitude. The monk begins to feel a "horror of the place where he is" and "disgust with his cell." The same monk begins to "complain that he is making no progress" and is "devoid of all spiritual progress." Finally, he "sings the praises of monasteries located in other places" and concludes that "he cannot get any better as long as he stays in his present place" (*Institutes* X.2).

Ironically, I first read those words while sitting one evening on the porch of Merton's hermitage in Kentucky as the sun slowly went down on a lazy June evening. I wrote Cassian's words in my journal with the notation: "an exact description of TM in 1959." One must agree that these ancient monastic writers were shrewd students of human psychology and exact observers of human frailty. They seem to intuit that it was not the harshness of the monastic life but its regularity, its sameness, its boundedness, that could enervate a person. In that sameness one could fancy other places, other settings, other people who would add vigor and freshness to the routines of the ordinary monastic round. As Peter Levi once put it in his study of monks (*The Frontiers of Paradise*, 1987): "If a monk realized that his vocation as a young monk was to become an old monk, I think he would be terrified."

The end of the story, of course, is that Merton's superiors did not permit an exclausturation, official permission to leave Gethsemani; Merton got that word directly from the Vatican. It is striking, given the passionate character of his earlier entries in his journal, that Merton received this news with a calm sense of acceptance. It is then that he notes, briefly, that he will devote himself to the search for "solitude outside geography."

My story ends in early 1960, when arrangements had already been made for Merton to have a combination hermitage and retreat center, Mount Olivet, on the monastery property for the many visitors who came for ecumenical discussions. He could spend time there, and eventually he moved there permanently as a hermit. One does not get Dom James's side of the story, but given those arrangements it is clear that Merton's superiors had the shrewd sense to give him enough latitude within the community to fulfill his heart's desire for a life of contemplation and solitude.

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PART

## *Master of Students*

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*July 1952–March 1953*





*July 25, 1952*

I am trying to get myself adjusted to the fact that, twenty four hours ago, I had just left Columbus, Ohio, in an American Airlines plane, although forty eight hours ago, I was here at Gethsemani, working quietly enough, just as I am doing now. Once again – the problem of always arriving where I already am – the problem that confronts me in my dreams – beats me here. (I am slowly getting rid of the violence of that one day's journey.)

How did I happen to get away from Gethsemani, gather myself together in the middle of Ohio, then take a running jump at the place and land back here in the evening after every one else had gone to bed? This is extraordinary behaviour for a Trappist.

Was it last week Reverend Father told me I was to drive up and meet him in Columbus to see some property near Newark, Ohio, that was being offered us for a foundation?

I said Mass yesterday morning at 2:15 in the back sacristy. Bro. Clement and Bro. Wendeline served me. We drove off together about sunrise. They are bringing back some hay from Ohio, where there has been plenty of rain. Everything is burnt up in Kentucky this year – corn, hay, beans, everything except the tree seedlings we planted in the forest this Spring.

About a half hour on the other side of Louisville, I suddenly realized this was a marvelous journey. We were going along the Ohio River and I saw that it was wide and serene and blue and I saw the wooded hills sweeping down to the broad water, and soon we came to a great curve in the river and passed a river boat coming down with great paddles kicking up the water at her stern. It had already been a happy journey from the beginning (I said the votive Mass for Travellers), but now it became a brilliant one. We crossed the bridge at Cincinnati where the state trooper tried to arrest me for taking a snapshot in 1941, when I first came to Gethsemani on retreat. We sailed up the side of a big hill, a couple of hundred feet above the river, with the city unrolling behind us. There are corners where you come upon churches and monasteries springing up on the hilltops, and over your shoulder you see the weird domed towers of Covington, and you are no longer sure whether you are on the Ohio River or the Danube. Finally,