

# P A R T 1

## A Life in Letters

### In His Own Words

*“There are three gifts I have received, for which I can never be grateful enough: first, my Catholic faith; second, my monastic vocation; third, the calling to be a writer and share my beliefs with others.”*

—“To My Dear Friend,” ca. 1963



While all of Thomas Merton's letters shed light on his life and work, writing a letter was, on some occasions, an opportunity for him to tell his story in brief. The earliest of such letters was one that Merton wrote to Abbot Frederic Dunne in January 1942, a little more than a month after Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. Writing to fulfill the canon law requiring him to identify the dioceses in which he had lived before coming to the monastery, Merton traced the story of his conversion and previewed the narrative line of his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In brief accounts of his life more than two decades later, Merton struck quite a different chord, as illustrated by the letters and excerpts that follow. In 1963, Merton drafted a form letter that he sent to those requesting information about his life and writings. He sent a copy to Tommie O'Callaghan, a friend in Louisville whom Merton chose as one of three trustees of his literary trust, and quipped: "This might amuse you—I send it to High School kids who want me to write essays for them." In May 1967, he included a short curriculum vitae in a letter to poet Jonathan Williams and prefaced it this way: "I am bad at writing these things, 'born on a chimney top in Strasbourg in 1999' etc., but you can select what you want from this one: there is plenty of choice." In June 1968, in a letter to Sister J. M., Merton offered a cogent reprise of the periods of his life as a monk and writer.

TO ABBOT FREDERIC DUNNE, O.C.S.O. *Frederic Dunne, O.C.S.O., was Merton's first Abbot. When Abbot Dunne died on August 4, 1948, just two months before the publication of The Seven Storey Mountain, the autobiography the abbot had directed Merton to write, Merton noted in his journal that Abbot Dunne "is very close to me and will remain so all the rest of my days. . . . His sympathy was deep and real. . . . I don't know who was ever kinder to me."*

[GETHSEMANI NOVITIATE] JANUARY 2, 1942

At the suggestion of my Father Master, I am writing out for you this outline of the main facts of my life and education, including, in particular, the circumstances of my conversion and vocation.

I was born Jan. 31, 1915, in Prades, France, in the diocese of Perpignan, of Protestant parents. My father was a native of New Zealand, my mother an

American. Both are now dead; my mother died when I was six, my father in 1931. I have no knowledge of having received even a Protestant baptism. It is barely possible that I did: but no record exists of it, and no one is left to tell me.

In 1916 my parents brought me to America. I lived here until 1925 when I returned to France with my father. Then I went to the Lycée of Montauban—a public institution of secondary education, for two years. In 1928 I was sent to England, where from 1929 to 1932 I attended Oakham School at Oakham, Rutland, in the Diocese of Nottingham. This was my address from the age of 14 to 16½. After that I came to America and lived most of 1933 with my grandparents at Douglaston, Long Island, in the Diocese of Brooklyn. During the scholastic year 1933–4 I attended Cambridge University, in England, on a scholarship in modern languages. My home address, however, was my grandparents' residence—50 Rushmore Ave., Douglaston, Long Island, N.Y. In fact this was really my *home address*, although most of the time I was away at school, from 1931 to 1934. But I actually lived there from 1934 to 1939. During that time I attended Columbia University, where I got a B.A. degree, and later I pursued my studies and took an M.A. in English, and even did some work towards the degree of Ph.D. I taught English at Columbia one term.

My next address, 1939–40, was 35 Perry Street, New York City, in the Archdiocese of New York.

After that, from June 1940 to December 1941 my address was St. Bonaventure College, St. Bonaventure, N.Y., in the Diocese of Buffalo. There I was employed as an assistant professor of English.

As to my conversion: I had been brought up without much religious training of any kind. My grandparents gave money to the Episcopal Church, but never attended it. My father was a just, devout and prayerful man, but he did not like the Protestant cenacles in France, and never went to the length of becoming a Catholic. He died a good Anglican. The school I went to in England was Anglican, but I protested against the liberal teaching in religion we received there, and because it seemed to me to have no substance to it, I proudly assumed that this was the case with all religions, and obstinately set my face against all churches. Thus from the time of my leaving Oakham School until 1938, I gradually passed from being anti-clerical and became a complete unbeliever. The consequences of this in my life were

disastrous. My only concern was with earthly things: thinking myself passionately devoted to “justice” and “liberty” I began to take an interest in atheistic communism, and, for a while, I held the “doctrines” of radicalism, concerning religious institutions: namely that they were purely the result of social and historical forces and, however well-meaning their adherents, they were nothing more than *social* groups, which the rich made use of to oppress the poor!!!

Suffice it to say that I could not be happy holding such beliefs; and the earthly life, which promised happiness on a purely natural level, had instead brought me great disappointments and shocks and miseries: and I was making bigger and bigger mistakes and becoming more and more confused. I began to realize that my interpretation of the natural order was very mistaken.

As a result of studies and reading which familiarized me with the works of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, but particularly as the result of the work of God’s grace which now began to move me with the most urgent promptings of desire, I began going to Mass at Corpus Christi Church, West 121st Street, New York. And there, I soon began to take instruction and was happily baptized on November 16, 1938.

After that, with many graces from God and many instances of stupidity and ingratitude on my own part, I began, too slowly, the long-needed amendment of my life. In September 1939, considering that my life was still far short of what I desired, I began to pray for a vocation to the priesthood. At that time I was considering the Order of Friars Minor. I even sent an application for admission to that order, and was accepted: however, before beginning the novitiate, I recalled an incident of my past life, and believing this made me unworthy to be a priest, and supported in this belief by a friend who was a priest, I withdrew my application and did not enter the novitiate. Instead, I went to work at St. Bonaventure College, in order to live as nearly as possible the life I would have led if my hopes had not been disappointed. I then discovered that this life also was too easy-going and worldly and relaxed for me; it was well that I had not gone on and entered the Franciscan novitiate! However, I became a Franciscan Tertiary, and by means of daily Communion and other sources of Divine Grace, attempted to advance in the paths of Christian life.

With the passage of time, I was still much unsatisfied, and having heard of the Trappists from a friend [Dan Walsh], I decided to make a retreat here at Gethsemani, which I did during Holy Week, 1941. From the very first moment of entering the monastery I was overwhelmed with the holiness and sanctified atmosphere that filled it, and by the end of that week I was filled with an intense desire to enter this community. However, I still believed that I had no choice in the matter and that, being “unworthy” of the priesthood, it would be useless for me to ever think of applying to be admitted here. Nevertheless I was praying for a Trappist vocation against all hope. The whole situation made me intensely miserable. I returned to my work, and all the impressions I had brought from Gethsemani remained with me all summer—and grew in strength, with my desire to consecrate myself entirely to God as a monk—or if not as a monk, by some other perfect sacrifice of the world: just what, I did not know: but I thought of going as a permanent worker with Baroness de Hueck, in Harlem, where I did actually spend two weeks.

During this time, I was so much at a loss for an answer to my question, for out of shame at the situation in my past which had created this problem, I dared consult no one about it—I finally resolved on saying some prayers and opening the Bible and seeing what answer I would get in this way. With great amazement and fear I read the first words that my eyes fell upon, and they were “*Ecce eris tacens!*” [Behold, you will be silent!]*—*the words of the angel to Zacharias. Even at this surprisingly clear indication of what I was to do, I remained uncertain for some time, and made a retreat early in September at Our Lady of the Valley [Cistercian Abbey in Rhode Island].

Finally, this fall I decided to consult another friend, a priest, and one more learned and experienced than my former adviser. This time I was told that the problem I had in mind was no obstacle to my becoming a priest—which turned out to be the case when I submitted it to your consideration through Father Master, on my arrival here.

I came to Gethsemani December 10, and was admitted to the community on the Feast of St. Lucy, December 13; and now with many prayers and thanks to Almighty God I beg Him to make me, the least of all His servants, totally His so that my past life of rebellious sins and ingratitude may be

burned clean away in the fire of His infinite love—for which I know I humbly share in the merit of your prayers, my Reverend Father!

TO “MY DEAR FRIEND” [CA. 1963]

Forgive me for answering you with a form letter, but I get so many requests like yours that is the only way. It is either this, or no answer at all. You perhaps do not know to what extent correspondence is restricted in a monastery like ours. Even though I have to write many more letters than the Rules provide for, I would never be able to answer everything that comes in. I will put down some notes on the things about which people generally ask, and I hope your question may get answered somewhere along the line.

First: most of the factual information you may need can be found either in the usual reference books (*Who's Who in America*, *Catholic Authors*, etc.) or in books of my own. *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas* are both autobiographical. More recent information may be found in the preface to a *Thomas Merton Reader* (1962). This *Reader* is probably the handiest way of getting to know what I have written and what I think. There is a *Bibliography* of materials by and about me, edited by Frank Dell'Isola. This however goes only up to 1956.

To give you a quick rundown on the facts of my life: born in France, 1915. I was educated at grade schools in New York, Bermuda, France. In high school and prep school in France and England. I went to college at Cambridge, England and Columbia University, N.Y. I did graduate work at Columbia. I taught at Columbia and at St. Bonaventure University. Entered Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in 1941 and have been here since. Ordained priest in 1949. In the monastery I have been spiritual director of the monks studying for the priesthood (Master of Students) and Master of the Novices, that is to say I am supposed to guide and instruct the new ones who have just entered. I have them for three years, give them classes and so on. This takes most of my time.

People are always asking if I am still here. This is because all sorts of rumors go around to the effect that I have left. I haven't. I am still here. I have not been seen in any New York nightclubs for twenty-five years. I am not teaching at Columbia University now. Nor am I teaching at Georgetown,

Purdue, Chicago, Southern Methodist, Stanford, the Sorbonne or anywhere else except Gethsemani. I am not a priest in a parish in the Bronx or even in Brooklyn. I am not traveling around Chile giving retreats to nuns, etc. If you hear anything of this sort you can assume that it is for the birds.

People often ask why I am here in the first place, and what the contemplative life means to me. It means to me the search for truth and for God. It means finding the true significance of my life, and my right place in God's creation. It means renouncing the way of life that is led in the "world" and which, to me, is a source of illusions, confusion and deceptions. However I say this only for myself, and I have no criticism of anyone who seeks truth elsewhere and by some other way of life, provided that they really seek the truth. There are all kinds of ways to God, and ours is only one of the many. But it seems to be the one for me, and it is the one I have chosen and accepted as God's will. There are three gifts I have received, for which I can never be grateful enough: first, my Catholic faith; second, my monastic vocation; third, the calling to be a writer and share my beliefs with others. I have never had the slightest desire to be anything else but a monk, since I first came here. But I have often thought I would like an even more solitary life than we have in the monastery. I think solitude and silence are very important elements which are sadly neglected in the life of modern man, and if you want to find out more of what I think about this, there are books like *Thoughts in Solitude*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Wisdom of the Desert* and parts of *Disputed Questions*. If you want to find out about the monastic life, besides *The Sign of Jonas* you can also consult *The Silent Life*, *The Waters of Siloe*, and some of the pamphlets published here at the monastery, like *Monastic Peace*. I would be glad to send you one if you want it, as a present.

For those who ask what I think about poetry (I write poetry), there is an essay published in my *Selected Poems* which deals with poetry and the contemplative life. At one time I thought I ought to give up writing poetry because it might not be compatible with the life of a monk, but I don't think this anymore. People ask me how I write poetry. I just write it. I get an idea and I put it down, and add to it, and take away what is useless, and try to end up with some kind of poem. A poem is for me the expression of an inner poetic experience, and what matters is the experience, more than



the poem itself. Some of my favorite poets are St.-John Perse (Alexis Léger), F. Garcia Lorca, Dylan Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Boris Pasternak, William Blake, John Donne, Dante, Shakespeare, Tu Fu, Isaias, Aeschylus, Sophocles, etc.

To those who ask what I think about art, there are a couple of essays on the subject in *Disputed Questions*. I like modern art. I have always liked such painters as Picasso, Chagall, Cézanne, Rouault, Matisse, and so on. I like expressionists and impressionists and post-impressionists and abstract expressionists and most of the other “-ists” but I don’t like social realism. Nor do I like candy-box art or the illustrations in the *Saturday Evening Post*. I am not prepared to enter into an argument in defense of these preferences.

Some may want to know what I think about politics. I think that we citizens of the United States, as a nation, ought to make more serious efforts to act our age and think in proportion to our size. For this, a whole lot of people who never thought about anything serious in their lives are going to have to wake up and start thinking about their moral and political responsibilities. It is no good going on emotions and prejudices and slogans and feelings of righteous indignation. It is no good simply letting our minds become a passive reflection of a television screen. It is no good going around shouting something that someone else has suggested that we shout, no matter what it may be. If we want to become a seriously political nation, the people have got to do some thinking for themselves.

I think two issues in this country are extremely serious: one, the race issue; two, the question of nuclear war. The second one is worse than the first but both of them are pretty bad. I do not believe that people who fight for integration are all Communists. I do not think that people who are opposed to nuclear war are necessarily enemies of America and paid agents of Communism. I do not think that military might is the solution to our problems. It may defend our pocket books, but it will never defend our liberty. Liberty begins inside your own souls. Our souls cannot be free if we believe only in money and power and comfort and having a good time. I do not think that our present line of action is doing anything to keep us free.

Doubtless I could go on to explain what I think about Jazz (I like it); the movies (haven’t seen one for years, don’t miss them); smoking (don’t miss it); TV (never watched it, don’t want to); the newspapers (seldom see one);

modern youth (I like them, at least the kind we've got around here—they are the only ones I know); cars (I never had one); wives (never had one, can get along without). There must be some other things about which I ought to have an opinion, but this is enough.

Once again, I am sorry I cannot answer you personally, but I think by now you understand. I will be praying for you. God bless you, pray for me too.

TO JONATHAN WILLIAMS *American poet and essayist Jonathan Williams visited Merton at Gethsemani in January 1967. They were joined by poet Guy Davenport and photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Merton dubbed the trio "the three kings from Lexington."*

MAY 19, 1967

. . . I have been held up in writing the current curriculum [vitae]. I am bad at writing these things, "born on a chimney top in Strasbourg in 1999" etc., but you can select what you want from this one, there is plenty of choice. . . .

—Curriculum vitae Merton, May 1967

Born 1915 in Southern France a few miles from Catalonia so that I imagine myself by birth Catalan and am accepted as such in Barcelona where I have never been. Exiled therefore from Catalonia I came to New York, then went to Bermuda, then back to France, then to school at Montauban, then to school at Oakham in England, to Clare College Cambridge where my scholarship was taken away after a year of riotous living, to Columbia University New York where I earned two degrees of dullness and wrote a Master's thesis on Blake. Taught English among Franciscan football players at St. Bonaventure University, and then became a Trappist monk at Gethsemani Ky. in 1941. First published book of poems 1944. Autobiography 1948 created a general hallucination followed by too many pious books. Back to poetry in the fifties and sixties. Gradual backing away from the monastic institution until I now live alone in the woods not claiming to be anything, except of course a Catalan. But a Catalan in exile who would not return to Barcelona under any circumstances, never having been there. Recently published *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, have translated work of poets like Vallejo, Alberti,