

Seven Storey Mountain

the autobiography of Thomas Merton

Overview & Synopsis

Thomas Merton experienced all 7 stages of Rambo's conversion theory beginning from the context of the illness and death of his father and the crisis of Merton's own personal touch of death to the quest to find God. Merton's encounter with the Roman churches in Italy was where he began to learn who Christ truly is. It was here that Merton felt the call to monastery life by the realization that he was part of the sins of the world that Scripture spoke about. Over the years with a series of interactions between life at Cambridge and Columbia University and living a riotous life Merton found that he was spiritually empty – the world no longer satisfied him. However, the ultimate rejection came from Father Edmund of the Franciscan Order who told Merton that he did not belong in a monastery.

Overview & Synopsis

Merton continued to be unsettled in his spirit. His quest to satisfy his soul in response to his shifting worldview eventually gave him peace of mind and renewed spiritual energy. Through a series of retreats to various monasteries, as well as ongoing interactions, he eventually made his final commitment to become a Trappist (Cistercian) Monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. As we all know there are consequences of all of our decisions. Merton was challenged to yield his entire life to the monastic rule, which included breaking ties with some of his past relationships and possibly giving up his passion for writing. Fortunately, the leaders at the Abbey recognized Merton's gift of writing, and provided opportunities for Merton to live out his monastic calling while influencing the world with his literary gift.

A painting of a harbor scene with several sailing ships and a town in the background. The water is light blue with white ripples. The town in the background is rendered in shades of blue and brown. The sky is a pale, hazy color.

Part I

Childhood & Adolescence

“St. Ives” by Owen Merton
(Thomas’ father) 1910

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas Merton was born in France during World War I to his parents who were both artists. Having little money but a high capacity for work, vision, enjoyment, and expression, Thomas inherited their keen ability to derive enjoyment from life (p.4). He grew up enjoying the freedom to do as he pleased and admired sailors and the heroes of Greek mythology, which made his extensive travels to be very pleasant (p.21).

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas' family

Father – **Owen Merton** – A persistent painter, he was born of a very pious musician in New Zealand only to meet his wife in his study of art in London. He worked as a gardener and an organist to support his family when they moved to America.

Mother – **Ruth Jenkins** – Artist who's dreams and ambition after perfection caused a young Thomas to remember her as worried, precise, quick, and critical. While she would attend Quaker meetings, she never involved religion in the raising of her children.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas' family

*Brother – **John Paul** – “My most vivid memories of him, in our childhood, all fill me with poignant compunction at the thought of my own pride and hard-heartedness, and his natural humility and love...” (p.25).*

Pop & Bonnemaman – Mother's parents – Pop was buoyant and excitable while his wife was deliberate and hesitant. He was a publisher and movies were their religion with actors raised up as examples of morality. Protestants by financial contribution, Pop instilled in Thomas an unconscious hatred and suspicion of Catholics (p.29).

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Having only been taught the Lord's prayer by his father's mother who visited them in America once, they did not attend church until his mother began to die of stomach cancer. The children were kept away from her and did not experience her death, but it is recalled that Thomas did not even think to pray for her.

Later when his father was sick in Africa, the notion to pray did come few times, but only in the face of crisis. Nothing of faith had been raised in him.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

After his wife's death, Owen Merton pursued painting once again while Thomas and his brother resided then with Pop and Bonnemaman. For a large portion of the time Thomas was allowed to travel with him and became used to living among strangers and skipping school to be with his father.

His father eventually left there alone for Europe and Africa where he honed his skills as an artist and had successful viewings and sales thereafter, but as it was mentioned he became sick in Africa to the point of death. Upon his return to America he had decided that he would move his family back to France.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas' birthplace of France is highly revered in his writing. In his travel through the country he finds the history of the church built before him upon the grandeur of the landscape. Just as many of these cathedrals, monasteries, and castles were in ruin Thomas proposes that France had been corrupted to the same degree to which it was once great, and it is to this corruption that he also falls victim.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

“I suppose the most shocking thing about France is the corruption of French spirituality into flippancy and cynicism; of French intelligence into sophistry; of French dignity and refinement into petty vanity and theatrical self-display; of French charity into a disgusting fleshly concupiscence, and of French faith into sentimentality or puerile atheism.” (p.57).

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Owen Merton

Thomas's father had become keenly aware of his desire to raise his sons in a home where he could still be allowed to pursue his art, and so they bought land in a very small village in the south of France. He would not only build a home for them there but he would make sure that they were educated in religion. John Paul never came to live with them in St. Antonin, France. Here for the first time his father encouraged him to pray for God's help.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas attended the local school to learn the language but soon was sent to a Protestant school in Montauban, Lycee. Comparatively the Catholic schools bore a better crop of children, for the children at Lycee were prone to corruption when brought together in that school (p.55). Religious instruction was simply learning the morals of the Biblical stories and Thomas asserts that the only real religious training came naturally out of the abundance of his father's heart (p.59). Casual conversations with him were far more valuable than any religious discourse in school.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas describes the Privats as being the polar opposite to his school. When his father was away he would stay with them and was forever impressed with the supernatural degree to which they were loving (p.62). While he would profess to them that all religions were basically good and led to God by different paths, they held that there was only one faith, and one Church. Even in the face of his ignorance, they did not condemn him and Thomas suspects that their prayers for him were essential to his salvation.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Pop, Bonnemaman, and John Paul came to visit and with all the pomp and arrogance that an American can muster they traveled with Pop up into Switzerland but it was a miserable trip for Thomas. It waned in comparison to France's art and beauty.

At the same time Thomas was more than happy to hear that he and his father would be moving to England. He left behind his friends with whom he would write heroic novels and joined his Aunt Maud and Uncle Ben in Ealing.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Thomas attended Ripley as a preparation for the greater public school which he would attend, but there was a guarded innocence surrounding the children that did not exist in France nor outside Ripley. He was required to attend church and there did acquire, “a little natural faith,” (p.71), but in looking back Thomas recognizes that the formal Church of England lacked the supernatural faith he had experienced with the Privats. Based on his father’s finances and his own lack of English education it was decided that he would attend Oakham, an obscure but descent little school.

Father's Condition

Owen Merton became sick with an unknown condition. He was later diagnosed with a malignant tumor on the brain, and from this condition he would die a slow and painful death, which caused a young Thomas to question his faith, and the life beyond.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Once in Oakham, Thomas continued his schooling. In 1930, when Thomas turned 15, he entered the typical teenage rebellion state and wanted to display his independence. He would not listen to other people's opinions nor would he obey authority.

Father's Last Days

During this time the family visited Father in the hospital, where his condition had worsened and Father was near death. This broke Thomas' heart. In this state of brokenness Thomas realized that suffering is a part of life and it cannot be avoided. To try to avoid it is to bring more suffering on oneself.

Father's Last Days

Thomas watched his father battle the tumor and in doing so saw a man who exemplified the Christian faith. Owen Merton eventually died, and this led to the ultimate rebellion stage in Thomas's life.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Life After Father

Thomas is cemented in his rebellion and his intellectual arrogance. Thomas then seeks a venue to study philosophy.

Life After Father

Thomas became sick with gangrene, and thought he was going to die (hallucinating Death came into his room). Even though Thomas believed he was going to die, this did not make him turn towards God. Thomas was wrapped up in indifference towards God and all religion. Thomas ultimately recovered from his sickness.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Life After Father

He spends the summer traveling, and in doing so he comes to an old monastery, but believes there is nothing for him there. When Thomas completes his education at Oakham and heads to Italy, he continues his rebellious lifestyle.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Italy

Thomas is living a carefree life, but this does not make him happy. “I was doing just what I pleased, and instead of being filled with happiness and well-being, I was miserable” (p. 117). He realizes that his freedom and sins hurt others.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Italy

While in Rome, Thomas takes an interest in the churches rather than the ancient ruins. During his visit to many churches, Thomas begins to learn who Christ truly is. “But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him” (p. 120).

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

Italy

Thomas has a deep initial conversion experience with God. This is the time when Thomas first thought “I would like to become a Trappist monk” (p. 126), but he eventually leaves Rome and goes to America.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

America

While in America, Thomas visits several churches, but does not find one that suits him. He loses most of his interest in religion. He takes a boat back to England to begin his studies at the university.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

University

Thomas struggles to make sense of life at Cambridge. His aunt Maud died, and this would be the last time Thomas saw his family in England. Thomas reads *The Inferno*, and Dante's work has a tremendous impact on Thomas. He is beginning to realize he must surrender his will to God. He goes to America in 1934, and he will never return to England again.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

The Boat to America

Thomas decides that he is a Communist and that capitalism is the cause of the world's problems. He decides to enroll at Columbia University.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

At Columbia

Thomas meets Mark Van Doren, who has a tremendous impact on him. Thomas becomes a Communist in order to right the wrongs of the world, but this brief affiliation only lasts about three months.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

At Columbia

Thomas and John Paul spend the summer of 1935 watching movies. Thomas joins a fraternity to make friends and meet women.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

At Columbia

Thomas begins to work for the Jester. Thomas and his friends were involved in the “night-life” at Columbia. His internal wrestlings and discontentment continues to grow.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

At Columbia

In the fall of 1936, Pop dies (Thomas' grandfather). Upon seeing the body, Thomas involuntarily prays (you are seeing the seeds of God moving in Thomas). A few months later, Bonnemaman dies too.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

After Grandparents

Thomas became sick and worries he may be having a nervous breakdown. He becomes gripped with fear. He realizes that he has tasted of all the world has to offer, but none of it satisfies him.

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As artists and friends of intellectuals, Thomas' parents did not want their children to become subject to the superstitions that came with popular religion and therefore remained silent on the subject. Should they have placed their children under the guidance of the church anyway?

We see here that formal Christian education was not the primary format that impacted Thomas as a child. His father and the Privats are lifted up as his spiritual guides. What has been your experience: is Christian education responsible for your Christianity or are Christians?

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In what ways did you rebel and state your independence? How did this play into your conversion story?

How does one explain loss/death to an unconverted soul, in light of the fact that Christians preach that God is good?

Part I – Childhood & Adolescence

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What was your most real encounter with God?

Why do people fill their lives with things that ultimately leave them empty?



Part II

the Columbia Years

Part II – The Columbia Years

This section of Merton's text begins poetically, "But, now in this season of new beginnings, I really had something new to begin" (p.283). This "something new" was following up on his conviction to meet with Dan Walsh regarding his passion/calling.

During this encounter Walsh sincerely comments to Merton, "You know, the first time I met you I thought you had a vocation to the priesthood" (p. 284). Merton's response was one of astonishment and shame, "It made me feel like a whited sepulcher, considering what I knew was inside me" (p.284).

Part II – The Columbia Years

During his conversation with Dan Walsh they discussed a number of religious orders including the Jesuits, the Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines and the Order of Cistercians also known as Trappists. Merton, opening the window to his self-awareness admits, “I needed a rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God, not a rule to fit me to fight for God in the world” (285). After much discussion and contemplation Merton feels directed towards the Franciscan order.

Part II – The Columbia Years

“What I eventually found out was that as soon as I started to fast and deny myself pleasures and devote time to prayer and meditation and to the various exercises that belong to religious life, I quickly got over all my bad health, and became sound and strong and immensely happy” (p.287).

“He said that it was a good thing the monks didn’t have to talk-with all the mixture of men they have there, they get along better without it” (p.288).

Part II – The Columbia Years

Referral note in hand, Merton made the journey to the Franciscan Monastery, St. Francis of Assisi to meet with Father Edmund. Father Edmund encouraged Merton to make application to enter the novitiate in August. For Merton this is an exhilarating, uplifting progression in this great adventure; “What a transformation this made in my life! Now, at last, God had become the center of my existence” (p.291).

Part II – The Columbia Years

Key in Merton's continued spiritual development is his reading of *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. This leads to his contemplating the question "why had God brought me into the world" (p.294). Even more life transforming were his meditations on the mysteries of the life of Christ, mortal sin and venial sin. "I left that meditation with a deep conviction of the de-ordination and malice there is in preferring one's own will and satisfaction to the will of God for Whose love we were created" (p.296).

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST. IGNATIUS



Part II – The Columbia Years

“And I learned, with wonder and fear, that teachers have a mysterious and deadly power of letting loose psychological forces in the minds of the young. The rapidity, the happy enthusiasm with which they responded to hints and suggestions – but with wrong response – was enough to make a man run away and live in the woods” (p.299).

Part II – The Columbia Years

In preparation for an appendectomy Merton visits a local store and buys a toothbrush and a copy of Dante's *Paradiso*. During his ten day stay in the hospital Merton reads *Paradiso* which brings about feelings of spiritual infancy, "I was still nursed and fed with spiritual milk" (p.303). Now June of 1940 Thomas Merton is informed by Father Edmund that his application for admission had been accepted. With two months remaining before he was to officially move into the monastery, he continues to develop a love for quiet solitude and spiritual reading. "I don't think I had ever been so happy in my life as I now was in that silent library, turning over the pages of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*" (p.317).

Part II – The Columbia Years

Now only weeks before becoming a Franciscan, Merton is taken on a Dante like journey of self-examination through the valleys of pride, self-love, lost peace and intense self-doubt. He begins to question his calling to become a monk. Seeking direction he prays, “My God, please take me into the monastery. But anyway, whatever you want, Your will be done” (p.325).

Returning to Father Edmund he confesses his inner turmoil and feelings of doubt and unworthiness. Father Edmunds listens and asks Merton to return the following day for more conversation. Merton leaves Father Edmund and goes to confession where his words are sadly misunderstood by the priest who rashly advises him that he most certainly did not belong in the monastery, or even the priesthood.

Part II – The Columbia Years

“When I came out of that ordeal, I was completely broken in pieces. I could not keep back the tears, which ran down between the fingers of the hands in which I concealed my face... The only thing I knew, besides my own tremendous misery, was that I must no longer consider that I had a vocation to the cloister” (p.326). Chapter one ends here with Thomas Merton certain he will never enter the vocation that he has so dreamed of.

Part II – The Columbia Years

Merton buys Breviaries, the four books that serve as a symbol of his determinism. “They said that if I could not live in a monastery, I should try to live in the world as if I were a monk in a monastery” (p.328). Through these prayers Merton comes to a renewed realization of his need for God’s Grace, “All I knew was that I wanted grace, and that I needed prayer, and that I was helpless without God, and that I wanted to do everything that people did to keep close to Him” (p.329).

Part II – The Columbia Years

Merton's continual focus on prayer and the need for God's grace eventually lead him to feelings of harmony, renewed strength and spiritual rebirth. "It was a peace that did not depend on houses, or jobs, or places, or times, or external conditions. It was a peace that time and material created situations could never give. It was peace that the world could not give" (p.344).

Part II – The Columbia Years

Merton next makes a retreat to a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, The Abbey of Gethsemane, during which he continues to vacillate between following his passion for the vocation and sincere indecision. He continues to ask, seek and knock.

Part II – The Columbia Years

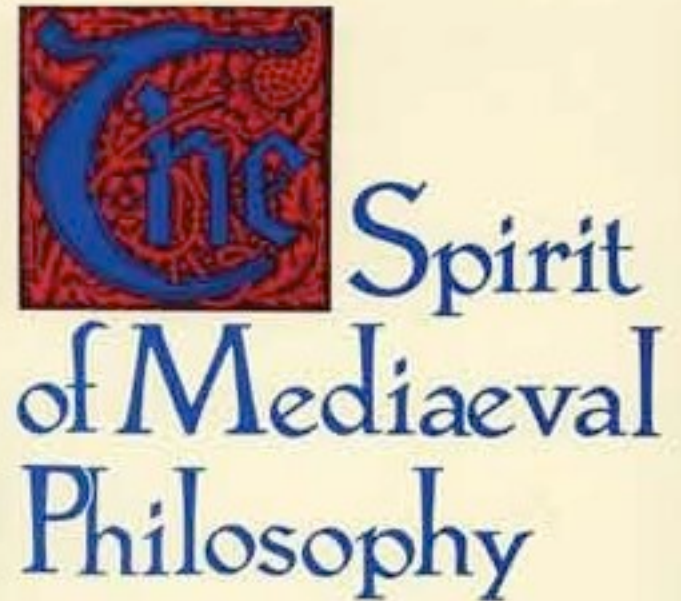
Merton returns from his retreat having grown closer to his Father in heaven and feeling refreshed, nevertheless still full of indecision. The chapter closes with Merton hinting at the possibility of his becoming a Trappist.

Part II – The Columbia Years

One book, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, influences Merton greatly. It changes his perception of the Catholic church. Rather than being intrinsically afraid of it, he is now intrigued, and finds himself longing to attend mass.

He now realizes that no human can adequately understand God.

ETIENNE GILSON



The Spirit
of Mediaeval
Philosophy

Part II – The Columbia Years

Merton returns to the church of his childhood, where his father had played the organ.

He says of this revisiting:

“I think the reason for this was that God wanted me to climb back the way I had fallen down.” (p.192)



Part II – The Columbia Years

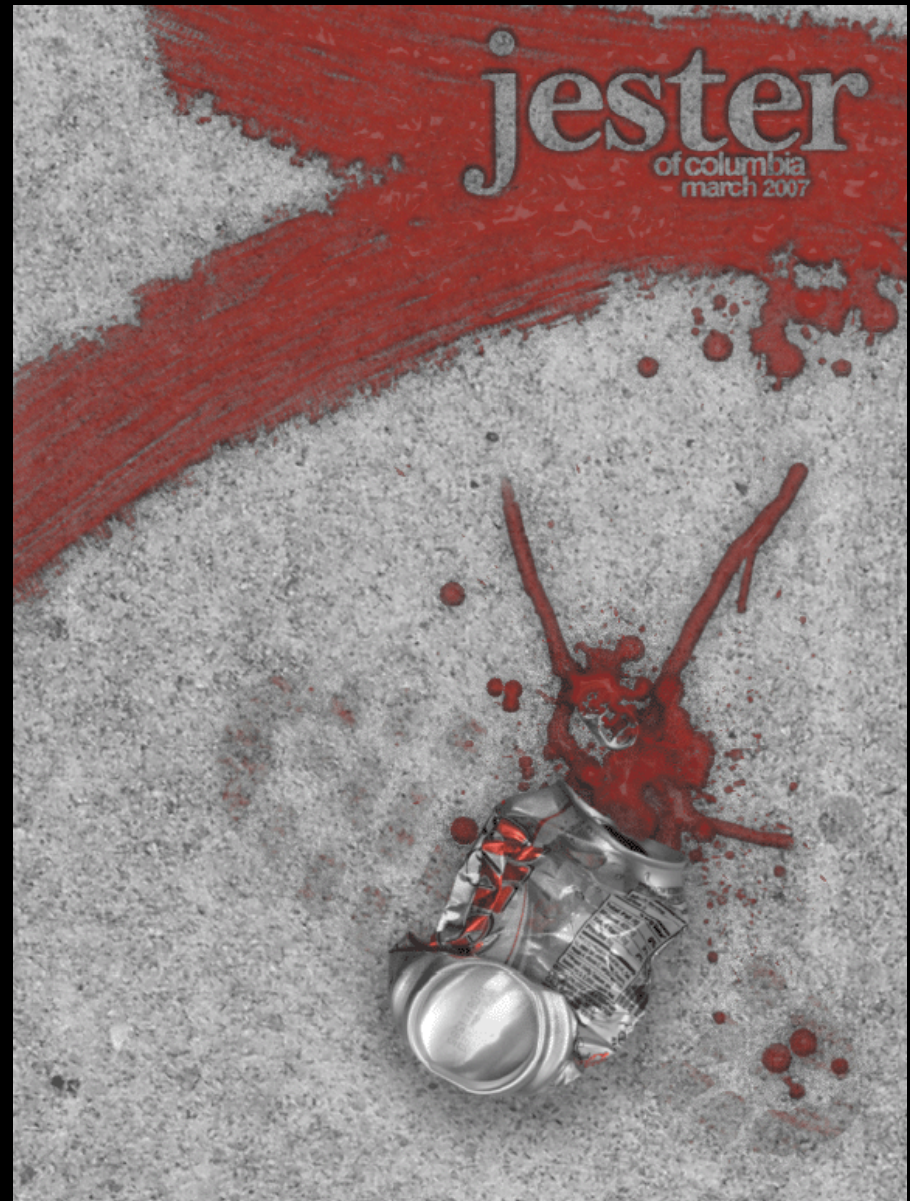
God uses classmates and friends at Columbia University, to reveal himself to Thomas. He sees these brothers as the “Body of Christ” manifested to him. They serve as guides and fellow journeymen throughout his life’s troubles.

Part II – The Columbia Years

Merton begins to write and draw illustrations for the *Jester*, a satirical publication at Columbia.

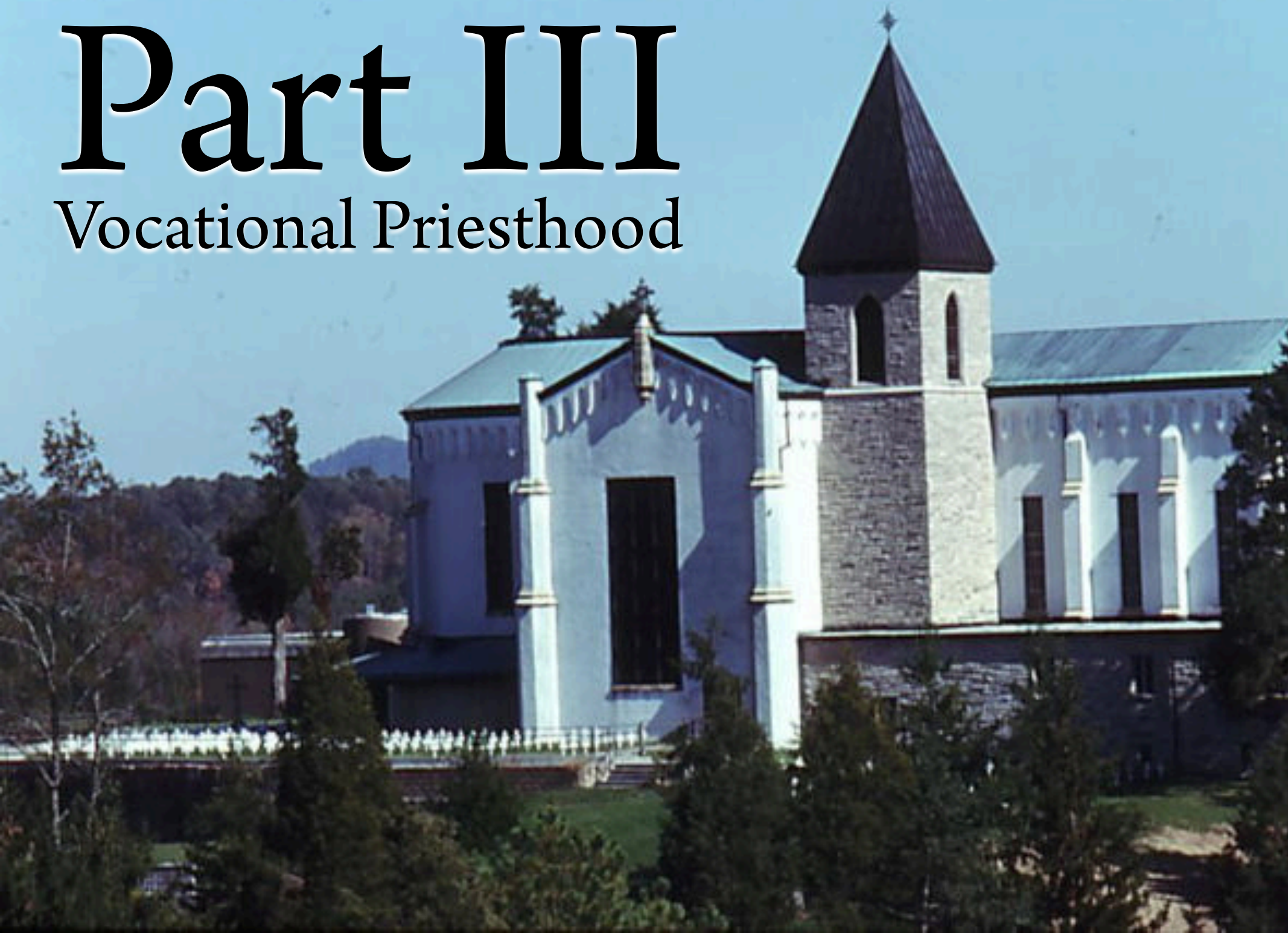
Here, he meets Box Lax and Ed Rice, who are to be his life-long friends.

Issue cover of *Jester*, March 2007 >



Part III

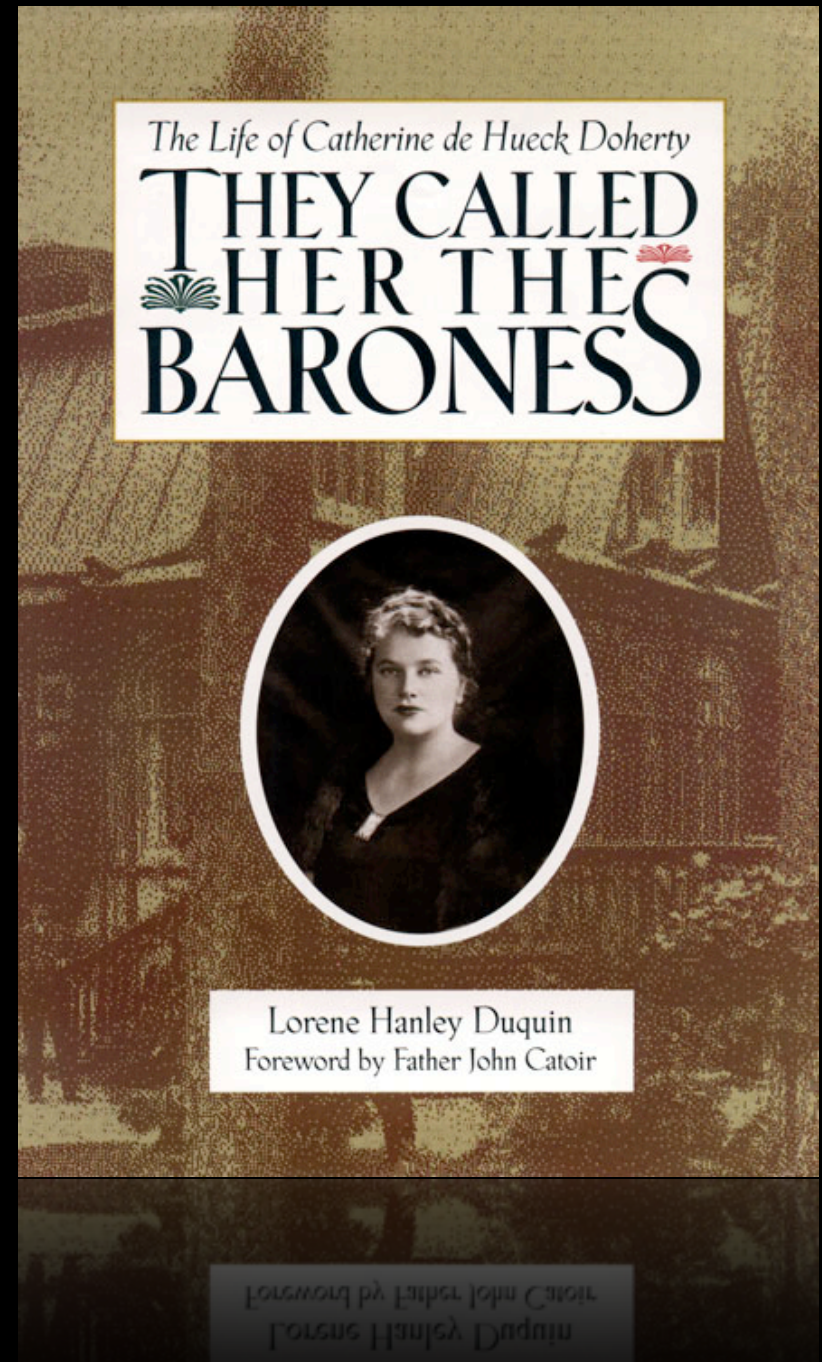
Vocational Priesthood



Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Baroness de Hueck

While teaching at St. Bonaventure's, Merton regularly walks alone near the woods. This is a recurring theme of solitude in his life where he finds peace as he pursues God. One particular night he stops in where a gathering is occurring, and he hears Baroness de Hueck, a prophetess of sorts, who is calling Catholics to social action. Merton discovers that the Baroness' life experiences, though very difficult, served only to strengthen her faith, not weaken it. He recalls, "I never saw anyone so calm, so certain, so peaceful in her absolute confidence in God" (p.375).



Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Baroness de Hueck

He begins to join the Baroness in her ministry to youth in Harlem, NY, creating yet another challenge to his vocational call. This ministry taps into a deep longing of his soul, as he discovers the value of community. Merton continues to correspond with the Baroness for several months, asking challenging questions of the faith. When they meet again, she asks him if he is thinking of becoming a Priest, but remembering the stinging words of rejection, Merton denies the call to the Priesthood. This relationship is one of many that help to move Merton forward in his faith development. Relationships are key to the entire conversion experience, and across each of Rambo's stages of development.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Our Lady of the Valley

Realizing his need for deep community, Merton arranges another retreat at a monastery. “No, it was all too evident: I needed this support, this nearness of those who really loved Christ so much that they seemed to see Him.” (p.383). This retreat did not provide any overwhelming experiences that marked the first Gethsemane retreat, yet it did supply strength, a nourishing of the soul, and an inner growth marked by “firmness and certitude and depth.” Although the retreat proves successful on a spiritual level, he is not compelled in any vocation. He chooses to remain at St. Bonaventure’s to await further clarification. Significantly though, there is not a desire to enter into the Cistercian Monastery.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Back at Bonaventure's

After the retreat, Merton increases his life of spiritual disciplines, spending extended times of the morning in solitude and prayers, and increasing his spiritual readings of the lives of the saints. He discovers that the “Little Flower” is really a saint, named St. Therese of Lisieux, a saint in the most unlikely of places – the bourgeois. Encountering the lives of these saints serves to further Merton's own journey of faith, and reveal to him the extravagant capacity of God to move through people of all ages, classes, and societies. Merton asks Little Flower to take charge of his brother and guide his life, as John Paul has now joined the Canadian Royal Air Force.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Merton realizes his time at St. Bonaventure's is drawing to a close. In his own words he says, "I could no longer doubt that St. Bonaventure's had outlived its usefulness in my spiritual life. I did not belong there any more. It was too tame, too safe, too sheltered. It demanded nothing of me. It had no particular cross. It left me to myself, belonging to myself, in full possession of my own will, in full command of all that God had given me that I might give it back to Him. As long as I remained there, I still had given up nothing, or very little, no matter how poor I happened to be" (p.393).

This tension resonates with the quest of Rambo's taxonomy, in that his worldview is unsatisfying, and he must uncover why, and what to do about it. This unsettling has now reached its climax, and change must come as he pursues another worldview that will bring satisfaction to his soul. This pursuit is very active on Merton's part. He is engaging people, reading books, and genuinely seeking counsel and insight from a variety of sources.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

The Call of God?

The Baroness de Hueck asked Merton if he was thinking of becoming a Priest. He said “No.” Father Thomas, the President of the seminary at St. Bonaventure’s asked Merton if he had ever thought about becoming a priest. He said, “No.” Mark van Doren, a professor at Columbia and good friend asked Merton about the idea of becoming a priest, and if Merton ever pursued that. He recalled the early rejection he experienced in pursuit of this vocation. These three separate encounters all happened within about 2-3 months in 1941.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Act NOW! *A Committed Response*

Realizing that continuing to avoid a call to the Priesthood may actually result in a loss of call to the Priesthood, Merton is compelled to act with haste and resume the pursuit of this vocation. “I suddenly found myself filled with a vivid conviction: ‘The time has come for me to go and be a Trappist’” (p.398-9). “I don’t think there was ever a moment in my life when my soul felt so urgent and so special an anguish” (p.400). A Friar confirms this commitment, and immediately Merton senses a deep peace in his soul. He writes the Abbot at Gethsemane, and begins his journey to Kentucky, where he is certain he is called to live out his vocation.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Quotes on the Contemplative Life

“The Monastery is a school – a school in which we learn from God how to be happy. Our happiness consists in sharing the happiness of God, the perfection of His unlimited freedom, the perfection of His love” (p.409). “What we have to learn is love” (p.409). “The beginning of love is truth, and before He will give us His love, God must cleanse our souls of the lies that are in them” (p.409). “That is the meaning of the contemplative life, and the sense of all the apparently meaningless little rules and observances and fasts and obediences and penances and humiliations and labors that go to make up the routine of existence in a contemplative monastery: they all serve to remind us of what we are and Who God is...” (p.409)

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Humble Beginnings

There was no angelic welcoming. No grand celebration to mark his arrival. In fact, nobody even disrupted their normal routine, except Brother Matthew who unlocked the gate to let him in, and Father Joachim, the guest master, who took him into the house and showed him his room. Merton begins to read through *Spiritual Disciplines*, a book given to offer insight into the contemplative life. There are other novitiates seeking to enter at the same time as Merton. Some of their initial jobs include washing and waxing the floors. Father Abbot, the head of Gethsemane, challenges them with simple words, “Each one of you will make the community either better or worse. Everything you do will have an influence upon others. It can be a good influence or a bad one. It all depends on you” (p.416). Merton is later reminded that he did not arrive at the monastery by himself and that his perseverance may impact many other lives.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

The Soul of a Monk

Merton enters the monastery in the advent season of 1941. He parallels the soul of the monk with Bethlehem, as they await the coming of the savior to be born. The stones of the monastery are transformed by the warmth of the presence of God through the singing, disciplines, and spirit of the monks. Monks are not perfect people, and living in such close community reveals the slightest imperfections of each other. Some still struggle with wanting to be recognized. Merton reflects and notes that the holiest men were the ones who often went completely unnoticed. Significantly, these were also the men who were the happiest and most content in their vocation.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Maturing

The life of the contemplative includes long days of intense physical labor, as the monastery is self-sufficient. This means the monks work the land, planting and harvesting through the seasons, all the while being diligent in their spiritual disciplines. Merton acknowledges that initially he often paused from work to pray, and often found himself hurrying to get to the next task. He says, “The fact that I was hurrying and ran into people only indicates that I was much less of a contemplative than I thought I was” (p.424). He recognizes that many of his bad habits have followed him into the monastery. They may have been masked by religious sentiment, but the core of the sin was still present.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Maturing

He begins to learn what he calls “the grace of simplicity” (p.427). “The innocence and liberty of soul that come to those who have thrown away all preoccupation with themselves and their own ideas and judgments and opinions and desires, and are perfectly content to take things as they come to them from the hands of God and through the wishes and commands of their superiors. It meant the freedom of heart that one can only obtain by putting his whole life in the hands of another, with the blind faith that God will use our superiors, our director, as instruments for our guidance and the formation of our souls” (p.427). He begins to practice “active contemplation,” which is the art of constantly focusing on God while continuing to be about the business of actively doing the responsibilities of the monastery.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

Freedom in Grace

Merton's brother, John Paul, visits him in Gethsemane. John Paul exhibits a deep hunger of the soul, which Merton recognizes from his own journey. Merton shares with his brother everything he knows and understands about God, culminating in the truth that "Once you have grace, you are free" (p.437). Merton realizes that the work of God is more powerful than any one person's life of sin, and this truth is powerfully on display in his brother who sits before him. Merton and John Paul share communion together, and when John Paul leaves, it is the last time they see each other. John Paul dies in April 1943, fighting in WWII. The chapter ends with a poem by Merton written in honor of his brother.

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is our motivation for pursuing our call to ministry, or other vocation? What are the consequences of our actions? Is our happiness rooted in our pursuit of God, or our pursuit of human approval?

How are we learning to practice the presence of God in our daily activities? Do we see our activity as a spiritual discipline infused with the presence of God, or as mundane details of a dreary vocation?

When have you made a strong commitment to the call of God? How were you reassured, or confirmed in your faith response? What were some of the positive and negative consequences of this decision?

Part III – Vocational Priesthood

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

God's grace is fundamental in the conversion process. How have you seen God's grace at work in your own life? In the lives of those around you? How does Merton's statement "Once you have grace, you are free" resonate with or challenge your understanding of the Christian journey?

When has your worldview become so unsatisfying that you were compelled to pursue something different?

When has God spoken repeatedly to challenge, or encourage, you to move towards a particular faith response, vocation or other?

Gethsemane Abbey, KY

Epilogue

Epilogue

It is Christmas, 1943. The last of the three great Masses is being celebrated. Merton is one of the minor ministers in the monastery. Merton presents the crosier (the “staff”) to the Reverend Father and the monks.



Epilogue

Christ is born, the Son made
Flesh – born anew in our hearts.
Everlasting beginning without
end. Everlasting perfection,
newness of God. Light of Light,
True God of True God.

Epilogue

Encounter with an old Jewish friend, Bob Lax, who converted to Catholicism. Merton hopes that Lax will get baptized only to find out Lax was baptized in New York by a Jesuit priest.

Epilogue

A new life in Christ: taking off the old and putting on the new. Leaving old friends behind – Merton asks Lax about his old friends at the magazine – Merton has not forgotten them. Merton's poems from his past life are published "Thirty Poems."

Epilogue

Who am I?

Merton wrestles with the “old man” from his past life and how his journalistic abilities can still be used for God. God uses everything about us to glorify His name. Gethsemane strengthens his spiritual vitality and renews his interest in writing. Father Abbot instructs him to continue perfecting his poetry.

Epilogue

Life at the Retreat

Active yet contemplative – the superior vocation embraces both. The active life (the practice of virtues, mortification & charity) prepares us for contemplation (rest, suspension of activity, solitude and silence of God).

Epilogue

Contemplative prayer results in an overflow of love that communicates what it knows of God to others. Merton's heroes: St. Thomas, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bernard, St. Gregory, St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Blessed John Ruysbroeck and St. Bonaventure.



Epilogue

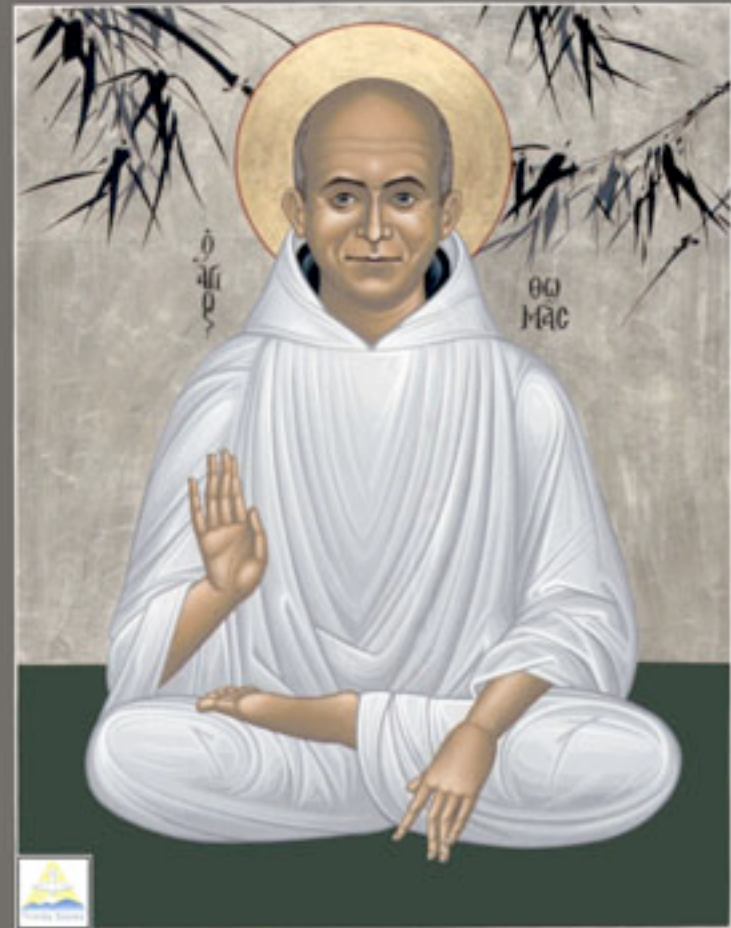
In practice there is only one vocation: you are called to the summit of perfection; you are called to a deep interior life even to mystical prayer; you are called to pass the fruits of your contemplation onto others by word and by example through the Church and into the world.



Epilogue

“The life of each one in this abbey is part of a mystery. We all add up to something far beyond ourselves. We cannot yet realize what it is. But we know, in the language of our theology, that we are all members of the Mystical Christ, and that we all grow together in Him for Whom all things were created” (p.459).

“We already possess Him by grace... We dwell in His light” (p.459).



THOMAS MERTON

THOMAS MERTON

Epilogue

“By the time I made my vows, I was no longer sure... what my vocation was... for the reasons best known to Yourself” (p.460).

“I am beginning to see what it is all about... You have called me... not to wear a label by which I can recognize myself... or to think about what I am, but (only) about what You are...” (p.461).

Epilogue

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Where do you see yourself being part of this mystery?

At what point was Christ born anew in your life that it was no longer your will but God's will?

What spiritual, emotional, cognitive, personal, or relational difficulties might a person of Jewish faith encounter when converting to Catholicism or Protestantism?

Epilogue

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What gifts and talents has God given you in your “secular” environment, that can be used for the growth of God’s Kingdom?

Where do you see yourself being part of this mystery? Why did God call you?

Epilogue

St. Thomas – the work of teaching and preaching are only substantiated by contemplation which must lead to more contemplation.

“The greatest perfection is contemplate tradere.”
– *St. Thomas*

Personal Question: How has being a seminary student interrupted your prayer and contemplative life (your interior life), if at all? What will you do to improve this aspect of your vocation?

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