

# AWAKE and ALIVE

Thomas Merton  
According to His  
Novices

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## Introduction

Thomas Merton wore many hats. As a writer, he was a poet, an autobiographer and memoirist, hagiographer, essayist, diarist, and author of one of the richest bodies of correspondence of any twentieth-century literary figure. Most importantly, he wrote several of the classic works of Christian spirituality of his era—the latter twentieth century—including *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

As a human being, Merton was an artist and prophetic voice on war, race, and the issues of the day, and an encourager of like-minded artists and activists throughout the world. His friends and correspondents included the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day; the Lithuanian-born Polish poet

living in California who eventually won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Czeslaw Milosz; an earlier Nobel winner, the Russian poet, novelist, and translator, Boris Pasternak; Nicaraguan poet and politician, Ernesto Cardenal, who in fact spent two years at the Abbey of Gethsemani with Merton as his Novice Master; and Fr. Daniel Berrigan SJ, who was often getting arrested in protests of the atrocities of the Vietnam War, with Merton's encouragement. There was also a long letter from Merton to the great novelist and civil rights champion, James Baldwin, which as far as we know went unanswered, and an intended gathering in April 1968 of Martin Luther King Jr. and Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, which never happened due to the assassination of Dr. King only a few days beforehand.

As a friend and mentor to others, he was also a student and teacher of Christian spirituality, Catholic mystics, and his own Cistercian religious tradition. And he was a mystic himself, actively discovering the spiritualities of East-

ern religions, Indigenous traditions, Judaism, Sufism, pushing people in his own church to explore the truth of others, years before documents written at the Second Vatican Council made it “permissible” for Catholics to do so. He also had a gift for friendship, and was able to truly meet and know people of faith and wisdom around the world who sought him out.

But Merton was first and foremost a monk. And beside H. H. the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, both of whom Merton met in person, he is probably one of only three famous monks in modern history. As a monk, he served for a decade in his monastery in Kentucky, the Abbey of Gethsemani, as Novice Master, from 1955 to 1965, teaching young men studying to become Trappist monks. He was beloved in this role, and most of the stories and anecdotes that follow have been told by his former novices.

Four of the authors of these anecdotes were Merton’s novices; two of them—Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell and Fr. John Eudes Bamberger—

were Scholastics when Merton was Novice Master.

In this book, you meet Thomas Merton as Novice Master and as monastic brother, confessor, spiritual director, and friend. Our title, *Awake and Alive*, is designed to reflect a way of being in the world, which is known to millions of readers of Merton's books. This way of being is distinguished by insight, awareness, and imagination. One of the reflections to come is from Brother Paul Quenon, who, speaking of Merton, reflects, "He was aware and awake and alive in his imagination and considered that to be an important part of his spiritual life. So, I've emulated that example." Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO later echoes Quenon (they were interviewed separately) when he remarks, "[He was] always really alive!"

It was Merton who first made the treasures of monastic life and monastic spirituality accessible to people outside the cloister. In many respects, what he did for his students at the Abbey of Gethsemani he did for those who

read his books, heard his recorded lectures, and who continue today to follow his path. In this respect, becoming *Awake and Alive* is a path for all of us.



It is useful to remember the themes of Thomas Merton's life during the time period covered by these personal stories: the 1950s and 1960s.

Although he was always an enthusiastic teacher, and his students almost universally appreciated him, we also know that he was experiencing some inner conflict during his years as Novice Master, often wondering if he was guiding young men to become something that he wasn't himself fully sure that he wanted to be. For instance, Merton at times seriously considered leaving Gethsemani to become a Carthusian hermit. He would have more solitude and time for contemplative practice as a Carthusian. But "Reverend Father [his Abbot, Dom James] threw buckets of cold water on

the mere suggestion,” he wrote in his journal on October 10, 1952.

A few months later, that same abbot gave Merton permission to begin spending periods of time in solitude and seclusion from the community of monks, and an old toolshed in the woods was identified as the place where he might first do this. Merton fixed it up a bit and named it St. Anne’s. It was there that he wrote the book *Thoughts in Solitude*. In his journal on February 24, 1953, he writes, “[H]ere at St. Anne’s I am always happy and at peace no matter what happens. For there is no need for anyone but God.” But the desire to leave Gethsemani for a different kind of monastic life kept coming back to him. In the summer of 1957 he confided, “The hope of a monastery in Ecuador. . . . Is it a hope or a temptation? . . . (All the time my stomach is sick with the feeling that with Dom James nothing of the sort is possible.)”<sup>1</sup>

It has been reasonably suggested that the Abbot then gave his restless, brilliant monk, Father Louis (Merton’s monastic name), the

job of Master of Novices to slow him down and to center him in a monk's work. It was also a job that Merton was very qualified to do. He was responsible for training the young men, teaching them the classics of Christian theology, and of Cistercian history and spirituality. He seems to have relished this responsibility. He was also to see that the men followed a healthy pattern of personal prayer and meditation as well as development of character. This is a job for an experienced monk, who is also a priest, and who can work well with his Abbot.

Merton's lectures to the monks were a bit unorthodox in the range of material he presented. Through Merton, novices were exposed to more than theological and spiritual classics, but also to modern writers of fiction, such as William Faulkner, and contemporary poets, such as Boris Pasternak. This is notable because, in those days, a monk's reading material was only supposed to be of a "spiritual" kind. Novels were usually forbidden. Similarly, Merton the Novice Master's occasional comments on po-



litical issues of the day were offered fleetingly, but were nonetheless significant, since news of the outside world, for Trappists in the 1950s and 60s, was only to be shared with the monks by their Abbot. Abbots also usually instructed their monks how they were to vote when national elections came around.

Merton even talked with his novices about yoga, Native American spirituality, Buddhism, and the dramas of the unfolding Cold War. And he didn't restrict himself, or them, to only intellectual work; sometimes he led them in walks in the woods, or manual work with purpose, such as clearing tomato plants killed by a recent frost. He mostly reveled in the work, whatever its form, but over time, when the responsibility was taken from him, he was grateful to be done and to have more time to himself and his evolving vocation.

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, an intertwining story of four great Catholic figures and writers of that time—Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Mer-

ton—Paul Elie expresses some of the paradoxes that Merton embodied just before 1960:

[H]e had been a Catholic for twenty years and a Trappist monk for seventeen. He no longer saw the Abbey of Gethsemani as the center of his or anybody's existence. Set apart from the other monks by his background, his fame, his literary calling, and his yearning for solitude, he had come to see himself as an independent, a Trappist of Gethsemani whose real life was elsewhere. He no longer saw the outside world as a nest of vipers, but he didn't yearn to be out in the world making his way as a poet or a college professor, either. He had no desire to be anything but a monk. Rather, he felt called to be a monk on different terms—to be more intensely a monk than he was.<sup>2</sup>

This “sets the stage” for the stories, sayings, and anecdotes to come.



Most of the content of these pages began as interviews conducted with six of Merton's former brother monks. All of them were novices under his direction. One was his secretary. One was his final Abbot, after Dom James retired. All six remained in the monastery—not always the Abbey of Gethsemani—for many decades, until the end of their lives, and each went on to become a notable monastic in his own right.

In pages 15–48, we have the voice of Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO.

In pages 49–64, we have the voice of Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO.

In pages 65–82, we have the voice of Father Chrysogonus Waddell, OCSO.

In pages 83–90, we have the voice of Father John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO.

In pages 91–116, we have the voice of Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO.

In pages 117–128, we have the voice of Father Flavian Burns, OCSO.

As one Trappist friend said to me recently, this collection might as well be called “Merton Apophthegmata,” and that is true. The word *apophthegmata* is often used in connection with the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Christian antiquity, whom Merton adored, studied, and taught—the word meaning a collection of pithy maxims, stories, and sayings. Other significant figures in history, such as Plutarch and Erasmus, have also had their *apophthegmata* published.

For those readers who know Merton’s life and his close monastic friends, the question may arise, why do we not have reflections from Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO, who was Merton’s last personal secretary, here? The answer was offered to me by the director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center in Louisville: “Patrick always refused to do one [an interview about his time spent with Fr. Louis]. He always got very emotional when his relationship with Merton came up; I guess it dominated his life’s work. I was working on him, and he seemed to be getting more amenable, but then his health

began to decline” (Dr. Paul M. Pearson).<sup>3</sup>

May you find something to inspire you in what follows.

Jon M. Sweeney