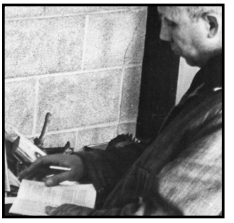

Sunday

december first

A GOOD DAY TO START A RETREAT, the first Sunday of Advent, New Year's Day in the Church's liturgical calendar, a time for new beginnings.

I offered Mass this morning with the community of Gethsemani in their century-old basilica—so different from the church at Spencer. It fairly soars with its stark I-beams reaching unimpeded to the austere Romanesque roof, lightsome even on a gray winter's day. Whitened brick and numerous lances. It

must have been quite a change for Tom from the mellow warmth of the previous era of pseudo-Gothic stone. In *The Spirit of Simplicity* Tom lauded the simple, austere beauty of the surviving twelfth-century Cistercian churches. He loved the authentic medium unadorned. The uncovering of Gethsemani's native brick walls must have brought a disappointment to him and others. The brick was found to be too fragile to stand on its own and had to be covered with a protective white coat. All is now open and exposed. Gone are the little chapels around the apse where a monk could slip into a dark comer and pray in secret.

The Church . . .
Is half-destroyed
Laid bare by
Too much light and air
As though by a cyclone.

Gethsemani, May 19, 1966

I don't know if the monks could live with it if they did not have their private rooms where they can pray to the Father in secret. When darkness descends upon the church and the only light is the flickering lamp between the cross and the tabernacle, then the lofty basilica invites one to enter and offer the silent, secret prayer of the heart.

After none, Brother Anthony, my guide and solicitous brother, and I descended the escarpment—down the steep stone steps to the valley, across the creek near the glass-fronted water purification plant, and then up the winding dirt road through the woods and along the fields. Across the knobby terrain at some distance we could see the stand of evergreens that turns the field in front of Father Flavian's hermitage into a Zen-like garden. This disciple of Father Louis, who became his abbot, can see from his cell the stand

of pine that surrounds his teacher's little, cement block house.

The hermitage is not impressive nor particularly beautiful. An open porch—the playground of hungry squirrels and birds—runs the length of the building, some twenty-six feet. Its shed roof shelters the entrance and the picture window in front of the worktable. The view is generally in the direction of the abbey to the south, but the woods hide the buildings and the vista reveals only the fields, woodlands, and knobs that lie east of the monastery. The other sides of the hermitage are enclosed by the surrounding woods. It seems a quiet spot that could be many, many miles from anywhere. The tall tree-trunk cross that commands the clearing in front of the hermitage is the only man-made sign that this is a holy place. The little plaque, *Shalom*, hanging by the door, is redundant. Everything whispers "Peace."

WHAT DO I WANT TO GET OUT OF THESE DAYS OF RETREAT?

Some renewing experience of God and contemplative time.
Some clarity on my vocational question.

Already it seems to be coming clear. Maybe that is just proof that I need more prayer and listening. My spiritual father doesn't see it as being so simple. He sees the great need of contemplatives to respond to the growing contemplative aspirations of the laity—not to speak of priests and active religious—even, if need be, at the cost of giving up their own communities and perhaps creating new communities. I may be too ready to let all such ideas and ministry go in order to be free to settle quietly in community. That is, until I get a request like the one from the bishop of Santa Lucia, detailing the great needs of his priests and people. Then my heart longs to reach out and respond. I need to pray a lot more on this; I

need to think, write, and talk with friends and advisors.
WHAT ELSE DO I WANT FROM THESE DAYS OF RETREAT?

A deeper entrance into the spirit of Thomas Merton. A significant start on the book.

The book—a personal quest, with Tom as guide, into the meaning of true freedom for myself as a Christian and monk; for the Order or more correctly for the communities in the Order, for each community has its own responsibility; and for the Church, which seems to be in a critical moment with a forceful leader giving a particular interpretation to the spirit of Vatican II, a particular application affecting the Christian life of over 850 million persons. How does a responsible Christian answer to this leadership freely, without undue subservience (motivated by a quest for false security or by the need for recognition within the institutional structures) and without reaction, which is as enslaving as succumbing to domination?

In reflecting on Tom's life and on his quest for true Christian freedom, ever more deeply understood, what answer or direction do I perceive for my own quest? And what can our own communities learn from Tom now? What does he have to say to the Church today?

I NEED TO MAKE A COUPLE OF DECISIONS: What kind of schedule do I want to follow during this retreat? How much fasting do I want to do?

To a great extent Tom observed the schedule of the community when he lived here in the hermitage. Father John Eudes told me of finding Tom's schedule, written out on a small sheet of paper. It had been left in the breviary he was using in his last months in the hermitage. It had been written up during that last summer of Tom's life, when he was working

on *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. We had started *Cistercian Publications* in May of that year, 1968. The abbots wanted Tom to be the general editor, but he declined. I took on the job and Tom agreed to be on the editorial board. We decided our first book in the "Cistercian Studies Series" would be an amplified version of the article Tom had written five years earlier, which had been published in *Cistercian Studies.* In the rewriting it became a general treatment on prayer. The later chapters, with their insightful treatment of dread in prayer, were autobiographical, an expression of the experience Tom went through in the early sixties. Tom did not like to write in the first person about his prayer experience, so the matter is presented in a more impersonal or abstract way, but it flows from deep personal experience and has all the urgency that that kind of experience brings. Tom got the manuscript to me just before he left for Alaska and Asia. The last note I got from him, a postcard from Singapore, was about the galleys for it. The card arrived a few hours before the call announcing his death.

But to get back to the schedule. I think I will basically follow his schedule. A Cistercian, even in a hermitage, is a community man, attached to an abbey. I will move with the prayer rhythm of the community across the valley, beginning with vigils at 3:15 AM. But I might put off compline till later than 7:40 PM because I don't need seven hours of sleep. Since this is a time of retreat for me, after lauds and Mass at 5:45 AM, I will spend much of what would be work time listening to Tom on tapes and in his books. Brother Anthony brought up a large collection of tapes of the talks Tom gave the novices and the community during the last years of his life. I decided before I came that I would read again Tom's *Thoughts in Solitude.* But first I want to listen to the talk he gave the community on August 20, 1965, the day he left the novitiate to move full-time into the hermitage.

I think I have written enough for now. It is time to be.

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I AM SITTING ON THE PORCH. A whipping storm has just passed; the clouds are still low and running, with sun from the west breaking through the layers. The evergreens are catching the harmony of the wind. There is a freshness in the air but yet a tingling chill, just enough to make a coat comfortable. The blue is winning out as the clouds continue running to the east. The view from the porch!—I wonder how Tom ever wrote anything, or anything but poetry. Each season, each day, must have its own unique beauty. Right now it is the changing sky that commands all. The distant knobs are lost in deep shadow. Bird calls, unfamiliar to my ear, come through when the trees are quiet. This is indeed a place which the Lord has made. May he be praised and glorified in it!

Down at the Abbey, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar. It is the first Sunday of the month, retreat Sunday. Back home it is a day of great silence, a good way to begin a year.

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I CAN SEE NOW why Tom was in search of a more remote place. I didn't realize that the hermitage is so exposed. There is only a thin line of trees behind it, then an open field out to the highway. A man appeared from around the side of the hermitage. He said he saw the roof from the road and came up across the fields to see Merton's hermitage. I gently suggested I was on retreat, but he persisted and finally asked to make a general confession. I wonder how often during this week I will have "visitors." Anthony said it might snow. That will help. But today is a beautiful day for being out. It has almost the feel of one of those early March days when the winds give promise of warmer days ahead. How capricious nature can be, but captivatingly so.

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I FEASTED ON TRAPPIST CHEESE, the special smoked cheese that I like so much, and homemade whole wheat bread. And I listened to a tape of the talk Tom gave the day he left the novitiate to take up full-time life here on the hill they call Mount Olivet. He noted that he spent his whole monastic life in formation: two years as a novice, ten years as novice master, nine as a student, and three years as student master. Now he was graduating to a hermitage.

In the talk, Tom tells of an experience he had during his

Easter retreat here at Gethsemani in 1941. He stood just about where the road now leads up to the hermitage and, looking in the direction of the Abbey with its enclosing walls, said to himself, *This place is absolutely out of the question. How can I live in a place like this? You never get out into the woods.* Like most of us, most of the time, he was looking in the wrong direction. Already he was sensing the direction in which he was called and had to go. Already his deepest self longed for the freedom of the woods. His desire for this would surface more and more and would take on many false interpretations before he would find his way. "Seek and you shall find." Tom makes it clear in his talk (as Dom James insisted when he spoke with me) that he did not force the abbot on this matter. Nor was it a reluctant grant on the abbot's part. It is true that when Tom spoke of the hermitage back in 1955, Dom James did get permission to allow him to experiment with an eremitical life, but he was not keen about it and was happy when Tom volunteered for the job of novice master. Tom never regretted that choice. Dom James asked him for a three-year commitment to the job. Tom in fact stayed with the novices for ten years. In his departing talk he declared that novice master was the best job in the monastery.

By 1965 he was ready to leave it and go into a hermitage. And Dom James, who himself was moving unobtrusively towards retirement into a hermitage, was ready for Tom to go ahead. He had quietly prepared the way, first allowing a little construction shed to be moved so that Tom could find some solitary hours in it. Then he allowed this cinder block house to be built on the hill. Gradually he allowed Tom to spend more and more time here, eventually to sleep here and come down to the monastery only for his duties as novice master. Father Louis asserted that the community needed a hermit and that Tom was delighted that he was the one chosen. As he saw it, it is necessary that the monks realize that there is leeway for

the individual vocation within the monastic life. The community, each monk, needs to be reminded and to know that he has his own personal call and the freedom and the responsibility to follow it. Tom's word was that it is necessary that the monk "feel" he has some leeway: an inner sense, something deeper than just knowing, a living sign in the life of a brother that you can follow the movement of the Spirit in the way you live your own life—that you are free.

This points to something specifically Cistercian in Tom's eremitical vocation. Every true hermit sees his call within the context of the Church; for the Church; a witness to the Church. The Cistercian, as one bonded to a particular community by a solemn vow of stability, sees his vocation as within his community even as he draws apart physically from it. He is of his community and for his community, as a sign, a source, and a center.

Tom saw another valuable witness that the eremitical life gives us: "Some assurance that it is possible to put away all care, to live without care, to not have to care." He went on to explain that the care he was speaking of here is useless care, self-defeating care. He was speaking of a life that cannot face death and fills itself with a multitude of things to avoid facing death. The hermit puts aside all care, because he is embracing death, i.e., death to the world. Thus he finds the freedom to live without fear of death.

All of this is, of course, in support of finding that freedom to which all monastic life and all Christian life is dedicated: self-abandonment, a continual forgetfulness of self that leaves the soul free to love God, completely untroubled by the fears, regrets, and anxieties that self-absorption brings. At the same time, Tom would be the first to admit that we fall far from this ideal and are all too prone to fill our lives with petty cares. But God offers to take on all our cares. Through his apostle Peter he tells us: "Cast your cares upon the Lord, for he has care of

you" (1 Peter 5:7).[8] Love cares for the other. We care for God and he cares for us.

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AS MUCH AS A COMMUNITY NEEDS A HERMIT, I think it also needs some who are reaching out to the world. Tom, in his extraordinary, paradoxical way, did both. The community needs an incarnational reminder that our lives are not just for ourselves but for the Church and the world, that our lives are meant to bear fruit for the Church and the world. The first Cistercian Fathers, especially those canonized as our models —Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Peter of Tarentese—were great examples of this. There can be no doubt about the impact of Cistercian life on the twelfth-century Church and world through these great monks. Enclosed monks are in constant danger of becoming enclosed upon themselves. We need the challenge of a brother who is reaching out in compassion to others and, yes, even letting the pains of the world in to tear at and disturb his contemplative heart.

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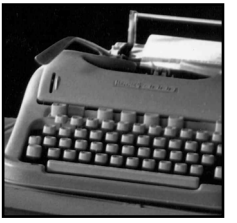
AFTER COMPLINE I STEPPED OUT INTO THE NIGHT. A cloud covering must have come over, for no stars were visible. A few lights shone from the distant knobs. A monastery light could be seen through the woods. The trees still murmured with the rhythms of the winds. But all else was silent. I am ready for bed. I will end this first day of retreat by making Tom's prayer to God our Father my own:

> Whatever may have been my particular stupidity, the prayers of your friends and my own prayers have somehow been answered, and I am here. For it is here, I think, that you want to see me and I am seen by you. My being here is a response you have asked of me, to something I have not

clearly heard. But I have responded, and I am content: there is little more to know about it at present. Here you ask of me nothing else than to be content that I am your child and your friend. Which means simply to accept your friendship because it is your friendship and your Fatherhood because I am your son. This friendship is Sonship, and is Spirit. You have called me here to be repeatedly born in the Spirit as your son. Repeatedly born in light, in knowledge, in unknowing, in faith, in awareness, in gratitude, in poverty, in presence, and in praise. To be here with the silence of Sonship in my heart is to be a center in which all things converge upon you. This is surely enough for the time being. Therefore Father, I beg you to keep me in this silence so that I may learn from it the word of your peace and the word of your mercy and the word of your gentleness to the world: and that through me perhaps your word of peace may make itself heard where it has not been possible for anyone to hear it for a long time.



Monday

d e c e m b e r s e c o n d

WHEN I WOKE UP THERE WERE ENOUGH COALS still alive in the grate to enkindle the fire. I never cease to wonder at fire, how it releases the stored energy and warmth of decades of sunshine. It is blowing colder this morning. The hermitage is in no way insulated, just a cinder block wall. There is a wood-burning stove in the corner, put in years after Tom's passing. But for the moment I am depending wholly on the fireplace as did Tom—quite a task for a fireplace, for the main room is about twenty-four feet long and about fourteen feet wide and has lots of windows.

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FOR A SECOND READING AT VIGILS I listened to one of Tom's tapes. His talks are always full of humor—even those on very serious topics like the one I listened to this morning on moral freedom. He was using Abelard as his foil. As usual, he comes out on the side of the underdog. He shows the contribution that that errant monk was making, even while he corrects Abelard's exaggerations. Tom opens his talk by saying that freedom is the most characteristic modern problem, a very important one, central to the problem of meaning. The power of self-determination is basic to the person. When the person takes responsibility for deciding, and for the consequences of his decision, he is mature. Tom sees in Abelard a weakness prevalent today: too much emphasis on intention, making it almost the exclusive determinant of guilt or merit. If one acts with a good intention, we think the action is justified, no matter what it is. In Abelard's day this balancing emphasis on intention was needed because the tendency then was to place all the weight on the side of "objectivity." Today we need to work at keeping a certain objectivity in our moral decisions. We need to avoid being wholly subjective, especially in a time when we are increasingly aware that our actions are often prompted by unconscious motivations. True freedom lies in the appropriate relationship to reality; i.e., a clear perception of what reality is, and the ability to make responsible judgments and decisions in the light of that perception.

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ALREADY I CAN HEAR THE GREAT BELLS FROM THE ABBEY announcing lauds and Mass. The quiet time goes by quickly here, sitting before the fire with coffee, very conscious of God's presence. I really haven't made space yet for wholly free, deep prayer; there is still too much thinking. I will have

to do that after Mass. On second thought, I think I will just put off lauds and take some time now.

WHAT ABOUT FASTING? Tom, at least in his last years, was not into fasting. He once joked when weighing in for a Red Cross blood donation that his "icon" was getting a bit out of shape. The pictures of him from the Gethsemani centenary celebration in 1948 and at his ordination in 1949 show a lean enough monk, almost emaciated. The rigorous fasts that were required before Vatican II and the strain that accompanied them pretty much ruined his digestive system, just as they affected the health of many other monks. In Tom's later years he welcomed "care packages" from friends like Naomi Burton Stone. He appreciated it when visitors arrived with six-packs and hamburgers. In this he was not unlike other Cistercians I know.

Tom didn't write much on fasting, but in some notes he wrote in mid-1968 to complement an exchange of letters with Coleman McCarthy in *The National Catholic Reporter*, he did write about the role of discipline in our lives. Discipline can and usually should, if we have the health, include fasting.

In these notes on discipline Tom speaks of fasting only once and then in passing. He emphasizes more the other disciplines of the monastic life—community life, solitude, ascesis (which can include fasting), work, *lectio*, quiet prayer, liturgy, and meditation. But all that he says, I think, can fully apply to fasting.

Tom doesn't deny some of the more popular explanations justifying ascetical works, but he doesn't put much weight on them. Fasting is a good work and has its reward. Jesus fasted, setting the example—imitating him in the proper way is always good—and he said that we, his disciples, would fast. A quid pro quo rationale—I'll do this for God and he will reward

me—doesn't appeal much to Tom. Or to any of us. It isn't the kind of relationship we have or want to have with our God. Tom speaks of it as a "materialistic view."

For Tom there was a need to respond to tradition. Christians, especially monks, have always fasted. In itself this is enough of an argument to support fasting. We need to enter into the practices of the living tradition and make them our own until they reveal their inner meaning to us. Only then will we be able to be part of the living tradition ourselves and make our contribution, creating the fitting expression of these values for our own times so that we can pass them on as a living reality to those who are following us in the tradition. If we refuse to make these practices our own until we understand them, we may never succeed in understanding them. The meaning of some things can only be discovered from within. With our refusal, traditions can die. They will not survive to be handed on. We have a responsibility to be, first, courageous and self-sacrificing learners and, then, courageous re-creators. To be the latter often takes more courage. Once we have learned the inner value of a practice, we are fearful of losing it by giving it new form. Yet, if it is to stay alive as a tradition, it must be reformed from generation to generation; otherwise we will soon have a lifeless mummy.

We monks have a commitment to fasting in our vow to live the monastic way of life. Every disciple of Christ has a commitment to follow him in his fasting. Ours calls for a clearer expression, to give our sisters and brothers witness, to support them in their fidelity.

One of the reasons that tradition has seen fasting as important is that it fosters our growth in moral virtue and strength. Restraining a very basic appetite—mastering it for the sake of reason—makes us more human; restraining it for the sake of Christ makes us more faithful and loving. We hear our Master's words: "Not by bread alone does one live (Matthew 4:4)," and