

## Monastic Vows: A Memorandum

By **Thomas Merton**

*The following undated memorandum was apparently written sometime in the mid-1960s, either toward the end of Merton's tenure as novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani or after his move to his hermitage in August 1965, in response to the growing numbers of vowed monks, even monks under solemn vows, leaving monastic life. It exists in two versions, a two-page typescript with numerous handwritten additions and alterations, and a three-page mimeographed text corresponding almost exactly to the revised typescript. The copy text for the version printed here is the revised typescript, collated with the mimeograph. All changes in the original text are recorded in textual notes following the article. The text is published with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and with the assistance of Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, where both versions of the material are located.*

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*Note:* this memorandum is concerned only with *monastic* orders such as Benedictines and Cistercians, where the monks have local stability and the abbot is elected for life.)

Because of the present serious problem of stability, the rather numerous defections and dispensations from monastic solemn vows, it would seem that some of the aspects of our present practice ought to be reconsidered. For example it would appear that a two-years' novitiate and three years of temporary profession are not a sufficient time of probation and preparation for solemn vows, or at least not generally so. It would also seem that a very much greater flexibility should be permitted. The local abbot and his chapter, or his council, should have power to determine each individual case with regard for the special needs and capacities of each. Thus:

1) After a two-years' novitiate, it should be possible to extend the novitiate another two years. But the important thing is not an extended novitiate. The more serious problems are those which begin after vows.

2) After making temporary vows the monk should enter a period of monastic formation prolonging the novitiate, and should not engage in formal academic studies until the abbot is convinced that he is ready for them (perhaps after five or six years). In fact he should not necessarily begin priestly studies *at all*, it being understood that one can be a monk without becoming a priest.

3) Temporary vows should be for one year, and should be renewed annually for a more or less extended period of years, perhaps fifteen, but after the first five years it should be possible to make temporary vows for *five* years, or else to continue renewing them annually.

4) Solemn vows should not normally be made until the monk has been under temporary vows for twelve or fifteen years. But it should be possible for the monk to continue under temporary vows, renewed for five-year periods, *even throughout his whole monastic life* if there

is reason to believe this to be advisable. In some cases monks might wait twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years before making their solemn vows.

5) The extension of simple temporary vows would enable monks to hold certain monastic offices and exercise certain responsible functions, before their definitive engagement in the monastic life. (Most monastic offices do not require Holy Orders.)

6) During the time of temporary vows a monk who had reason to think he needed a more active life (for instance in the secular clergy) could be given permission to leave the monastery, while remaining under vows, to pursue a seminary course and study his possible “vocation” to a more apostolic life; or a similar permission might be given to one thinking himself called to another order. If the change proved to be undesirable, the monk could return to his monastery and continue under simple vows.

7) Solemn vows would imply not only a definitive stability in the monastery, but also a deeper and more mature commitment to the *contemplative life*, so that solemn vows would not be regarded simply as a prerequisite for major orders or for the more important monastic offices. Solemn vows would in some cases be a doorway to a more retired and solitary life within the framework of the monastic community. Serious experiments in solitude could thus be permitted to certain monks *of proven maturity*. (In the case of younger monks thinking themselves called to solitude, they could make a trial of life in a more enclosed order during their temporary vows, as suggested above in [6]; or in very special cases where the abbot might think that a younger monk had very exceptional qualities and a special capacity for contemplation he might be admitted earlier to solemn vows with permission from the Superior General and the Definitors perhaps. In every case, solemn vows would be required before a monk could be permitted either to advance to major orders or to enter upon a notably exceptional and more solitary way of contemplation within the monastic setting. However studies for the priesthood could be carried out under simple vows.)

*In resumé:* during the long period of frequently renewed temporary simple vows, a monk could be tested in active responsibilities, could make some of his priestly studies, could perhaps try his vocation in another order or in a seminary if there were good reason for doing so, or could simply be sent away as not having a solid vocation, on the basis of evidence that he could not seriously confront the trials of professed life in the community. But the monk under perpetual solemn vows would be a man of proven maturity with an evident capacity to lead a more deeply contemplative life, or to be a priest in the monastery, or to assume the burdens of the greatest responsibility. Without real evidence of such a capacity, a monk would continue under simple, temporary vows.

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