

# Introduction: An International Centenary Celebration of Merton's Vision of the World Redeemed by Christ

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This special centenary volume of *The Merton Annual* brings together international scholars in a composition of voices inquiring into, reflecting on and celebrating Thomas Merton's vision of the world redeemed by Christ. At the center of this conversation is the voice of Czeslaw Milosz. After reading *The Sign of Jonas*, Milosz wrote to Merton:

I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world, ordered by religion, while Middle Ages had such an image.<sup>1</sup> This was not the aim of your diary and I have no reason to demand from one book of yours what can be demanded from all your work. But a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by majority is clear: empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death. I imagine a reader who says: he possessed a secret, he succeeded in solving the puzzle, his world is harmonious, yet in his diary he tells already about sequences while we would be ready to follow him in 5 volumes through a very vision of the world redeemed by Christ.<sup>2</sup>

This excerpt is from an undated letter mailed sometime between September of 1959 and February of 1960.<sup>3</sup> The decade-long exchange of letters

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1. Milosz appears to have found something along these lines in a book by a Russian philosopher who wove together historical conjectures and imagination to create a vision of the world redeemed in Christ. See his Introduction to Vladimir Solovyov's *War, Progress and the End of History* (Aurora, CO: Lindisfarne Press, 1990) 7-13; for Solovyov's influence on Merton's own sophianic vision see Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) *passim*.

2. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997) 61-62; subsequent references will be cited as "STB" parenthetically in the text.

3. The letter is situated in the collection between a letter from Merton dated September 12, 1959 and another letter from Milosz dated February 28, 1960. It was Milosz's fourth letter to Merton.

(1958-1968) was initiated by Merton after reading Milosz's *The Captive Mind*.<sup>4</sup> Milosz wrote this book in response to Western intellectuals' attraction to the new world order of the Stalinist movement. Troubled by the allure of totalitarianism, Milosz offered an exposé of minds held captive by doctrines that in his estimation were detrimental to the flourishing of human life. The focus of the correspondence, however, promptly moved to a critique of the twentieth century as an age of violence that instills fear and despair that drives nations into the oppressive and false security of tyrannical systems, East and West.

A deep affection and solidarity in Christ<sup>5</sup> sustained the two writers in their effort to address the challenging questions raised by this nihilistic and authoritarian age. Together they searched for an alternative that affirms life and restores freedom. Merton found in Milosz a mentor who would assist him in breaking out of his own unique captivity that provided for him "convenient escapes from freedom" and the "painful experience of seeking it" (*STB* 4). Milosz found in Merton, as he had found in Simone Weil and Albert Camus, a creative thinker who "tip[s] the scales of victory of good over evil" – a visionary of hope in a desolate world for those left abandoned and homeless.<sup>6</sup> **Angela Alaimo O'Donnell's** article entitled "Poetry, Friendship and the Communion of Saints: Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz" presents an interesting and, as you will see, creative reflection on a friendship that was deeply appreciated by both men.

We present this volume of *The Merton Annual* to you the reader in celebration of Merton's graces and tasks that he labored faithfully to cultivate in his life and work. We have inherited Merton's legacy and are now responsible for continuing the work of witnessing to the world redeemed in Christ. Each of the articles presented here provides a unique perspective into that vision.

### **A Spirituality Rooted in the Wisdom of the Body**

Included in this volume is an address by **Czeslaw Milosz** simply entitled "Merton," that was originally written for a conference held in Lublin, Poland in 2002. Milosz recalls his first face-to-face meeting with Merton at Gethsemani after years of corresponding. There is something of

4. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (London: Mercury, 1953).

5. Both Merton and Milosz greet and close their letters with terms of endearment that represent the spiritual bond that existed between the two men.

6. Milosz often describes the twentieth century as a "homeless age." See, for example, *Roadside Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998) 105. There is irony in Milosz's request to an orphan to show the way home. It may be, however, an irony that bears the mark of Providence and thereby signifies the importance of Milosz's letter and the light it sheds on Merton's monastic vocation in the modern world.

importance in Milosz's initial impression of Merton. He was surprised to find not "an ascetic kind of person, somewhat skinny and yellowed," but rather "a man with quite a broad and jovial face like a Burgundy peasant." It is the line that follows that reveals what attracted Milosz to Merton. For Milosz, Merton's spirituality was "strongly rooted in his body." The same was true for Milosz. The body and spirit were not two separate entities for him. We only need to glance at a few lines from Milosz's poetry to see the importance of the integration of body and soul for this poet. For example, in his poem "In Krakow," Milosz reflects on the sacrament of marriage:

The nakedness of a woman meets the nakedness of a man  
And completes itself with its second half  
Carnal, or even divine,  
Which is likely the same thing,  
As revealed to us in the Song of Songs.<sup>7</sup>

Even though Merton and Milosz saw the modern world as desolate, their understanding of spiritual transcendence was incarnate – earthy, ordinary and as playfully obscure as a game of hide-and-seek. **Christopher Pramuk** in "Rumours of Glory: Walking in the Dark Half-Light of Faith" explores the ways in which these two poets engage in this game of God's absences and presence that creates a tension between sorrow and joy, despair and hope, doubt and wonder – a tension that breaks forth in liturgy and poetry with longing and waiting for God's definitive breakthrough. All of this is simply and profoundly expressed in "cruciform presence, the divine mantra of mercy and forgiveness" that is at the center of Merton's life.

In light of this observation, the cruciform image on the cover was selected from **Roger Lipsey's** book entitled *Angelic Mistakes*.<sup>8</sup> Merton describes his art as "*graffiti*" that are "Summonses to awareness, but not to 'awareness of.'" In *Angelic Mistakes*, Lipsey sets quotations from Merton adjacent to the images that suggest what Merton *may* have had in mind. With this image (n. 33 [127]), we find two passages that locate the presence of Christ within all persons, a presence that is illuminating – not *something* illuminated (awareness of) but rather an illumination of the true self (pure awareness):

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7. Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 6. With regard to the body, see Milosz's Introduction to Anna Swir's collection of poems entitled *Talking to My Body* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1996) 3-7.

8. Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006).

9. Thomas Merton, "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 181-82, reprinted in *Angelic Mistakes* 61.

God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.

That is what it means to be a Christian: not simply one who believes certain reports about Christ, but one who lives in *a conscious confrontation with Christ* in himself and in other men. This means, therefore, the choice to become empty of one's self, the illusory self fabricated by our desires and fears, the self that is here now and will cease being here if this or that happens.

Christ not as object of seeing or study, but Christ as center in whom and by whom one is illuminated. (126)

Lipsey revisits this image in "Christ Crucified: A Note on the Cover Image." He once again opens for us the language of Merton's "graffiti" and this time digs even deeper to reveal the dynamic presence of "*the Christ of the burnt men*"<sup>10</sup> of whom Merton was one and for whom this image signifies the mystery of his vocation.

Where is Christ to be found? For Merton, Christ is found within oneself and the world. This becomes central to Merton's pastoral care of novices. Note Merton's spiritual direction to novices entering the world redeemed by Christ in the transcript edited by **Paul Pearson** presented here. No abstractions, no flights from this world into heavenly spheres – only this reality with its rumors of glory:

Contemplation does not mean discarding the only reality we've got. It means *penetrating* the only reality we've got. The only reality we've got is right there, but it's not necessarily material, but it is in matter. I mean God is not absent from the material world. God appears through the material world. You don't have to despoil the material world before you get to God. You don't have to get out of it before you get to God: He's right there. The reality that we've got is matter and spirit together, and so, the only way of contemplating anything is to contemplate what's real, what's right there.

For Milosz and Merton, the love of a man and woman, the sun caressing a hillside, or a conversation between two poets are fractured reflections of grace, beauty and truth. In "Internal Countries: Where the Self Redeemed by Christ Becomes the World Redeemed by Christ," **Fiona Gardner** skillfully draws our attention to the interior world of the Merton-Milosz friendship by exploring the dialogue, its tensions and connections, that

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10. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 423.

unfolds line after line in letters mailed across the Atlantic. Here is a conversation that reveals glimpses of a world redeemed – glimpses that shine from the “cracks” in the captive minds and worlds of both poets.

**Malgorzata Poks** peers into one of those openings in Merton’s monastic enclosure: “‘Love Wins Because It Is Bad Business’: The World Redeemed in Christ in *Eighteen Poems*” turns to another relationship in Merton’s life. This one is defined not by the reflective movements of *philia* but rather by the creative chaos of *eros*. With wonderful insight, Poks shares with us ways in which Merton’s poems for M. “celebrate love, beauty and the creative power of the imagination.” The poems rise from the hermit’s newly found “wisdom of the body” awakened by Sophia. Here is the vocation of lovers who concelebrate “creation made innocent and holy again” in a world redeemed by Christ.

### **Exploring the Border between the Intellect and the Imagination**

It is the creative power of the imagination that opens for Merton and Milosz a vision of the world both desolate and redeemed. The title of **Artur Rosman**’s article, “‘How Could I Not Think of This?’ – Milosz’s Thomistic Challenge to Merton” begins with a passage from a book by Milosz entitled *Roadside Dog* that clarifies Milosz’s interest in theology and the imagination.

Instead of leaving to theologians their worries, I have constantly meditated on religion. Why? Simply because *someone* had to do this. . . . I lived in a time when a huge change in the contents of the human imagination was occurring. In my lifetime Heaven and Hell disappeared, the belief in life after death was considerably weakened. . . . After 2,000 years in which a huge edifice of creeds and dogmas has been erected, from Origen and Saint Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman, when every work of the human mind and human hands was created within a system of reference, the age of homelessness has dawned. How could I not think of this?<sup>11</sup>

Rosman, an internationally recognized Milosz scholar, sheds light on the way Milosz engaged Merton in thinking deeply about the age in which they lived and worked. Milosz was, as indicated here, primarily concerned about the modern breakdown of religious imagination, Catholic in particular, leaving, he believed, humanity homeless in the vast expanding universe. He turns to Merton with the hope of finding an alternative to the modern worldview that “suspends the sustaining presence of Be-

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11. Czeslaw Milosz, *Roadside Dog*, trans. Robert Hass and Czeslaw Milosz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 105.

ing (*ipsum esse*) with an all-pervading absence . . . eternal life with the pervasiveness of death . . . salvation with quasi-damnation.” For Milosz, “Salvation ought to have the shape of an imaginative narrative” as it had been in the Middle Ages when there was a union of theological truth and imaginative expressions of that truth.

“Merton on Art as Truth” by **Ross Labrie** addresses the concern raised by Milosz with an excellent inquiry into the playful and creative trajectories of reason and imagination in Merton’s work that reveals “an ever larger picture of the unity of being.” According to Labrie, the connection of art and truth in Merton’s work is “essentially Romantic as was his elevating of the role of the imagination.” Both counter the reductiveness of materialism. By applying his imagination to the truths that he discovers in his religious life, Milosz believed Merton “might create new understanding” that “allows one to see through the curtain of appearances but also adds to the richness of being through its ability to create new worlds.”

### **Seeing the World Redeemed in Christ**

The imagination becomes a way of seeing through the fractured reflections of divine reality in the world and thereby discovers the paradise that lies within. This way of seeing is explored in the next two articles. “Landscapes of Redemption: Thomas Merton’s Vision of the World from the Mount” by **Fernando Beltrán Llavador** provides an interesting inquiry into Merton’s “following of the Beatitudes” as a way of cultivating his vision of the world redeemed in Christ. Beltrán describes a life committed to the Beatitudes as an eightfold path to heaven. This reference is intentional as it turns our attention to another important conversation for Merton noted in this article. D. T. Suzuki and Merton, as do Merton and Milosz, acknowledge the cause of nihilism as rooted in our faulty vision of the world. The antidote for the ills of the modern world therefore becomes the discovery of an authentic vision that affirms life and death as meaningful.

“Finding Christ in the East” by **Michael Higgins** also directs our attention to the East and the influence of Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, as well as to William Blake and the Desert Fathers. All of these threads are woven together to form a tapestry of Merton’s Asian journey. In the East Merton discovered “doors of perception” that are essentially imaginative, mystical and poetic. As Higgins points out, preparations for this pilgrimage were long in the making.

Merton the poet longs to restore the integrity and harmony that once existed before individual consciousness or reflexive ego awareness

shattered prelapsarian unity. The poet realizes that the only way humankind can recover paradise is not by ratiocination or systematic inquiry, but by a poetic and mystical identification or co-sympathy with creation, discovering in its mystery the *irrelevance* of the “I” and the illusoriness of the empirical self. As he says in “O Sweet Irrational Worship”:

My heart’s love  
Bursts with hay and flowers.  
I am a lake of blue air  
In which my own appointed place  
Field and valley  
Stand reflected.

At the forefront of this search was a mature Christology, rooted in the Alexandrian tradition. As Higgins points out, Merton was able to find Christ in the East because he understood that “the Word was made flesh” means “God is in all of us and all of us are to be seen and treated as Christ.” Consequently, Merton was able to find Christ outside one religion, one institution, one history – incarnate and present in all humanity.

**Detlev Cuntz**’s interview with Dr. **Hildegard Goss-Mayr** is an excellent example of finding Christ in the world. Cuntz draws our attention to Goss-Mayr’s conversations and correspondence with Merton during the 1960s. Her life and work were committed to the promotion of nonviolence. As a prominent leader in the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Goss-Mayr sought Merton’s guidance with regard to spiritual formation of peace activists. The interview eventually turns to “Blessed Are the Meek,” an article by Merton that Goss-Mayr asked Merton to write for publication in her journal *Der Christ in der Welt*. These two titles connect various lines of thought represented in this volume of *The Merton Annual*: the Beatitudes as an eightfold path, Christ beyond ecclesiastical walls, and the transformative work of the Spirit that reveals an entirely new reality.

**Bonnie Thurston** in “‘An Entirely New Spiritual Reality’: Thomas Merton on Life in Christ” presents us with an examination of the Apostle Paul’s influence on Merton’s work with attention to the meaning of “life in Christ.” As she carefully unpacks the Merton corpus, Thurston comes to the conclusion that “the world is redeemed *by* Christ when Christians live fully the implications of their being *in* Christ.” Thurston sees each Christian as “an outpost of God’s Kingdom and, by submitting to the transformation Christ effects in him or her, becomes a ‘carrier’ of Christ and, animated by Christ’s self-giving love (what Merton called ‘charity’), draws others into the circle of Christ’s influence.” The implications of this

understanding of what it means to be a Christian are significant.

“Speaking Out for Those in Exile” by **Glenn Loughrey** brings the conversation around to the social and political obligations of life in Christ – the one exiled and crucified – in whom there is neither you nor I nor they, but only we. It is the Christ in us that compels us to speak out against all forms of tyranny and oppression as we stand together.

**Patrick O’Connell** in “Redeeming the Time from Destruction” expands on this notion of exiles in and for the world with a carefully researched article on the British publication of an abridged, reordered, retitled and augmented edition of *Seeds of Destruction*. The editors suggested that the title should reflect the essential theme of the newly arranged essays. That theme and title they believed was to be found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” O’Connell, recalling Milosz’s belief that readers would be ready to follow Merton through volumes to discover his vision of the world redeemed by Christ, suggests that the long process of revision initiated by the editors may represent such a tracing from the trajectories of Merton’s thought a vision of a redeemed world, in particular the “providential time of redemption” whereby humanity is called to conversion and corresponding vocation in a time of crisis that offers mercy and grace to heal brokenness, restore life and open new ways of freedom.

**Joseph Quinn Raab**, co-editor of *The Merton Annual*, concludes this volume with a bibliographic review essay that invokes a vision of hope in and for our deeply troubled world of the twenty-first century. “The Grandeur of God in a Picture of Hell” gathers 2013 publications under the banner of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem whose title is seen here combined with Merton’s opening paragraph from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This juxtaposition of divine grandeur and the torments of hell represents a coincidence of opposites that forms the center around which Merton scholars and readers gather in conversation with attention to the cosmic dance of redemption in Christ – a dance choreographed by Sophia who seeks in her graceful moves to transform humanity and our vision of the world in ways unimaginable but nonetheless known in the depths of our hearts as full of grace and truth.

With appreciation to all who contributed to this volume and, of course, deep gratitude to Merton for sharing with us his vision of the world redeemed in Christ, the co-editors of *The Merton Annual* present to you, the reader, this volume in celebration of the faith, hope and love offered us in the life and work of Fr. Louis.