

“LIGHT THAT IS NOT LIGHT”:

A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon

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“Byzantine painting, which avoided luxurious additions and never sacrificed its essentially contemplative viewpoint to the love of anecdote, seems well-fitted to make its home in a Cistercian setting.” Thus wrote Marco Pallis to Thomas Merton on 14 October 1965, in a letter that accompanied a gift of a late seventeenth century Macedonian triptych.¹ The icon graced the hermitage chapel along with an authentic Greek Tikhvin Mother of God, and several reproductions: St. Elias, St. George, and Rublev’s Holy Trinity. Merton’s letter of 5 December 1965 to Pallis resonates with the emotion he feels for the icon.

1. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 473. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

Acknowledgements: I wish to express my indebtedness to Dr. Robert E. Daggy, Director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center, whose sustained assistance, generosity, and background knowledge were indispensable to me in carrying out my research. I also appreciate the singular kindness and help of Lorraine Welsh, archival secretary of the Friedsam Memorial Library of St. Bonaventure University. I am grateful to Brother Patrick Hart for his interest and encouragement in this project, his keen insights, and for permitting me to photograph Merton’s icons. To Sr. Susan Bremer who carefully proofread the text and to Sr. Rita Kuhn who capably typed it, I remain indebted. To my fellow travelers, Sr. Rose Mary Hoge and Sr. Marian Leonard, I am thankful for their support and companionship.

Where shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me in the coming of the ikon to my most unworthy person. At first I could hardly believe it. And yet perhaps your intuition about my karma is right, since in a strange way the ikon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem. (*HGL*, p. 473)

The letter continues to suggest that the “problem” involved his decision to withdraw from the increasing political agitation of the peace movement.

Let me return to the ikon. Certainly it is a perfect act of timeless worship, a great help. I never tire of gazing at it. There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual “Thaboric” light, which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe. It is unutterably splendid. And silent. It imposes a silence on the whole hermitage. (*HGL*, p. 474)

That these icons remain integral to the solitude of his hermitage years is evidenced in his July 1967 letter to Sr. Emmanuel de Souza e Silva:

Nothing much new here. I enjoy the quiet of the hermitage and am saying Mass here now, which is very beautiful at least for me. I did not realize it would mean so much. I have two authentic ikons over my altar, one Bulgarian and one Greek, both from good periods, and also two good copies of Russian ikons. (*HGL*, p. 199)

In October he sent her photographs of the icons to give her an idea of their beauty.

A Western hermit cherishes a Byzantine icon from a scholar of Tibetan religion: irony and paradox abound in the life of Thomas Merton. His public self was poet, critic, activist; his private self was traditionalist, in the best sense of that term. He was steeped in the traditions of Christianity until his death in Bangkok. On 9 November 1968, he wrote to his friends:

I wish you all the peace and joy in the Lord and an increase of faith: for in my contacts with these new friends I also feel consolation in my own faith in Christ and His indwelling presence.²

In order to grasp the full significance Merton attributed to this Byzantine icon we must journey back some thirty years, before Bangkok, before Kentucky, before New York — to Rome.

2. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 325.

BYZANTINE MOSAICS

"But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed."³ In his autobiography Thomas Merton recalled his second visit to Rome in February-March 1933, when he was eighteen years old and carelessly passing the time before entering Clare College at Cambridge in October. During this trip his experience of Byzantine mosaics was to prove a turning point in his life, one to which he often referred. During his first retreat at Gethsemani he recorded: "This morning after Mass, I walked along the wall of the guest-house garden . . . in the midst of more beauty than I can remember since I was in Rome. I remember Rome a lot, here."⁴

The adolescent Merton was accustomed to vacation alone; in fact, he preferred it. On this occasion, even before arriving in Rome, he had run out of money. In the letter that accompanied fresh funds, his guardian Thomas Izod Bennett "took occasion of my impracticality to call attention to most of my faults as well, and I was very humiliated" (*SSM*, p. 103). His misery was compounded by an attack of boils and an abscessed tooth. His arrival into the Eternal City was subdued, if not depressed. After retracing the steps of his first tour through the classical ruins two years earlier, Merton was left with a deep sense of emptiness, dullness, and boredom. ". . . the whole thing, all this Roman empire had become suddenly quite uninteresting, *appallingly* [~~crossed out~~] dead, stupid and dumb."⁵ He persisted for about a week, roaming about museums, libraries, bookstores, and ruins by day, and reading D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and books about Rome at night. Quite accidentally one day he stumbled upon an old chapel near the ruins of the palace of Caligula: ". . . a couple of Roman columns holding up a brick arch, and on a wall, a Byzantine fresco of the crucifixion." Suddenly he was "very awed and surprised to find that this was something I recognized and understood. Something I had been looking for." Merton proceeds to reassess his conception of and admiration for the ancient Rome of "Cecil B. De Mille orgies of Tiberius" — the paradise of refinement and spirituality opposed to the middle class vulgarity of Victorian England or the war-bent materialism of his own era (*Lab*, p. 51). He realized that "imperial Rome must have been one of the most revolting

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 109. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 199.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Labyrinth*; unpublished novel in the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, p. 49. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Lab*. I have attempted to use Michael Mott's pagination system in referring to this novel.

and ugly and depressing cities In fact, the ruins and umbrella pines scattered about among them were far more pleasant than the reality must have been" (*SSM*, pp. 107). Now he placed Rome among those cities and epochs that were infected with "the plague," a disease he was as yet unable to define. On the same day that he discovered the ruined chapel, Merton describes his overwhelming encounter with the Byzantine mosaics in Sts. Cosmas and Damian Church across the Forum. Varied and detailed accounts appear in his autobiography, his novel *The Labyrinth*, and his 1941 journal:

It is the feast of S. S. Cosmos and Damian, and I remember their church in Rome, with the mosaic of Christ standing among red clouds, small, firm clouds in a mackerel bank on a blue ground, receiving the two saints into heaven They were physicians, and they were martyrs, and I think, Arabs. The mosaic showed Christ in Glory, receiving them — and not smiling.⁶

This mosaic held him fascinated by its "mystery," "design," "tremendous seriousness," and "simplicity."

The effect of this discovery was tremendous. After all the vapid, boring, semi-pornographic statuary of the Empire, what a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power — an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say. And it was without pretentiousness, without fakery, and had nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity — and by the obscurity of the places where it lay hid, and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their positions and everything about them proclaimed it aloud. (*SSM*, p. 108)

If before he scarcely looked at Byzantine art for being "clumsy and ugly and brutally stupid" (*Lab*, p. 49), now he was determined to understand it aesthetically by the formal analysis of art criticism. Yet "significant form" merely echoed the obvious. No term proved adequate to the mystery, the something more, "that life and that wisdom, a life and wisdom which I soon found belonged not exclusively to good mosaics, but to almost anything in the Byzantine tradition . . . a kind of wisdom in the very conventions of the tradition itself . . . a kind of radiance and seriousness" (*Lab*, pp. 50-51). Merton sensed that the answer to "the plague" somehow resided in the early Christian basilicas which he now haunted daily.

But I knew, now, that if I wanted to see it, I could go and hunt for it in these old

6. Thomas Merton, *Saint Bonaventure Journal*; unpublished manuscript in the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, 27 September 1941, p. 213. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SBJ*.

churches . . . and there, in mosaics, in statues, in thrones and stone altars, I could see quite plainly something that I was looking for. I didn't know what it was: it was there. It was not a material thing, it was an intellectual and spiritual quality these ancient artists had given to their works. But it was not something that could not be seen, and not something you had to accept blindly: for it was there, you could see it. (*Lab*, pp. 52-53)

The desire for greater breadth and depth of knowledge impelled Merton to pour over Joseph Wilpert's volumes on mosaics and finally to purchase his own Vulgate. He began reading his favorite books, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, but "after that I began to read the gospels because I decided I wanted to, and Revelations because that would help with the iconography of Byzantine mosaics" (*Lab*, p. 54). Gradually, as the weeks passed, Merton realized that he was unintentionally becoming less of a tourist and more of a pilgrim, though his motivation was unclear and confused. The young Merton had not been a stranger to old churches and monasteries, having been born under St. Martin-du-Canigou and near the ruins of St. Michel-de-Cuxa, part of which was later to become the Cloisters in New York where he would pass some quiet moments while a student at Columbia. In the medieval town of St. Antonin, the village church was the axis around which the town and landscape revolved. There, near the abandoned chapel, Le Calvaire, his father Owen built a house, incorporating into it fragments of church ruins. There, too, he enjoyed paging through the medieval Christian landmarks of *Le Pays de France*. In 1931 and 1932, he hiked and picnicked in the shadows of a Cistercian monastery near Beaulieu. But this was different. It was the spirit of peace and of belonging that drew him into the naves and sanctuaries of St. Mary Major, St. Pudenziana, St. Prassedes, St. John Lateran, St. Mary Sopra Minerva, Santa Maria Cosmedin, Santa Maria Trastevere, St. Peter in Chains, and San Clemente (*SSM*, p. 114).

In his room at the pensione at night, it was a different story. He was oppressed by fears and hopelessness that eventually climaxed in a strange phenomenon. Merton is extremely cautious about offering a definite explanation for *why* or *how* it occurred, but *that* it did is certain. In a flash, Merton was vividly aware of the presence of his deceased father in the room with him. There followed a profound insight into the misery of his own soul.

I fell into the middle of a great depression, and within ten or fifteen minutes everything around me and in me turned sour. I could actually feel myself go sour, I could feel myself turning to ashes inside. (*Lab*, p. 55)

The sight of himself, his ideas, friends, and possessions disgusted him. Everything shouted of his vanity, pride, and conceit. With much horror and many tears, he realized that “the plague” he had projected onto the city of Rome was really *within* him. He was diseased. His life was in ruins (*Lab*, p. 55). Then he did something extraordinary. He prayed.

And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray — praying not with intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being and praying to the God I had never known. (SSM, p. 111)

The next morning, the humbled and embarrassed Merton entered Santa Sabina Church with the intention of praying.

I had been walking in and out of churches as if they had been museums. Now I was almost ashamed to cross the threshold of this one, yet as soon as I was inside I knew that a church was the only kind of place where I could make any peace with myself at all. Because I knew that, I dared to pray there. It took daring. (*Lab*, p. 56)

Self-conscious of each movement and gesture lest he be caught as a “heretic tourist,” Merton eased his way to the sanctuary where he knelt and prayed the “‘Our Father’ over four or five times, and every time it was just as sweet and just as full of strength . . . the words of the prayer (Thy Kingdom Come) were strong and kind and good . . . I began to feel healed inside” (*Lab*, p. 56).

The joy and peace that followed Merton out of Santa Sabina that afternoon continued for a few weeks. As he left the Eternal City to which he would never return except in memory, he was yet incapable of framing his beliefs in any discursive formulations, but he knew what he loved, clearly and simply: prayer, the Gospels, and religious art (*Lab*, p. 57). And through them a deeper, hidden love was being enkindled.

And for the first time in my life I began to find out something of who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my *conception* of Christ was formed. (SSM, p. 109)

It is noteworthy that Merton speaks of his *conception* of Christ being formed by the encounter with the Byzantine mosaics. Later in life, he analyzed the relationship of the aesthetic to the contemplative experience, the artist to the mystic. He distinguished between a *concept* and *conception*, the latter being an intuitive perception of an inner spiritual reality, the “vision” of the artist. The authentic aesthetic experience transcends both the sensible and rational orders and thereby resembles the mystical

experience.⁷

Its mode of apprehension is that of "connaturality" — it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification of itself with it. It rests in the perfection of things by a kind of union which sometimes resembles the quiescence of the soul in its immediate affective contact with God in the obscurity of mystical prayer.⁸

These first stirrings of an inner truth left their indelible mark upon Merton, but his religious enthusiasm was short lived. It was August 1938 before he again entered a Roman Catholic church. But by then he was in too deep to want to retreat:

I shall never cease to wonder at the love I suddenly got for these mosaics: it was certainly God's grace, and I cannot know in this life how much that love meant: but it may have meant my whole life, through the prayers of these Saints and others of the earliest times of the Church, who won by their prayers that I should love their churches, and that I myself should also pray and read the Bible — and after that, no matter where I went and what I came to for five years after, they still prayed until I came dragging back again, much more beaten and about ready to be dead. (*SBJ*, p. 213)

This powerful intercession of the silent Byzantine saints was answered when at last they witnessed the death and rebirth of Merton through his baptism into their communion on 16 November 1938 in the Church of Corpus Christi.

CHRISTO VERO REGI

After describing the Christ in the apse of Sts. Cosmos and Damian in his 1941 journal, Merton erupts spontaneously into a fervent prayer:

My true God teach us to see Thee again the way the mosaics tell us the people of those times saw Thee, in Thy true glory and power and strength — *teach us, for our own* [crossed out] use of the words power and glory suggest bad opera, or a racket of machines, or something cheap and drunk; cauterize our sore [crossed out] intellects and scabby imaginations, and let us see straight towards Thee in Faith and Fear and Wisdom, not straining our eyes at the compulsion of the hopeless imagery we make up to deaden our hunger for Thy Love and Justice! We cannot see Thee with eyes at all, yet in those days, the mosaics were there to teach us the Faith and Fear with which to begin to see Thee with the inward eyes of our intellect, and love. (*SBJ*, p. 213)

7. Thomas Merton, "Notes on Sacred and Profane Art," *Jubilee* 4 (November 1956): p. 27.

8. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 443. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Poetry."

Faith and fear weave thematically throughout this passage. Seeing God in truth, with the eyes of faith, penetrating reality, purifying images and concepts parallel the movement of awe and reverence in the face of unearthly transcendence. Merton's distinction between the *outward* and *inward* eye is the key to realizing what occurred in the years that followed.

Fourteen years later, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton identifies the Christ of the Byzantine mosaics as the Pantokrator, God and King. Initially, the color and design of the mosaics, the hieratic quality of the large formal, frontal, motionless, and silent figures struck him with the power, glory, and eternity of the God they traced. But it was years later, only after he had "been granted a deep understanding of the ways of God and of the mystery of Christ, deeply rooted in the spiritual consciousness of the whole Church, steeped in the Liturgy and the Scriptures, fully possessed by the 'mind of the Church,' " that he grasped existentially *who* this Person was and *how* he was God and King — "the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers . . . the Christ of St. John, and of St. Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers — and of The Desert Fathers" ("Poetry," p. 442; *SSM*, p. 109).

The aesthetic experience had been fulfilled and transcended in the contemplative: "Christian contemplation . . . is simply the experience of God that is given to a soul purified by humility and faith. It is the 'knowledge' of God in the darkness of infused love" ("Poetry," p. 440). Only now could he sing with St. Paul for they are both *in* Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature . . . in Him were all things created, by Him and in Him . . . He is before all and by Him all things consist . . . in Whom it hath pleased the Father that all things should dwell . . . for in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally, that in all things He may hold the primacy. (Colossians 1 & 2)⁹

Ironically the heart of the theology of the icon is also contained in these scriptures. The divine essence is and remains incomprehensible and incommunicable to humans. Yet God chose to reveal Himself to humans through His Son, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, who is His perfect image. By uniting human nature to His Divine nature, Jesus Christ unites all that is created with the uncreated. Matter becomes the vehicle of reconciliation of humans to God, and through humans the entire cosmos as well. In the icon of Jesus Christ, it is his Person that is depicted, not his Divine or human

9. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *Commonweal* 69 (24 October 1958), p. 89. Hereafter referred to in the text as "PAC."

nature. For the body of Christ depicted in the icon is not thereby separated from His Divinity but represents flesh deified and transfigured with Divine or Taboric Light. All icons of the Theotokos and of the saints attest to the total recapitulation of all things in and through the victory of Christ's Death and Resurrection by being images of glorified humanity.

Merton described the icon of Christ as His spiritual presence "effected by the invisible light of the 'divine energies' which have mysteriously clothed themselves" in the lines and colors used by the artist who was "enlightened by a certain inspired contemplation."¹⁰ So the true King to whom Merton dedicated *The Seven Storey Mountain* is preeminently the Christ of the Apocalypse. His Kingdom is the New Creation, the

hieratic universe which is recapitulated and centered in the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. The life of the new creation is a life of cosmic liturgy, in which time and eternity interpenetrate one another in Christ. This is a world of spirit and of worship, a world which is not "put off" to the next life but which is already here and now though in the darkness of faith. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you." — that is to say, the Kingdom of God has already been established by the victory of Christ, and we are all living in the reign of Christ whether we recognize the fact or not." ("Notes," p. 57)

Through the gift of contemplation, what had begun as a fleeting intuition of God's transcendence in a Roman basilica, grew into an abiding awareness of His immanence in the Mystery of the Church.

ICONS: SACRED ART

Once Merton entered Gethsemani his firsthand experience of the visual arts was severely limited. This did not deter him from learning about them in any way he could and expressing his views to the Trappist community in conferences on topics ranging from Cistercian architecture to Chinese landscape painting.

In the archives of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, lie the edited and proofed galley sheets of a small book by Thomas Merton on sacred art. Much of the text had been developed from conferences given to the scholastics in 1954. *Art and Worship* was originally slated for publication in 1959, but never appeared in print except for bits and pieces in Catholic periodicals, such as *Jubilee*,

10. Thomas Merton, "Notes on Art and Worship." In *Collected Essays: Vol. 4, "Art and Literature,"* Thomas Merton Studies Center, pp. 15-81. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Notes."

Sponsa Regis, and *Worship*. It appears that the publishers found Merton's selection of illustrations for the text problematic: contemporary religious art was sorely lacking. Robert Lax, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Giroux met with Merton at Gethsemani in 1959, to enlighten him regarding the contemporary art situation.¹¹ In 1960, a New York art historian, Eloise Spaeth, was engaged to assist Merton. Realizing how out of touch he was with the concrete experience of contemporary art, not to mention good sacred art (which even Eloise Spaeth soon found to be rare), Merton was reluctant to carry through the project. Even Spaeth had been advised to drop the book by a critic who deplored its questionable treatment of art history and its heavy theoretical, moralizing and theological tone. When Spaeth offered to rewrite a contemporary section for Merton, he must have been exasperated for she admitted she was herself no writer. To add contemporary photographs to update the book and make it more appealing and saleable was one matter, but to alter his ideas was a greater compromise than Merton cared to accept. Still, as late as 1964, we see that the book was on his mind as he requested examples of Shaker art from Edward Deming Andrews (*HGL*, p. 38). In 1965, he suggested its use to Canon A. M. Allchin (*HGL*, p. 27).

What the art critics of the revolutionary sixties may have made of the book we can only guess from the prepublication turmoil. But the little volume is invaluable to anyone who dares to admit the traditional roots of Thomas Merton's Christianity unlike Spaeth who could not tolerate Merton's " 'sacred artist' who keeps creeping in with his frightful icons."¹²

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton alludes to "the ancient craftsman's love of Christ, the Redeemer and Judge of the World" which he grasped intuitively when contemplating the Byzantine mosaics in the Eternal City (*SSM*, p. 110). To communicate the truth effectively, the iconographer, or sacred artist, though not necessarily a saint, must acknowledge the truth of his state as a sinner before God. His gift is essentially charismatic, given for the sake of others. The "depth and purity of the religious insight of the artist" determine the quality of a sacred image. "Fra Angelico said: 'To paint the things of Christ one must live in Christ'" ("Notes," p. 57). Merton draws a parallel between the artist's union with Christ in the

11. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 327.

12. Eloise Spaeth to Thomas Merton, Unpublished letter in the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

Church and the Eastern yogi, for both receive their inspiration from a source that insures its being metaphysically original and creative. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writes of the Hindu tradition in which the artist, by contemplative penetration, identifies with the being to be expressed, knowing it by empathy from within. A romantic, subjective, and "personal capacity for religious intuition" is suspect for the sacred artist. He must be guided by a traditional discipline to "enter into the heart of the mystery which will express itself, symbolically, in the forms that spring from his spiritual experience . . . with the illuminated eyes of the Church" ("Notes," p. 57).

The Christian artist has a demanding dual vocation. This double calling obliges him to be a Christian who meditates on the Gospel and loves the liturgy. He must also be a competent, skilled, and disciplined artist, untainted by commercialism, ambition, or narcissism. In short, the artist should be a contemplative: "It is not surprising, therefore, that real sacred art is not seen everyday in a world where everything tends to be inimical both to art and to sacredness ("Notes," p. 57). The task of the contemporary Christian artist as outlined by Merton espouses a prophetic vision:

It is the task of the iconographer to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom in the world, and to remind us that though we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are if we believe in Christ the Redeemer, in fact living and worshipping as "fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone with Christ." ("Notes," p. 58)

Just as the iconographer is the model of the artist, the icon serves as the paradigm for the work of art.

In Merton's view, all good art is religious by the very fact that it penetrates material elements to see into the inner spiritual reality. It becomes an "ikon of the transcendent world of being: a microcosm, paradise, and epiphany ("Notes," p. 58). He labels Cezanne's landscapes *eikons*¹³ and compares his father's paintings to Cezanne's for their "veneration for structure (*SSM*, p. 3). Merton abhorred representational art that merely copied the outward appearance of things. He believed the artist must create something new, which thereby became "an eikon, an image which embodies the inner truth of things as they exist in the mystery of God. A distinction is drawn, however, when Merton addresses art that is worthy of the public worship of God. Sacred art alone participates in the

13. Thomas Merton, "Art and Worship," *Sponsa Regis* 31 (December 1959), p. 116. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Art."

holiness of the transcendent mystery of God, whose *eikon* is the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ ("Art," p. 115).

Merton formulates seven qualities of sacred art, all of which pertain as well to the traditional icon of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The work of sacred art should convey a sense of awe in the presence of a divine mystery by its *hieratic* quality. It must not be merely conventional but truly *traditional*, drawing from the renewing sources of Christian revelation. A *living* work of sacred art embodies a sense of prayer; it is *sincere*, avoiding all virtuosity, pretentiousness and melodrama; and *reverent*, it avoids an overly human familiarity with the divine. In speaking of the *spiritual* characteristic of sacred art, Merton understands the work to be inspired by the Spirit of God. He cites Fra Angelico, Byzantine mosaics and Russian icons as exemplary. Lastly, insofar as sacred art is not preoccupied with calling attention either to itself or to any particular social, ethical or spiritual movement, it is *pure*.¹⁴

At times, Merton treats specifically of the icon. He recalls the Seventh Ecumenical Council's teaching on the parallel importance of the Gospel and the icon in tradition: "However, just as the hieratic narrative of the Gospel communicates a spiritual message that transcends the simplicity of the words and exceeds their capacity of signification, so too the icon communicates a spiritual light and beauty which transcends the medium used" ("Notes," p. 72).

In another place Merton quotes generously from an address delivered by Pope John XXIII on 28 October 1961 to a study group of the Pontifical Commission on Sacred Art. He highlights the pope's love for the "many Churches of the Orient," and draws inferences to the icon in passages that refer to mosaics of saints depicted "as perfectly spiritualized men, in whom the light of God is obscurely manifest to the world because they have recovered his likeness" ("Notes," p. 72). Pope John's quote from a letter of Pope Hadrian I included in the Acts of 787 is underscored by Merton: "Whenever you find Christianity, sacred images are set up to be honored by all the faithful so that through a visible likeness the soul may be lifted in heavenly affection to the invisible divine majesty" ("Notes," p. 74).

In his preface to *Art and Worship*, Merton offers the reader illustrations "drawn from the purest sources of Christian tradition" which if "studied in a prayerful, intent, relaxed and unprejudiced atmosphere"

14. Thomas Merton, "Seven Qualities of the Sacred," *Good Work* 27 (Winter 1964), pp. 15-20.

may assist him to understand the meaning of modern trends in sacred art and be "better prepared to distinguish between what is genuine and what is faked." A sampling of the illustrations he selected, many of which were questioned by Eloise Spaeth, confirms Merton's bias for Byzantine and Romanesque art and some Italian Primitives: Christ Enthroned, Hagia Sophia; mosaics from San Vitale, Ravenna; Christ of Autun; Christ in the Tympanum, Vezeley; The Temptation of Christ, Duccio; Last Judgment, Parma Cathedral; St. Francis of Assisi, Cimabue; portals from Chartres; Angel of Resurrection, Duccio ("Notes," p. 74).

We cannot know if Merton's book would have aided the average lay person in grasping a saner view of religious art of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, he was prophetic in addressing a need that continues even to the present. Merton believed that this task was best suited to the monk because of his prophetic role within contemporary society:

Reared in a degenerate and tasteless eclecticism, passively carried this way and that by the winds of artistic doctrine, we need to hear a voice that will steady us in our confusion, enable us to recognize, in the art of the past and that of the present, what is alien to us as Christians. And it is normal and right that this voice should come to us from the monasteries, from monks trained in the great tradition which is more than a culture — deep and pure religious cult.¹⁵

Merton's approach to any subject was essentially through his monastic experience as Jean Leclercq observes: "This was both his limitation and his strength: a limitation because, after all, monastic life is not the totality of the Church, or of society; other points of view are also valid. A strength, because he was a man of single purpose, a lone warrior."¹⁶

Ultimately, Merton's singleness of purpose was honed in prayer. Probably the purest expression of his theology of sacred art can be gleaned from a study of three prayers he wrote for Frank K. Kacmarcik:

"For Vocations in the Realm of Sacred Art"

"In Selecting an Artist for a Sacred Work"

"For the Artist, and for the Work in Progress"¹⁷

15. Thomas Merton, "The Monk and Sacred Art," *Sponsa Regis* 28 (May 1957), p. 231.

16. Jean Leclercq, "The Evolving Monk," in *Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 98. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Leclercq."

17. See *Appendix B*.

THE ICONOCLAST

In remembering his brother monk, John Eudes Bamberger contributes a telling remark: "Iconoclastic propensities not only flowered in his spirit as if in their natural habitat, he cultivated them with boundless satisfaction."¹⁸ Because authenticity stands at the heart of his monastic vocation, Merton resisted constantly all preconceived, external norms and rigid patterns of holiness and perfection. Concepts and ideologies of the Church and monasticism worshipped for their own sake deserved to be shattered. He observed: "Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: They never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God."¹⁹

Herein lies the justification for Merton's unrelenting battle against mere conformity to a role. "As an icon I'm not doing so good" may have been admitted with a gleam in the eye, but not without its inherent challenge.²⁰ The many Merton-images that evolved as his popularity grew outside the monastery were never consciously cultivated. If he were able to toss them all off he did, at least exteriorly, yet it must have cost him something as he wrestled interiorly before God (and perhaps *with* God) to maintain his true identity:

But the contemplative is, of all religious men, the one most likely to realize that he is not a saint and least anxious to appear one in the eyes of others. He is, in fact, delivered from subjection to appearances, and cares very little about them. At the same time, since he has neither the inclination nor need to rebel, he does not have to advertise his contempt for appearances. He simply neglects them. They no longer interest him.²¹

If Merton struggled against being pigeon-holed, categorized, idolized, or idealized, it was because he was free. For his true identity he relied solely on the unconditional mercy of God:

Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on his saving and

18. John Eudes Bamberger, "The Monk," in *Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 41.

19. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 98. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSC*.

20. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 310. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

21. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), p. 130. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Shannon*.

merciful knowledge of us. It is in proportion as we are known to him that we find our real being and identity in Christ. We know him in and through ourselves in so far as his truth is the source of our being and his merciful love is the very heart of our life and existence. We have no other reason for being, except to be loved by him as our Creator and Redeemer, and to love him in return. There is no true knowledge of God that does not imply a profound grasp and an intimate personal acceptance of this profound relationship.²²

Central to Merton's contemplative spirituality is an understanding of the human person, his relationship to himself, to God, and to the world. Growth in love entails the unmasking of the false, external self, the individual or ego to expose the hidden, true self, or inner person. The ego is a shadowy illusion that *has, enjoys, and accomplishes* for the sake of its name. The true self, on the other hand, is, and has nothing but a secret name spoken in silence and darkness by God. It is total gift:

The inner self is not an *ideal* self, especially not an imaginary, perfect creature fabricated to measure up to our compulsive need for greatness, heroism, and infallibility. On the contrary, the real "I" is just simply our self and nothing more. Nothing more, nothing less. Our self as we are in the eyes of God . . . Our self in all our uniqueness, dignity, littleness, and ineffable greatness: The greatness we have received from God our Father. (*Shannon*, p. 118).

In *The New Man*, Merton offered a compendium of patristic teachings on image and likeness, but in *New Seeds of Contemplation* and "The Inner Experience" he articulated and integrated this doctrine into his own contemplative framework:

In Christianity the inner self is simply a steppingstone to an awareness of God. Man is the image of God, and his inner self is a kind of mirror in which God not only sees Himself but reveals Himself to the "mirror" in which He is reflected . . . If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass "beyond" the inner "I," we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the "I AM" of the almighty. (*Shannon*, p. 118)

He interpreted the fall of Adam from paradise as an "alienation" or "exile" from God precisely because he is alienated from his inner self which is the image of God: "Man has been turned, spiritually, inside out, so that his ego plays the part of the 'person' — a role which it actually has no right to assume" (*NSC*, p. 280). Only by God's intervention can man turn himself "right side out," so to speak, "God Himself must become Man in order that, in the God-Man, man might be able to lose himself as man and find himself as God" (*Shannon*, p. 123). Here Merton echoed the teaching of St.

22. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, New York: Image Books / Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 83. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CP*.

Irenaeus in *Against Heresies V*: "For if the Word is made man, it is that men might become gods."²³ The kenotic emptying of the Word of God becomes the paradigm for the person who dies to his false self, so as to return to his Father's House within his inner sanctuary, "His Temple and His Heaven" (Shannon, p. 120). For Merton, the path to authenticity becomes the Christian life as the "return to the Father, the Source, the Ground of all existence, through the Son, the Splendor and the Image of the Father, in the Holy Spirit . . . that the inner self, purified and renewed, can fulfill its function as image of the Divine Trinity" (Shannon, p. 124). What Merton is describing in other words is the process of deification or theosis by which the likeness of God is restored in man. This authentic person is the transfigured and illumined saint of the icon. Paul Evdokimov describes how the icon figures in this growth through purification toward reintegration. The icon is "an apocalypse, a revelation of the hidden. Its power is maximal by reason of its opening upon the transcendental that has no image. The gaze thus purified and rendered watchful can now descend and scrutinize the interior of the soul and manifest it."²⁴ Concluding his letter of gratitude to Marco Pallis for his gift of the triptych, Merton implicitly links that icon, prayer in solitude, and his struggle for authenticity before God when he observes: "I see how important it is to live in silence, in isolation, in unknowing. There is an enormous battle with illusion going on everywhere, and how should we not be in it ourselves?" (HGL, p. 474).

At eighteen, Merton was confronted by the Roman Byzantine mosaics to admit "the plague" within his soul. At fifty, in the quiet hours before the Kentucky dawn, Merton continued to be challenged to purity of heart in the presence of the Theotokos, Sts. Charalambos, Nicholas, Demetrius, and George. Never tiring of gazing at the icon, nor of resting under its gaze, Merton believed it could change his entire attitude toward the distress associated with the peace movement. He needed to reestablish his priorities as a contemplative monk:

What has been so far only a theological conception, or an image, has to be sought and loved. "Union with God." So mysterious that in the end man would perhaps do anything to evade it, once he realized it means the end of his own ego — self-realization, once for all. Am I ready? Of course not. Yet the course of my life is set in this direction.²⁵

23. Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*; tr. Ashleigh Moorhouse (London: Faith Press, 1973), p. 35.

24. Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1966), pp. 165-166.

25. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, Texas: JHG Editions / Latitudes Press, 1983), p. 56.

In the purifying presence of the icon, Merton received the strength to remain an iconoclast. On the other hand, he was a defender of icons when it came to the place of good sacred art — symbol, chant, ritual — in Christian prayer and worship. In fact, he presupposed their existence. “One cannot go beyond what one has not yet attained, and normally the realization that God is ‘beyond images, symbol and ideas’ dawns only on one who has previously made a good use of all these things” (CP, p. 84). He wrote that *all images*, whether visible or invisible, material or immaterial are equally inadequate to God. In the contemporary world, he saw less danger of making “idols” out of material images than out of institutions and ideologies (CP, p. 84).

“THE CHRIST OF THE IKONS”

For Thomas Merton, the monastic life was essentially a life of prayer; in his last years he passionately pursued efforts for the creative renewal of the contemporary, contemplative vocation. When he wrote about prayer he made it clear that no conflict or dichotomy existed between “active” and “passive or infused” contemplation; between private and communal prayer; between meditation and liturgy. While he advocated “a full and many-sided life of prayer,” he also qualified it by admitting of valid individual differences inspired by God to emphasize certain types of prayer (CP, p. 66). Given the evolution of his own life, it becomes apparent that Merton was drawn by the Spirit more to contemplation in solitude. It is within this context of personal prayer as a solitary that Merton experienced the icon, rather than by participation in the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. However, Eastern Christian mystical theology formed the backbone of his monastic vocation. As a young monk he searched out the roots of monastic wisdom and discovered Evagrius, John Climacus, Cassian, Macarius, Basil, Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Diodochus of Photike among others (“Leclercq,” p. 96). In *Contemplative Prayer*, he treats of the “prayer of the heart” from the *Philokalia*.²⁶ Writing to Archimandrite Sophrony Merton said: “As you know I take great delight in the spirituality of [Mount] Athos, which seems to me to be authentic and integrated . . . If I seem to be able to understand this spirituality . . . it is simply because I like it. Nothing

26. *Contemplative Prayer* was also published under the title of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1969).

else” (HGL, p. 560). Merton identified his special charism for unifying within himself the spiritual truths of various religious traditions “without irresponsible confusions” (HGL, p. 476). To the Orthodox monk Sophrony, he comments: “We must love the truth wherever it is found; we must go straight to the truth without wanting to glance backward and without caring about what school of theology it represents” (HGL, p. 560). In 1966 he repeated this attitude to Marco Pallis:

It seems to me that my task is one of a positive and constructive spiritual freedom, as a “son of God” in the Holy Spirit and in Christ, to live the Christian life of grace in a creative, constructive, and in some sense original way of my own, incorporating into it valuable insights and helps from other traditions insofar as these fit in with the Christian view of life.” (HGL, p. 476)

Hence, Zen masters met the Desert Fathers; John of the Cross dialogued with Gregory of Nyssa without compromise.

In his vast correspondence with persons of various religious traditions, Merton was sometimes confronted with the necessity of presenting or clarifying the essentials of Christianity. These concise Christological mini-treatises offer rare insights into Merton, the man of contemplative prayer. Couched in terms harmonious to Sufism, Merton, the hermit, disclosed his method of meditation to Abdul Aziz:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as “being before God as if you see Him.” Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind that would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all . . . My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence . . . It is not “thinking about” anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible. (HGL, pp. 63-64)

This passage witnesses to Merton’s assimilation of the apophatic, mystical theology of the Eastern Orthodox tradition developed by Dionysius the Areopagite, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nanzianzen, and Maximus the Confessor. “Negative theology is thus a way toward mystical union with God, whose nature remains incomprehensible to us.”²⁷ The goal of apophaticism is knowledge of God through loving

²⁷ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), p. 28. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Lossky*.

union with Him, who remains unknowable, beyond and above all concepts, images, knowledge, being and existence: "For if God be nature, then all else is not nature. If that which is not God be nature, God is not nature, and likewise He is not being if that which is not God is being," writes the Byzantine theologian of the fourteenth century, St. Gregory Palamas (*Lossky*, p. 37).

In "The Inner Experience," Merton alluded to Gregory of Nyssa's mystic symbolism of Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai to a vision of God in the darkness of unknowing:

Now this "vision" of God is a vision in darkness, and therefore is not the face to face vision enjoyed by the Blessed in Paradise. Yet it is an equally real and genuine contact with God, the chief distinction being that it takes place without clarity and without "seeing." In fact, the spirit sees God precisely by understanding that He is utterly invisible to it. In this sudden, deep and total acceptance of His invisibility, it casts far from itself every last trace of conceptual meditation, and in so doing rids itself of the spiritual obstacles which stand between it and God. Thoughts, natural light and spiritual images are, so to speak, veils or coverings that impede the direct, naked sensitivity by which the spirit touches the Divine Being. When the veils are removed, then one can touch, or rather be touched by, God, in the mystical darkness. Intuition reaches Him by one final leap beyond itself, an ecstasy in which it sacrifices itself and yields itself to His transcendent presence. In this last ecstatic act of "unknowing" the gap between our spirit as subject and God as object is finally closed, and in the embrace of mystical love we know that we and He are one. This is infused or mystical contemplation in the purest sense of the term.²⁸

In 1967, Merton attempted to explain his Christology to a Quaker, author-activist June J. Yungblut. This time he used the specific language of the Eastern Christian tradition: "For me Christ is not simply 'a mystic' among others, but then perhaps I have not much of a historical Christ anyhow: it is the Christ of the Byzantine ikons or of Transfiguration mysticism on Mount Athos, 'I am the Light'" (*HGL*, p. 637). Ten months later, in March 1968, Merton responded to Yungblut's request for clarification regarding his "Christ of the ikons." In this letter Merton states definitively his non-alignment with any specific cultural or historical associations with particular schools of theology. The same point had been emphasized earlier to D. T. Suzuki:

Does it mean conformity to a social and conventional image of Christ? Then we become involved and alienated in another projection: a Christ who is not

28. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation (IV)," ed. Patrick Hart, *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983), p. 300. Hereafter referred to in the text as *IE*.

Christ but the symbol of a certain sector of society, a certain group, a certain class, a certain culture . . . Fatal. (*HGL*, p. 564)

Likewise the role of the icon is not isolated within a "Byzantine" milieu. Rather Merton positioned it at the heart of all contemplation, as the medium that transmits the hidden awareness of the glory of the risen Christ within the man of faith at prayer:

The Christ of the ikons represents a traditional *experience* formulated in a theology of light, the ikon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us (in faith). The hieratic rules for icon painting are not just rigid and formal, they are the guarantee of an authentic transmission of the possibility of this experience, provided the ikon painter was also himself a man of prayer (like Roublev). Thus what one "sees" in prayer before an ikon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation of those who have "seen," from the Apostles on down. (*HGL*, pp. 642-643)

Therefore, the Christ of the ikons was not the Christ of historical criticism; in a letter to Suzuki he wrote: "The Christ we seek is within us, in our utmost self, *is* our utmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves . . . But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen" (*HGL*, p. 564). This Christ is reached "not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light" (*HGL*, p. 643). Writing about mysticism in "The Inner Experience," Merton linked union with God to personal theosis or divinization:

The inner self of the mystic, elevated and transformed in Christ, united to the Father in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, now knows God not so much through the medium of an objective image, as through its own divinized subjectivity. (*IE*, pp. 299)

John Eudes Bamberger explains that Merton did not treat of formal, dogmatic theology because:

He strove still more to penetrate into the dogmatic formulations and discover, in a personal way, their hidden truth and life. For him dogma was spirituality because it was to be contemplated, assimilated and lived. In short, he was in accord with Evagrius: "If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian."²⁹

Merton had inherited the wisdom of the Fathers for whom true theology (*Theologia*) is contemplation (*Theoria*).

29. John Eudes Bamberger, "Thomas Merton and the Christian East," *Theology and Prayer* (1975), p. 76. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Bamberger."

For that very reason the tradition of the Eastern Church has reserved the title of "Theologian" to three sacred authors: St. John, the most mystical of the four Evangelists, St. Gregory Nazianzen, author of contemplative poems, and St. Symeon, called the New Theologian, minstrel of union with God. Mysticism therefore, must be considered as a perfection, the crown of all theology, a theology par excellence.³⁰

As their spiritual son, Merton lived and taught that same message as crucial to the survival and renewal of the contemporary monastic vocation. He was in full agreement with Sergius Bolshakoff's belief that "contemplative monks should be the greatest theologians" (*Bolshakoff*, p. xx).

If knowledge about Jesus the Jewish mystic did not concern Merton, it was because he yearned rather for knowledge "in" Christ, "Christ not as object of seeing or study, but Christ as center in whom and by whom one is illuminated" (*HGL*, p. 643). "To me the 'light' of Christ in the ikons is simply a special case of the light which has now penetrated everything" (*HGL*, p. 644). This Thaboric light that transfigures humanity and the entire cosmos was experienced by Merton himself at prayer before the Theotokos triptych in his hermitage chapel: "There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual 'Thaboric light,' which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe" (*HGL*, p. 474).

According to the mystical theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, God reveals and communicates Himself as uncreated light, an interior light or grace, which transforms nature by deifying it. The development of light mysticism reached its full flowering in the fourteenth century under St. Gregory Palamas who defended Hesychast spirituality in a controversy that arose regarding the nature of the Thaboric light seen by the disciples at the Transfiguration. "God is light," says St. Gregory Palamas, "not with reference to His essence, but to His energy" (*Lossky*, p. 220).

Insofar as God is able to be known, He is light. This light transforms into light the entire person (body, soul, spirit) of the one whom it illumines, being at the same time "that which one perceives, and that by which one perceives in mystical experience. . . 'in Thy light we shall see light'" (*Lossky*, p. 218). It is in his Preface to *Russian Mystics* that Merton demonstrates his grasp of the theology of light:

Seraphim of Sarov is then the most perfect example of that mysticism of light

30. Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980), p. xx. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Bolshakoff*.

which is characteristic of the Orthodox Church: completely positive and yet compatible with, indeed based on, the apophatic (negative) theology of Pseudo Dionysius and St. Maximus the Confessor. It is perhaps this which distinguishes Russian mysticism in its pure state. Not an intellectualist and negative ascent to the Invisible above all that is visible, but more paradoxically an apprehension of the invisible in so far as all creation is suddenly experienced as transfigured in a light for which there is no accounting in terms of any philosophy, a light which is given directly by God, proceeds from God, and in a sense *is* Divine Light. Yet this experience is not a substantial vision of God because in Oriental theology the light experienced by the mystic is a divine "energy," distinct from God's nature but which can be apprehended in contact with the *Person* of the Holy Spirit, by mystical love and grace.³¹

God's immanence and transcendence are preserved and celebrated not only by the fourteenth century hesychast monks, but by a twentieth century marginal hermit from Kentucky: "Hence my Christ is the 'apophatic' Christ — light that is not light, and not confinable within any category of light, and not communicable in any light that is not not-light: yet in all things, in their ground, not by nature, but by gift, grace, death and resurrection" (*HGL*, p. 644). For Merton "everything points to this anointed King of Creation who is the splendor of the eternal light and the mirror of the Godhead without stain" ("*PAC*," pp. 88-89).

The mystic, transformed by a loving union with God, illumined by the "bright darkness" of the Holy Spirit, is enabled to perceive and commune with the interior radiance of Christ's presence in the heart of all creation. "Even so the glory of God sleeps everywhere, ready to blaze out unexpectedly in created things," sings Merton who admired the luminous vision of a William Blake and a Seraphim of Sarov.³² With Gerard Manley Hopkins he affirmed that "their inscape is their sanctity" (*NSC*, p. 30). Above all, the true contemplative is identified in his inner self with Christ and is inseparable from all persons who share in the life and love of God.

By 1965, Merton had been shaped by that solitude which embraces rather than rejects the world, a powerful insight that struck him years earlier for the first time in the incident at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville: "It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not 'they' but my own self" (*CGB*, p. 142). On that day Merton rejoiced not only at discovering that he was just a man "like other men, that I am only a man among others," but also that he

31. Thomas Merton, "Preface" in *Russian Mystics*, p. xiii. Also published as "Russian Mystics" in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), pp. 178-187.

32. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), p. 243.

was "a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate" (CGB, p. 141). His vision radiates with joyful exuberance: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun" (CGB, p. 141). He rejoices in their secret beauty hidden in the depths of their hearts, that core of authenticity, "*le point vierge*," untouched by illusion or sin, the center of nothingness which "is the pure glory of God in us" (CGB, p. 142). He perceives these ordinary folk as living icons of Christ, the Splendor and Image of the Father, transfigured by the Holy Spirit. The reflection of God's presence

is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (CGB, p. 142)

It would be a distortion of the truth to think that such ecstatic moments form the heart of Merton's contemplative experience. On the contrary, for the faithful man of prayer, this vision became a quiet, habitual presence illumined in the darkness of faith and purified in the crucible of struggle for authenticity. If the "gate of heaven is everywhere" it could only be opened by a constant and unrelenting surrender of the self to God in faith and love.

In Merton's life, the icon appeared and reappeared at *le point vierge* at moments where he was confronted with the truth of his identity in Christ. Before the Byzantine mosaics in Rome, he had repeated "Thy Kingdom Come" over and over as God's secret mercy awakened in him his identity as a son and heir of Christ the King (NSC, p. 42). In the hermitage before his new icon "in silence, in isolation, in unknowing," he assures Marco Pallis of his prayers for him "to go deeper into your own truth as, I hope, I will go deeper into that which is granted to me to live" (HGL, p. 474).

And finally in the Far East when Merton died, he had with him a small icon that he carried in his breviary. On the back of it he had written in Greek a text from the *Philokalia* which reads as follows:

If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present *our spirit naked to God*. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world — no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification — even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world. ("Bamberger," p. 68)

Even in the manner of his death, Merton gave silent witness to the truth of his authentic struggle. Years earlier, he had unknowingly prophesied:

In the vivid darkness of God within us there sometimes come deep movements of love that deliver us entirely, for a moment, from our old burden of selfishness, and number us among those little children of whom is the Kingdom of Heaven. And when God allows us to fall back into our own confusion of desires and judgments and temptations, we carry a scar over the place where that joy exulted for a moment in our hearts. The scar burns us.

(NSC, pp. 231-232)

Appendix A

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 The Theotokos with St. Prassede and St. Pudenziana, mosaic, Chapel of St. Zeno, Basilica of St. Prassede, 13th Century.

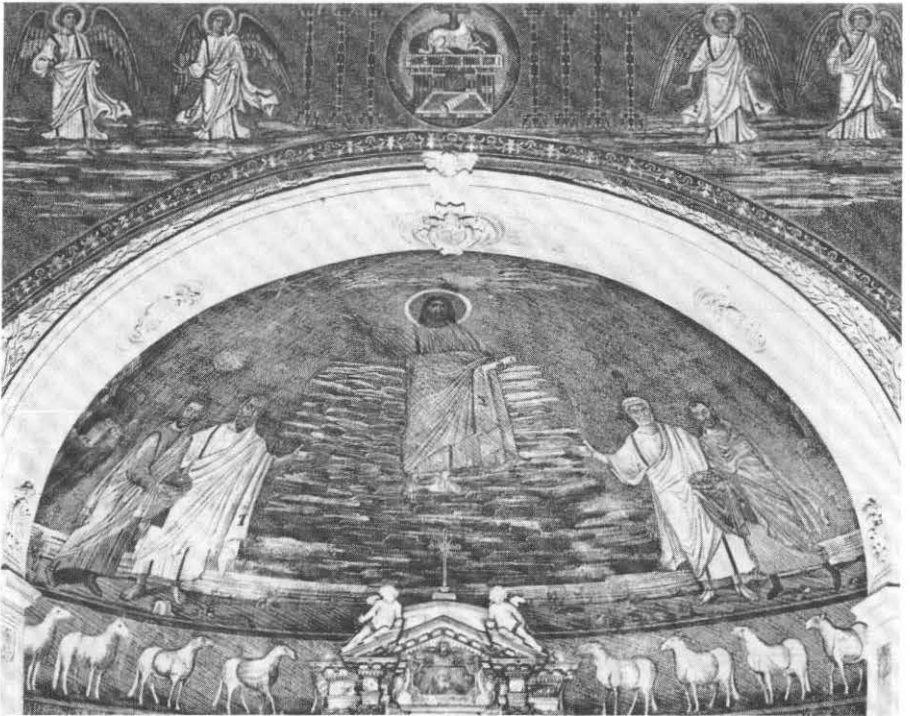


Fig. 2 Apse mosaic and Triumphal Arch, Sts. Cosmas and Damian. This mosaic served as a model for Roman mosaicists for centuries. Below, the twelve apostles are shown as sheep approaching the Mystic Lamb. The inscription reads: "The House of God shines in the splendor of glistening metal, but the light of faith is still bright," 6th century.



Fig. 3 Detail: Christ of the Apse , mosaic, Sts. Cosmas and Damian, 6th century.



Fig. 4 Mosaic of the facade: Christ Enthroned, Basilica of St. Maria Maggiore.



Fig. 5 Apse mosaic, Church of St. Prassede, 9th century. This mosaic is inspired by the apse in Sts. Cosmas and Damian. Christ holds the law, while the hand of the Father bears a triumphal crown above in the clouds. At the right are Sts. Peter, Pudenziana, Zeno, martyrs; on the left are Sts. Paul, Prassede, and Paschal I.



Fig. 6 Triptych of the Theotokos with Sts. Charalambos, Nicholas, Demetrius, and George, Macedonian, 17th century. Gift of Marco Pallis to Thomas Merton. Merton's photograph of the Pallis icon in the hermitage chapel. Printed in *Day of a Stranger*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 42.

Appendix B

Thomas Merton

THREE PRAYERS ON SACRED ART

I. For Vocations in the Realm of Sacred Art

Almighty God, Father of all light, Maker of the world,
Who have given to Man the power to conceive sacred forms and to create
Works of art in Your honor,
Look down into the abyssmal darkness of our hearts
And see the unutterable destitution in which our
 spirit and our art have fallen, since we
 have grown blind to the splendor of Your Truth.
O Lord, Who once heard the cry of Israel, Your Son,
 enslaved in Egypt,
Who delivered him with great power,
And led him, with Your prophet Moses into the desert:
Send us now men of vision who will open our
 eyes once again
To see your incorruptible light.
O Lord, who showed to Moses on the flaming mountain
The plan of a perfect Tabernacle in which a fitting
 worship could be offered to Your Majesty,
Send us chosen messengers and teachers,
Men of worship and men of art,
Who will restore with chaste and noble work the
 beauty of Your House.
May they teach us to see, with pure hearts,
The splendor of Your Son, Jesus Christ,
And to express what we have seen in images
 worthy of so great a vision:
Through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son,
Your Logos, Your Art and Your Splendor,
In whom all things subsist
And through Whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
All are called to be united with You forever. Amen.

II. In Selecting an Artist for a Sacred Work

Lord God, Father Almighty, Whose Art and Whose Wisdom
delight at all
times to play, before you,
in the great mystery of the world You have
created:

Look down upon us and bless our ardent desire
to create, in our times
A sacred "world," a mystical Eden of spiritual
symbol and form,
In which we may converse familiarly
with You as Adam our Father once did
in Paradise.

Send us, therefore, a wise maker of sacred
ikons [or buildings] to adorn [construct]
a visible house for Your invisible glory.

Enlighten us, and let us choose the one who has received wisdom,
from you, to do this work with all humility, and reverence, and
perfection. Teach us to choose him not in the way the world
chooses its servants (:) not by empty fame, not by the price of his
service, not by his conformity to ephemeral fashions: but show us
how to find by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, the one whom
that same Holy Spirit will guide and strengthen for his task: for
without Your Holy Spirit, Lord, no man can serve you worthily or
make anything that will give you honor. But with His guidance and
inspiration, all will be done in praise of Your everlasting glory,
through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

III. *For the Artist, and for the Work in Progress*

Lord Jesus Christ, who by Your Holy Passion
and Death, and by Your glorious Resurrection,
Restored the ruined world to its pristine
 perfection and ushered in a New Creation,
Be mindful, we beg You of Your Servant [Name],
 the architect [or sculptor, painter, etc.]
And stand by him in the work he has undertaken
 for Your glory.
Strengthen his soul in his struggle to create a
 new and living form:
Sustain him in his wrestling with the inertia
 of wood and stone,
Defend him against the lure of cowardly
 solutions, falsity, insincerity and
 servility to worldly standards.
Grant him patience, humility and understanding.
Endow his heart with incorruptible wisdom,
His mind with subtlety and discipline,
His hands with dexterous skill.
May he be sanctified in his work,
May his work itself be holy, and may
 it raise all our hearts to you in prayer.
Thus may we all, priests, people, artists, and workers
Be united in one great act of praise and
 thanksgiving.
On the day when, by Your grace, we shall happily
 dedicate this new work
 in all its sacred splendor, to the glory
of Your Heavenly Father. Amen.