

“Remarks Following a 2004 Poetry Reading”

Ernesto Cardenal

*Transcribed and Edited by Dennis Beach with
an Introduction by Patrick Hart and a Note by Corey Shouse.*

In April 2004, the Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal gave a public poetry reading at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Home to Saint John's Abbey—and down the road from its sister campus, the College of Saint Benedict and the monastic community of women there—this Benedictine setting provided a unique occasion for reflection on the perhaps mystical union of religion, poetry and politics in Ernesto Cardenal's life and work. What follows is a brief introduction to Ernesto Cardenal, the person and former Trappist novice at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, by Brother Patrick Hart. Then follows an overview of the themes of Cardenal's poem *Cosmic Canticle*, and, finally, the transcript of the Question and Answer session that followed the poetry reading.

Ernesto Cardenal was born in Granada, Nicaragua, in 1925, and was educated at the University of Mexico and Columbia University in New York. He is considered one of the significant poets of Latin America, along with fellow Nicaraguans Rubén Darío, José Coronel Urtecho, and Pablo Antonio Cuadra. Cardenal was involved in the political resistance movement under the dictatorship of the elder Somoza and this experience is reflected in his *Epigrams*, as well as a long political poem, *O Hora O*, both written before he entered Gethsemani. He also had a ceramic exhibition at the Pan American Union in Washington shortly before entering the novitiate at Gethsemani in 1957.

As a novice, Don Ernesto received the name Frater Lawrence, and was in daily contact with Father Louis as the Novice Master. He continued modeling in clay, as well as writing some poetic sketches which were later developed into poems and published in a volume under the title *Gethsemani, KY* (Mexico City, 1960). Thomas Merton translated some of these poems into English and published them in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York, 1963). Merton

and Cardenal became good friends as a result of this experience, as their voluminous correspondence testifies.

Poor health and a nearly tone-deaf ear brought Frater Lawrence the advice that he leave Trappist life at the end of his two-year novitiate, but he continued his priestly studies and was eventually ordained. He established a lay monastic community on the inland archipelago of Solentiname in Nicaragua, a community which was later bombed by the Somoza regime. He joined the Sandinista revolutionary movement, and when it took over the government in 1979, Cardenal became Minister of Culture, while his Jesuit brother Fernando Cardenal became Minister of Education. Under church pressure, both resigned from politics, but continued their ministry as priests in Nicaragua. In his "retirement," Ernesto Cardenal also served as director of the Casa de los Tres Mundos, a cultural centre in Granada, Nicaragua. (PH)

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In the poetry reading at Saint John's University, Cardenal read sections of *Cosmic Canticle* (1989), an expansive five hundred page free verse poem that explores the nature of the universe through the language of metaphysics, astronomy, spirituality and evolutionary science. As the poet José Coronel Utrecho has said of Cardenal's masterpiece, "more than an explanation, *Cosmic Canticle* is a representation of the universe itself, a poetic rendition of an astronaut's photos." Revealing Cardenal's lifelong fascination with the ideas of thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Sir Fred Hoyle and Thomas Merton, *Cosmic Canticle* embraces the discoveries and contradictions of our age, weaving these into hope-filled verse that searches for the divine amid the material, ethical and intellectual conditions and limitations of human existence. As in all of Cardenal's poetry, *Cosmic Canticle* is also deeply marked by the political, historical and spiritual context of his life as a priest, activist and revolutionary. Reminiscent of the popular poetry workshops Cardenal directed during his work as the Sandinista Minister of Culture, *Cosmic Canticle* evokes the hardships and dreams of contemporary Nicaragua through colloquial Nicaraguan speech, testimonial accounts of the Somoza dictatorship and reflections on the poet's work in the Christian base community of Solentiname. It also denounces the legacy of the Spanish Conquest and the abuses of American imperialism through poignant and often humorous examinations of Nicaraguan history, pop culture, U.S. for-

eign policy, the Contra War, and world media. Most impressively, in *Cosmic Canticle* Cardenal distills a seemingly endless number of source materials, insights and inspirations into an authentic poetic language that rings with a conversational tone, verbal elegance and sense of humanity reminiscent of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Fusing faith, science, poetics and politics with urgency and grace, Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle* has earned him distinction as one of Latin America's most significant revolutionary voices and greatest poets. (CS)

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**Transcript of the Question and Answer Session
for the Poetry Reading of Ernesto Cardenal
at Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, April 14, 2004.**

Q: Good Evening, Sir. I would like to ask a question about another poem I have read, the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Could you talk to us a little about ancient ideas and how they blend with modern ideas?

EC: I would like to ask if you believe that it could be of interest here that I speak about a poem that I didn't read, that perhaps others don't know. It's a question that I ask.... Perhaps they will not understand what I say because the others don't know the poem?

However, I can tell you one thing. I learned from a North American poet, Ezra Pound to put the ancient together with the new or to make the old new. And this poem of which she speaks is a poem from old Mexico, from the Aztecs, from the poet Netzahualcoyotl and I took his texts and remade them, updating them in a way, as if they were truly from our time. The new and the old, the modern and the historical, and what I'm telling you is that my teacher in this was Ezra Pound, who did this often. And he, too, had other teachers.

Q: What does the religion that you embraced represent to you?

EC: I did not embrace religion; I embraced God. God showed himself to me as love in beauty. I fell in love with the beauty of God, who is the author of all beauty. Of your beauty, and that of everyone here present, men and women, and that of

all the universe: the author of the beauty of the whole world. God revealed himself to me as beauty, and I fell in love. And so I entered a very strict religious order, the Trappist Order, which stems from the Order of Saint Benedict, to which this monastery belongs. Thus I could say that I embraced mysticism rather than religion.

Q: What do you think will happen to you when you die?

EC: Union with God.

Q: With God?

EC: And with the whole universe, which is God's body. I imagine that God is like the soul of the universe and that the universe is his body. Perhaps this is not very exact, very logical, but that is how I imagine it. And therefore I would be transformed into the universe and the body of God.

Q: How could you explain the religion of revolutionary Christianity?

EC: There should be no need to explain it because Christ came to bring a revolution, to say that another world is possible. This is what he said when speaking of the kingdom of heaven or of the kingdom of God: a world different than that which we have is possible. A world of justice and equality, without rich and poor, without exploiters and the exploited. And this message is one that we ought to continue to announce on the earth. When he spoke in his time of the heavenly kingdom, that was like now talking about revolution. And for this reason he died, for this they killed him.

Q: How does this conception differ from other conceptions of the Christian religion?

EC: There is no other Christianity than the one I'm talking about.

Q: Saint Benedict said that he could see the universe in the rays of the sun. Is there anywhere you have seen the universe in some moment of your life?

EC: I have not had this mystic experience. Some have had it, and among them, Saint Benedict. There is present here a Benedictine father, right? You're not? But isn't there a Benedictine here?

[Monk in the audience]: Yes, I am a Benedictine, but I haven't had mystical experiences either!

EC: Yes, but you do know the anecdote, the one that tells how Saint Benedict saw the whole universe in a single ray of light? Other mystics have had the same experience. It seems that it

is a well-testified phenomenon, but only for those few who are mystics.

Q: Don Ernesto, you speak of how the driving force of the universe is love, but other poets claim it to be war. For example, the ancient Greek poet or philosopher Heraclitus said that everything comes from war: "Strife begets all." How can two people, two poets, view the same universe and one say that its engine is love and another say that it is war? At root are these the same thing?

EC: I will say that this must have been a metaphor, speaking of love and calling it "war." I don't think there is a single poet that defends war. Bush defends it, but he's not a poet.

Q: Don Ernesto, you speak much about the sciences and evolution. In your view, are there contradictions between science and faith?

EC: For me there is no contradiction at all. For me science and faith complement one another. True, there are many scientists who do not have faith, but there are some that do. But today the majority do not believe them to be in conflict, but to be two different things. Still, for me they can also be complementary. The fact that the universe was born in the big bang, from a great explosion, and that everything else developed by evolution since that time, for me this is a revelation of the grandeur of God. God is the author of the big bang and of evolution and of everything else that exists on this planet and of everything that would be found on many other inhabited planets in the heavens. I very much enjoy reading books that recount scientific discoveries and these also fill me with love for God. And they also inspire me to write poetry, such as this that I read to you.

Q: When you read the passage about the individual, I thought of Rubén Darío and the poem "*Lo Fatal*." What is your relationship to Darío and his poetry?

EC: Rubén Darío, the subject of the question, is the great national poet of Nicaragua, and he has a very large following there. But he has not influenced me in my poetry. The influence I had was from the poetic literature of the United States.

Q: Who? Which people?

EC: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot as well, Marianne Moore and Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, Allan

Ginsberg, and many more: Walt Whitman, also Carl Sandburg, the great poet of Chicago.

Q: Thank you very much.

Q: In Nicaragua, you worked with the Sandinista government, which fought to lift up and to give power to the people. You talked about how you used your poetry to empower the people in Nicaragua, with the elements of mysticism and humor. How did you use poetry to empower the people in Nicaragua?

EC: My role was to be the Minister of Culture, and this meant to be the minister of poetry, of theater, of painting, of dance. Also folklore, libraries, publications and handicrafts. Poetry was very important in this ministry. At that time I created something there that exists in the universities here in the United States—poetry workshops. But here they are in the universities and the universities are not for everyone, for they are expensive. At that time we created there poetry workshops to help the whole populace, for the poor barrios, for the indigenous communities, for those of the countryside and workers and laborers and for everyone in the country. And we also had a publication for them of poetry from all over the world. There was much poetry from the United States, of those poets I just enumerated. Also poetry from ancient Greece and Rome, translated into English by some of these same poets, also Americans. And poetry as well from ancient China and Japan, and from many parts of the world, from Latin America and Europe. A British periodical, *The Tablet*, said that it was impressive that the workers and *campesinos* were reading that kind of poetry. And impressive as well that we taught them rules for writing poetry taken from a poet who was so difficult, even in English, as was Ezra Pound.

Q: Now that the Sandinista revolution is over, how is it? Do you feel defeat on behalf of the Sandinista revolution, that the revolution has been defeated?

EC: Insofar as we—all of us who participated in the revolution—were part of it, then, yes, we are defeated. Not that it is a personal defeat for me, but for all, and, I believe, for people from other countries such as right here as well. In the same way as I feel that God was also defeated in those elections. And it's not the first time that God was defeated in an election. In the Bible we find God being defeated in an election,

in the Book of Samuel. God recounts how the people of Israel had voted against him when Yahweh was the King of Israel and Israel wanted to have another king and elected Saul. Samuel did not want them to elect a king, because God was King of Israel, and so God says to him, "It is not you that they have defeated, but me." I believe that every time a people makes a bad election, then they are also defeating God.

Moderator: One more question.

Q: How do you see the relationship between poetry and politics? I ask especially because you mentioned Ezra Pound a couple of times. And his politics, of course, are very far to the right. So how do you see the relationship between them?

EC: What's important for me is the poetry, not the political ideas. Even when speaking about a poet, for me what is important is his poetry and not his ideology. I am not interested in Ezra Pound for the ideology he had, which was a defense of fascism, or of Mussolini rather than fascism itself, for it was the person of Mussolini that he defended and not the fascist party. Rather, it is his poetry that interests me. As far as his political ideas go, he was simply wrong. It was pure error. He believed that Mussolini was a great person, or that he could be such, to the point that he wrote a little pamphlet called *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, comparing the two of them.