Monastic Awareness, Liturgy and Art: The Benedictine Tradition in Relation to Merton's Growing Artistic Interests

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I

The materials which make this volume of *The Merton Annual* have resulted from many different contemporary currents which reflect trends in liturgical design, monastic life and art, music and aesthetics in relation to Merton's own interests in monasticism, art, liturgical renewal and poetry. While this volume was not planned as a tribute to Merton as artist, the many pieces gathered here conjoin to reflect both his formation as artist and his monastic development which parallel movements within Catholic artistic circles during the years Merton lived the Cistercian life (1941-1968).

Merton's ideals and interests clearly parallel those of Frank Kacmarcik, and as we see in the two opening essays here which focus on Kacmarcik, these brother-artists shared much of the same urgency of aesthetic. The three poems written by Merton for Kacmarcik (revised later, as printed in *The Merton Annual*, Volume 2) are here reproduced as part of this volume as one of our "unpublished pieces" as first written at Kacmarcik's request. Both of these artists stand as towering representative figures who brought the best of Benedictine spirit to the modern world.

The confluence of Merton and the *Zeitgeist* during the movement of transition from the modern to post-modern age is refracted throughout these scholarly articles about art, poetry, reading, liturgical reform and music. Our two other Merton "obscurely published" articles, which have been relatively unknown, appeared first in Sponsa Regis. Both of these essays exemplify Thomas Merton's conviction that the monastic impulse should serve to improve the wider Church.

Much of the other material included in this volume provides illustration of how the Benedictine-Cistercian monastic impulse moves in a rhythm which remains in tune with its culture. The pieces which document accomplishments of Father Bryan Beau-

mont Hays and Ernesto Cardenal, both as artists clearly influenced by Thomas Merton, each indirectly illuminate aspects of Merton's fundamental love of simplicity and good art. And as we can see from the articles which examine monastic reading, by Eric Hollas and Stefanie Weisgram, any living monastery is constantly breathing in new ideas from the wider culture.

Adaptation is the key. It is this constant living exchange within the Benedictine-Cistercian ideal, and a love and concern for the culture in which we all live, that makes monasticism remain alive and vital. In the article by Ross Keating we see how the wisdom tradition remained alive for Merton.

When we examine the two pieces included here which are about the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Georgia, by Methodius Telnack and Dewey W. Kramer, we see how the very ideas and ideals which stimulated Merton find new breath in a new setting. Father Methodius, as a near contemporary of Father Louis, has worked in the same traditions. His community's Conyers Church, which began as a definite copy of the Kentucky Gethsemani Church, evolved into a place quite appropriate just for Georgia and in part because of its simple glass and evocation of the past. As Jean Leclerq, OSB, once mentioned in conversation in 1975 "...a nineteenth century dream," but clearly a clean monastic building which echoes the earliest traditions of Cistercian art and which also draws seekers in steady numbers in the 21st century.

II

One thing then to be learned from the articles in our Volume 18 is that true Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism honors all things and adapts as needed. Art, Merton knew, sanctifies the ordinary. Thus, in the articles here which examine the continuing influence of William Blake and Gerard Manley Hopkins upon Merton, or the articles which trace parallels between his accomplishments and Andrade or Zen, we see always his love of the immediate. I think that important connection with the immediate is something Jonathan Montaldo has recognized well in his recent editing work of Merton for *Dialogues with Silence* which combine Merton's drawings with prayers. Montaldo combines selections of line drawings with prose and poetry which function as prayer. Most of the time what Montaldo does is to pull materials out of a hidden context so that the viewer or reader will be illuminated. What is significant is that these texts are often not formal prayers, and Merton, himself, kept doing this over and over in journal entries and poems.

Montaldo's *Dialogues with Silence* is both roughly thematic and somewhat chronological, although there is apparently little attempt to be systematic in terms of giving any overview of Merton's artistic accomplishment or prayerful vision. Nevertheless in the words and images, as selected, Montaldo approaches Merton with his own editorial eye and provides an emphasis which allows the reader to enter into a particular contemplative moment.

The drawings in *Dialogues* fall into several distinct groups: I) Portraits, or Impressions, of Saints or Holy Men; II) Monks, sometimes autobiographical; III) Women, often "portraits" of the Blessed Virgin Mary; IV) Crucifixions; V) Realistic sketches of places familiar to Merton; VI) Abstract flowers and other objects; VII) Calligraphies with some representation; VIII) Semi-representational calligraphies (such as the figure of the animals suggesting the ark); IX) Stark clean simple drawings—such as the Big Oval which Merton repeated many times and which we are honored to use on our cover for this year's volume. These nine groupings fall into three sets, roughly early figures which suggest holiness or asceticism; other realistic pictures of Christ and places Merton knew; and finally calligraphic representations. We move toward the more abstract, but also the more universal, and the immediate. So too in all good liturgy, in good poetry, in good music, in good connections of the monastic ideal with contemporary culture.

In the article by Pearson and commentary by Lipsey we see how Merton as artist was always somehow involved in the world he loved and was constantly seeking ways to make connections both by drawing and through sophisticated correspondence. The bibliographical note about Merton's art in Volumes 1-5 of *The Merton Annual* should serve to help future scholars to appreciate all the diverse pieces of Merton's work which often reflect his focus on the immediate.

I believe Merton's sure love of the particular is the whole reason for his journal project. What is rewarding and refreshing is to see reflected in much of the work in this volume of *The Merton Annual* is that so much of the Benedictine-Cistercian impulse toward successful activity never forgets the particular. Chris Orvin's reading of Merton's journals shows this. Still another recent editing job by Montaldo also deserves mention. Montaldo's idea of arranging his newly released *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals,* reviewed in this volume, is simple and tremendously effective because it uses particular seasonal ma-

terials. As a day book, as a record of Merton's seasonal moods, and as a challenge to all who need to get to the essence of being, this compilation provides guidelines. It does so by remaining grounded in Merton's words which honor the immediate. This is the essence of effective art.

III

The comments by Malgorzata Poks, within this year's bibliographic analysis, about Merton's "vision of the solitary who withdraws to the margin of society to become a diaphanous center of awareness" (p. 33) are also quite on target in terms of Merton's sustained perceptive insights as a religious writer. This insight stands also as a metaphor into art, liturgy and the wider world of responsibility which the successful Christian artist indirectly assumes must never be forgotten.

The new man, redeemed in Christ is both nowhere and everywhere. The artist on the margin must make the watcher, or reader, aware of this eternal gift. Merton's ability both to keep his focus on his own personal "journey" as a monastic yet also to keep his eyes open to the beauty of the world is reflected in many of the scholarly articles which make up this book. In the same way in the insightful book reviews, coordinated by David Belcastro, we see many more connections fruitfully examined.

Merton could always, it seems, keep his love of God in the forefront. Yet he knew as did Julian of Norwich, whom he considers in his journal entry for December 27th, 1961 that despite the distractions, even horrors of the contemporary moment, within a true school of charity, reinforced by attention to good monastic and aesthetic principles, all things can be brought with love to the Lord's service.