

## **“Unadorned Ideal”: An Interview in Two Parts with Methodius Telnack**

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*Conducted and Edited with Notes  
by Victor A. Kramer and Glenn Crider*

### **I**

The first segment of this interview was conducted as part of “The History of The Abbey of Our Lady of The Holy Spirit” (1984) by Victor A. Kramer. It is excerpted here to emphasize aspects of the continuing Cistercian aesthetic tradition. The second segment was conducted in 2005 by Glenn Crider.

As director of the Stained Glass Shop at the Conyers, Georgia Monastery, Father Methodius has supervised the design and construction of scores of stained glass projects throughout the Southeast during the past four decades. He has also been active as a musical composer. His vocation, as a Cistercian who was a contemporary of Thomas Merton, clearly reflects many of the Cistercian ideals which Merton articulated during a period of great monastic change and adaptability. As artists, both are intensely aware of the important influence of art upon the formation of community.

### **(1984 Interview) Conducted by Victor A. Kramer**

**Kramer:** Would you care to say something about when you first came to this monastery and the nature of the monastery at that time?

**Telnack:** I entered in 1949, I came down on an Easter retreat from Catholic University. I didn't really intend to join a monastery at that time. I was studying architecture and had been two years in the Marine Corps. I was in my first year of architecture when I came here on a retreat, and I liked what I saw.

Later that year one of the first things I saw when I returned to Georgia ... and I had gotten into Atlanta to get on a bus, was that there were seats in the back of the bus, so I went to the back to sit down. There were empty seats all through the bus as the bus went from one town to another all

the way from Atlanta. The seats filled up but there were still seats in the front of the bus. There was a black lady standing right next to us, although there were plenty of seats up in the front of the bus. And I thought it was funny that she didn't sit down. Finally she said, "Would you please move up to the front of the bus; these seats are our seats." And that kind of shook me. So, something about the racial conditions in the South is also what influenced my entering here.

**Kramer:** When did you actually enter here? Did you enter the same year?

**Telnack:** Yes. My first visit was in April and then I came back in June after school was out and I entered in August. It was on my June visit that I got on that bus and had the experience with the blacks. I was very much aware of black and white race relations. And so that was a very strong motivation for my entering this particular monastery, although I was never attracted to any other monastery.

Subsequently I found out that the Cistercian vocation is a "vocation to the place" ...says Saint Stephen Harding, the second Abbot of Citeaux. That is very much my own orientation. I would not want to be a monk any place else.

**Kramer:** So you feel that is very crucial, the vow of stability.

**Telnack:** For me that is essential. Everyone is different. There is room for everybody. And also we as a community are involved with people.

**Kramer:** In 1949 there were already a large number of men here. I think the monastery was not at a high point in members just yet, but there were a lot of people.

**Telnack:** Yes, at least 67 people. And I worked with the monks ...on the second visit. The first visit was during Holy Week, so it was mostly just attendance at Mass and choir services, and I thought that was pretty wonderful, although I had been familiar with the Liturgy at the cathedral in Baltimore and such things in other churches. But when I came the second time, I worked with the novices, and then Dom Robert [McGann] himself. When you saw him, you admired and liked him.

**Kramer:** So he was the Abbot at that time. Who was the Novice Master?

**Telnack:** Father Joseph, who was then called Father Mary. I did not meet him until I actually entered. I may have talked to him on the second visit, but I do not think I did. I'm not sure.

I don't remember him until after I entered. And he wanted to have me enter the monastery on the feast of the Assumption. I think at that time they had some sort of rule that you had to arrive the day before, which I did. I arrived on the 14<sup>th</sup>. But he had to expedite my getting in on the 15<sup>th</sup> as he knew of my desire. Very nice, though.

**Kramer:** Were you then immediately involved in construction work?

**Telnack:** Well, they had not started at that time. It was when they had run out of money. They had just put an addition on to the old building, actually two additions—the infirmary wing was built, and the novitiate wing, just before I came, that same year in 1949, I believe. So the work on this building had stopped because they ran out of money, and Dom James had been sent off to Gethsemani and had cut off the funds. There was considerable hostility toward Dom James at the time as I can remember, because he just cut off the funds saying we could not expect Gethsemani to continue the financing. But Dom Robert took over in 1949. He was elected Abbot, and it was really a blessing. I guess it was January, 1949. So he was the new Abbot here when I came, and his intention was to continue building, but we did not get enough money to start until 1952. I am not sure of the dates though.

**Kramer:** So for roughly two or three years, you were not involved in any kind of building?

**Telnack:** Correct. And as work we had common work a couple of times a week at least, but for the most part, the novices had the garden; we had somebody in charge. I think it was Brother Dominic when I first came in, who was Brother Thomas. I think he was already professed, and he was in charge of the garden and I used to help him, or we cut wood because we had a wood-burning boiler, and that was also in common. So we worked a lot together, which was fun, but it was not particularly fulfilling. I do not know how monastic it was, but at that time, it was part of the ideals. It was very romantic. We would walk out in single file with our hoods up and our shovels over our shoulders, like the seven dwarves or something. It really was very romantic. In fact, the whole time was kind of a romantic period.

**Kramer:** Well, then along about 1952 or 1953, plans were started up again, in terms of actually building the Church?

**Telnack:** The big thing was the selection of an architect, which Dom Robert did pretty much by himself on the advice of, I understand, Father Joseph Smith, who is buried in the cemetery. Father Smith recommended Mr. Logan as the best gothic architect in the South. There was not much good gothic architecture, but he had done the building at Agnes Scott and a few Presbyterian churches. Logan and Williams, I think was the name of the architecture firm, but we never did see much of Mr. Williams. And Logan was an old man at the time, too. So, he sent out some drawings. They could have been begun either by Dom Robert, himself, or by the council. I never thought to ask. In those days, no one really questioned the Abbot's decision on anything. So, he sent out a drawing which in general we were pretty favorable to because he decided on a concrete rather than brick structure.

We had initially started in brick and we had to tear it down, a whole story of brick over in the infirmary wing that was up to the first floor. We tore that all down, and blasted up the foundation and changed it and then started the concrete. We were very pleased with that. We were not pleased particularly with Logan's approach to the monastery, because he wanted to build a pretty box. Father Bob and I (Father Bob is a graduate architect. He even actually taught for a while.) both felt architecture should start from the inside out and that we should care what particular use the building would be put to, and then build around that. Whereas Logan's idea was to build a pretty box and leave us, the committee, to put rooms inside the box, which was really inside-out-architecture. Plus, there were a lot of fancy things that he was doing which we did not find appropriate.

**Kramer:** What do you mean by fancy?

**Telnack:** Well, a lot of decoration on the building. If you look at the buildings at Agnes Scott, or the Presbyterian Church on North Decatur Road, you'll get the idea. Of course, it was not exactly like those. Well, this was the plan until Mr. Logan got sick. The rest of the building was pretty much complete. One thing should be mentioned which I would like to see it in any kind of archival collection of remembrances. I think it was when Father Cyprian was Prior, and he was on the building committee. Dom Robert and Mr. Logan were talking about a groined vault in the cloister, which means plaster and lath, and none of us wanted that. It was a matter

of just maintenance for one thing. You just cannot keep something like up, and we were thinking in terms of centuries. So, there had to be a key support put into the wall on the refectory side of the cloister. I may be wrong, but I think Father Cyprian and I were aware of the fact that the key should be put in, but it was not put in because of someone's oversight. The key was not put in and we just let it go, and so the construction went on for several months. Then Dom Robert went to General Chapter, and while he was there, it was discovered that this key had not been placed in the poured concrete.

Father Cyprian called up long distance to Rome, which at that time was not such a common thing to do, and Dom Robert got the telephone call. He asked, "How much does this cost?" And Cyprian explained to him that the key was not put in where it should be, and there was not enough height in the cloister ceiling to put a plastered vault. We would just have to put in a more simple ceiling with arches. And all Dom Robert could think of was the cost of that phone call, I guess, because he said, "Oh, Lord, do whatever you think is right," and hung up. So we were happy because we were then able to just put the concrete as it exists, first with the plaster ceiling with the arches and, now, with monolithic concrete. It should last for centuries. That was kind of the first coup, a triumphant coup. Then when it came to the Church building, we were 22 feet 4 inches up when Mr. Logan had a stroke. We could not very well change the structure of the Church by that time.

We had worked on other schemes for the Church, other design schemes, but Dom Robert was not inclined to go along with Father Bob or me; he wanted to go along with Mr. Logan. But it got to 22 feet 4 inches. Dom Robert then became worried that the Church was too high. He saw the scaffolding and he said, "My, it's dangerous to work up that high." Father Cyprian said, "Yeah, that's less than a third of the height [of Mr. Logan's plans]." Dom Robert said, "Oh, that's too high." So we cut it down.

Then they gave that job to me. So, I was able to take 10 feet out of the clerestory and then change a lot of details, the window details. For example, in the nave of the Church I simplified the windows. I redesigned them without a jam so that you could see the actual structure—a fortified arch that

goes over the windows which is a big, thick concrete arch. And I thought that should not be lost and disguised with window jams so that you could see through the transparent glass. You can see that 4 foot thick arch. It is a dramatic church. And then the rear wall had to be changed. Originally that wall was round, the way Gethsemani was years ago. But we changed that early on, but then the actual design of the wall had to be changed.

**Kramer:** The rear wall had to be changed?

**Telnack:** That was originally a round apse which was then changed to be squared off, and simplified a great deal.

**Kramer:** And then did you have to change the roof also in terms of the way the arches come up?

**Telnack:** The angle of it may have been changed some. We did not change the structure because the arches were pretty much Logan's details. He worked that out, and I liked it. But there was talk at one time, of course, also in building a plaster vault within the Church, but that was rejected by the committee and Logan agreed with that. But the facade of the Church, when we took the 10 feet off, had to be changed dramatically. (By the way, I have in the glass shop a lot of architectural drawings that I did. You can see them there.)

As a matter of fact, I did several alternative facades. Dom Robert went up to New York; he had some contact up there with an architect. I do not know who it was—somebody he had confidence in. And the architect up there actually took the simplest drawing I did, which would have changed the roof line considerably, flattened the roof considerably. But for, I think, structural reasons, the work we had already done on the facade, there were certain things we could not do as we had originally drawn it up. So we had to change that, with the result that the gable in the front, the facade, comes up way over the roof on the west end. So, it was really a false gable, but that was about the only thing we could do and maintain the whole design through the building.

**Kramer:** So that it looks finished. Yes.

**Telnack:** Yes, there are problems with the work that had already been done. The front of the Church appears to be a little heavy; it had to be tapered off some way. We needed a certain amount of height to do it gracefully. That is why the Church looks that high.

**Kramer:** I think it looks quite good.

**Telneck:** I am happy with it, but I think if we were able to start just a few feet sooner, down lower, we could have....

**Kramer:** I was going to say something about the windows. The general shape of the windows would also have to have been changed in height. And in terms of the actual glass, that would come later in terms of the design.

**Telneck:** Yes, but I think I was thinking of the glass. In fact, I know I was thinking of the glass already.

**Kramer:** You were aware these windows would have to accommodate glass? And the windows in the front and the rear, you also had to be thinking in terms of what kinds of windows would go in there?

**Telneck:** That is right. And we knew we did not want a window, for example, on the east side that would be a big glare. So that window was put up high, so that we did not have the sunlight in our eyes. I already knew what I wanted for stained glass even though I did not have the project as my responsibility. They would have to be planned ahead. It was just a matter of really not even a year, I suppose, the time lag between those details and getting the stained glass into them.

**Kramer:** What year would that have been?

**Telneck:** It was 1955 because we did not start the stained glass until ... we had our birthday on April 10<sup>th</sup> in 1957. The reason I use that date is because we went on a trip to the Blenko Glass Company in West Virginia, where we got all our glass.

**Kramer:** That is the name of the company, Blenko? Is that a family name?

**Telneck:** It is a family name. It is a British family that came over three generations ago. The son, who was an old man at that time in 1957, was the founder. Bill Blenko was his name. He was very helpful and encouraged us. We tried to get all the information about stained glass which we could, and we got a lot of encouragement. We wrote the stained glass association, who were very helpful, very nice. As a matter of fact, Muriel Willett (who is the wife of Henry Lee Willett who died last year: Muriel died some ten years ago) was the secretary, or something, for the association, and she wrote us and was just as nice and helpful as she could be.

Also, she sent us a book called *Stained Glass For Amateurs* by Ruth Case Almy. I was kind of insulted. I thought, now we're not really amateurs. We have got a real project underway here, and I did not really look at the book for maybe six

months or so. And then, just one day I picked the book up and looked at and read it. It was absolutely fascinating. It is a wonderful book on stained glass, and I was really mortified. In fact, I had not appreciated it. So I wrote to Mrs. Willett and I also wrote to Mrs. Almey, telling her that I really thought the book was wonderful and I appreciated it. Her theory of stained glass was really good.

**Kramer:** Did any of these people come here?

**Telnack:** Not at that time. Mrs. Almey came five or six years later. I think it was in the 1960s, 1964 when she finally came with her husband. He was a Presbyterian minister, retired, and they were taking a trip around the country to see all their friends. So they stopped off here and spent a couple of days and parked there in the parking lot in an Airstream trailer. We had a very nice visit with both of them. I suspect they are dead now because they were old.

**Kramer:** In terms, then, of your making decisions about getting into the stained glass business, did you then go visit these people in West Virginia, or how did you ...?

**Telnack:** Not to get "into the stained glass business." Let's see, how did it work? It was obvious we had to get some stained glass for the church. The Abbot General came, Dom Gabriel Sortais, and saw the plans. He said, well you have to have some stained glass in this latitude. Pretty far south. We are the same latitude as the Sahara Desert and also Nineveh, and so he said that the Cistercian proscription against stained glass does not apply because that was done through northern climates, France, for example. I think Paris is like Nova Scotia, in latitude. So we were pretty far south. So we wanted the go ahead with the recommendation from the Abbot General and Dom Robert wanted it. So we decided something had to be done. But the problem was a matter of man-power, that we had a very small, limited number of people to put into stained glass work.

Dom Robert told us to do the Chapter Room first, and he said, "If I like that, then you can go on with the rest of the building." He kept out of the Chapter Room all the time we were working on it ... did not bother us. And after a year (he gave us a year to do it) well, specifically, it took us about a year to get that done. When he saw it, he said, "I like it and you can go on with the rest of the building."



We started the project, and then there was a young novice who may have been professed by that time, named David Richards. He had been an art student at Chouinard, an art school in Los Angeles, and he started the project with me. Then soon after that, there was a Father Anselm Atkins, who had a lot of artistic ability. He was actually going through a nervous crisis and people were looking for something for him to do to get him interested, and I kind of liked him, and thought I could work with him as a person, and got him into stained glass. So we did it. The Chapter Room designs were complete.

Atkins did some sketches for that, some very simple geometric designs. I did the same thing then as I do now. I try to let anybody who has worked in the glass shop be creative and express, get to use their artistic talent. I try to utilize their artistic talent as best I can. But with the glass in the buildings, since I did have a lot to do with the architecture of the building, I had pretty much in my mind what I thought it should be and what I wanted for the Chapter Room and the Sacristy, since both of those, the windows of the Sacristy and the windows of the Chapter Room are the same side, both on the cloister and on the outside and they had to reflect the same on the outside. So we used just a simple geometric design. I did not know too much about stained glass colors.

So we went up to West Virginia. Father Joachim drove us in those days. None of us had licenses except for a few who were drivers in the community, and Father Joachim, I think was Prior at that time. So he took David Richards and me up to the stained glass company in 1957. And while we were there, Mr. Blenko and Bill took a liking to us and saw the project we had. They realized it was a big project and suggested we talk with his designer named Wayne Husted, and that was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted all these years. Bill and his wife Jeanne and I are still good friends. And Wayne and his wife Betty, who is also a designer and David and I just had sort of a brainstorming session, and we showed them what we wanted to do, and they made some suggestions about the colors and gave some very interesting insights about stained glass. He was the first one to point out to me that the colors of glass situate themselves in space,

so that blue is at infinity and the other colors progress forward.

Working with stained glass is actually a three dimensional art, which was my dimension anyway, because as an architect I was working in three dimensions. Then he also pointed out the work of Robert Sowers who was very popular about that time. He did the stained glass for the American Airlines terminal at Kennedy Airport. Sowers was using deep, dark colors with a lot of light colors, so there was a lot of contrast in his windows and it was very obvious he was working with depth. So we experimented then with the Chapter Room. We got into a very deep blue and a darker green with a very light blue, and then red and also yellow colors come forward. The point Wayne made was that this is what happens automatically and you have to organize your colors for a pleasing effect, and it is a matter of organizing in three dimensions.

So with the Chapter Room, we got the stained glass started and then did the Sacristy. The Sacristy colors are not all that bad, except that the yellow was very heavy. We went up to the glass works and picked out our colors for the Chapter Room when the three of us were actually up there. Father Joachim did not have anything to do with it—just David and me. But when it came to the Sacristy, I thought, we'll just order from the samples we had here. Well, the yellow we ordered was a very bright yellow. When it came in the box, it was the same number but just various parts of the sheet. The part they had cut the sample from was maybe a thin part of the sheet, so that the yellow came out very heavy; and actually the color that looks purple in there, we thought was green. On the order, I ordered so much of this particular number in green that actually looks purple next to the yellow. And if I had gone up there to the glass shop and had seen the full sheets we would have understood what to work with. This was just sight unseen. But we put it together because I realized they were not really too bad, and it was kind of interesting, that yellow-violet, which are complimentary colors. But I'm still not as pleased. I think those colors would have been better if we had not had that accident. So, that was an indication that when we did the church, we would have to make sure what the colors looked like in the full sheets.

**Kramer:** Well, then how did you come to the decision that the church colors would be the colors that you have?

**Telhack:** That was done at the same time. It was Wayne, I think, because Bob Rambush did the design for the eastern Salve window. That was a bit of, I guess, politics. I had to make a decision there. I would have loved to design something for the Community, but Anselm had kind of a reputation of being the "designer" which he really was not.

**Kramer:** Anselm Atkins would have been a fairly young man.

**Telhack:** He is five years younger than I. He is just 50 this year and I am 55, and he would have been not that young because he had a college degree, so he would have been 24, I guess. How long ago was that? ... 20 years, 30 years?

**Kramer:** Roughly middle 50's. So he would have been in his middle 20's.

**Telhack:** Yes. I would say about that. As you get older, that seems young, but to a person who is 25 years old .... So, anyway, I thought it would be a bad idea. I knew what he would do with the design because I had seen his designs. He did the two windows in the back of the Church, Saint Bernard and Saint Stephen Harding, which some people like very much. I like them for what they are, but they are a little comical and there is a little cynicism involved. As a matter of fact, recently Anselm Atkins was asking me if I wanted to change the face of Saint Bernard. I said, no, leave it like it is. And I think he would have got the same thing in the Salve window which I would not have been happy with. And then I did not want to put myself up to do it. I thought, if they do not like me, or they get mad at me, when that window is lit up at Compline, when we sing the "Salve Regina" and they light that window, it could ruin their prayer life. So it seemed advisable, the most political thing to do, to get someone from outside the community and Bob Rambush was our architectural consultant. He was the son of the establishment of Rambush Church Decorating. They are an old company. As a matter of fact, just about this time the liturgical revival started up, and they started to call it "surgical art," not "liturgical," but "surgical" because all the Churches were tearing out all the old art and redoing their churches and making them more simple. This company was really involved in that. Bob was a very talented artist, very talented stained glass

artist. He did the lady chapel at the Baltimore Cathedral which is a very fine stained glass installation. Anyway he did this design. He gave us just a sketch, and I selected the glass colors.

But the trapezoidal figures in the back of that window sort of determined our plans. Because if we were going to use that for our most prominent window in the Church, then it would have to influence the rest of the stained glass. So this was decided then in that first trip up to Blenko when David and I talked with Wayne and Betty. It was decided at that point then to use the trapezoidal shape for the clerestory windows and to use a softer shape down below. There again, Anselm had done some curvy shapes which suggested what is there right now. What he had done with the colors would not have been good stained glass.

## II

Father Methodius's work as stained glass artist and as musician reflects his grounding in the ideals of the Benedictine-Cistercian life. His friendship with Thomas Merton has, as we can see in the 2005 interview, fed into his community work as well as helped develop and articulate Father Methodius's identity as a Cistercian artist. This interview further reveals a particular Cistercian aesthetic present in both his glass work and music. Key to this aesthetic is the analysis of Beauty as a reality of God's ephemeral yet tangible presence. Drawing on early monastic wisdom, Father Methodius shows how Beauty reveals itself through simplicity and unfolds in multidimensional ways so that one's experience of God remains dynamic and evolutionary.

### (2005 Interview) Conducted by Glenn Crider

**Crider:** What can you say about your continuing glass design and production work in particular as it relates to the Cistercian ideal?

**Telnack:** Well, Saint Bernard himself, even though he had been accused of being the first Puritan because of the simplicity of the Cistercian churches built during his time, made a disclaimer about simplicity and how it did not apply to parish churches or cathedral churches. He recognized that there are different needs for different churches—different needs for the liturgy, the worship, and the people. Since I have been doing

most of my work outside the monastery for parishes, I have not used any particular Cistercian ideals except—and this is true for St. Bernard as well—an analysis of beauty. He recognized Beauty as a transcendental quality of God: Truth, Goodness, Being.

Beauty which St. Thomas later developed as an entity of God. Saint Thomas says that we approach God more as a passion than as an activity. God draws us by beauty, for example. We're drawn by beauty. And St. Bernard says that the pursuit of beauty is the pursuit of God. And with all the necessary ramifications and qualifications and cautions, ontologically speaking, truth is beauty and goodness. Those are transcendental qualities. So what I can say is that the Cistercian ideal of the pursuit of truth is seen in simplicity.

Clearly, I think that sense of clarity in Cistercian architecture, a single-minded and unadorned ideal, is what I have used throughout all the work I have done. But I do not know if all my work is necessarily Cistercian, that what I create is necessarily Cistercian. I hope it is beautiful though. And if it is beautiful then it is in accord with the principles of Saint Bernard.

He was an artist in literature. He quotes the Fathers—he says that they may read poetry more beautifully than he can write it. They can say it more beautifully, and that beauty is persuasive. When the Word is expressed beautifully, it is more effective. And so that is one art form—poetry—a particular use of words. When I make stained glass, I am not in a verbal mode. To show beauty I pick a combination of colors and beautiful lines.

**Crider:** If you were preparing glass for a Cistercian monastery versus a parish church, what immediate differences and similarities become apparent?

**Telnack:** I think it would be a mistake to think that we have to repeat the designs of the original Cistercian churches. Why do that?

**Crider:** Yes.

**Telnack:** They were great works of art—what we have left. They were called "Cistercian Glass." They were not allowed to use colors. That was proscribed by St. Bernard. It should not be tinted or colored. But that did not keep the artist down. Consider the size of glass that they had to use; they did not have very big sheets of glass like we have now. They had

very small pieces of glass to work with. And when they put them together, they put them together in very intricate geometric, or sometimes floral, type designs. It was really complex. The design of those windows was not simple. Yet it contributed to the Cistercian style of simplicity because of the color of light coming through the glass. The glass itself was a grayish green. They called "grisaille." The typical Cisterican glass was intricately put together. It proves that you just cannot keep the artist down. They will find a beautiful way to do it.

With our own church, we had not thought of stained glass initially. Part of the Church was already roofed when the Abbot General came through in 1952. And it must have been the hottest June in history, I think. The Abbot had just come from Africa. He came from Africa to Georgia and said he had never felt such heat until he arrived here. He walked through the Church as it was under construction and look around and said, "You're going to have to put colored glass in here to cut down the intense sunlight." So it was really the Abbot's mandate that got us thinking about stained glass. I had done a lot of the architecture by that time. The architect had a nervous breakdown so I had to take over.

Simplicity was in my mind. And in the spirit of simplicity, rather than having a painting or a statue, we decided to put a stained glass window of the Virgin Mary in the Church. But it was not designed by me. It was designed by our liturgical consultant, Bob Rambush. I, of course, built it, enlarged it, colored it and painted it. But the initial design was his.

**Crider:** What year did that take place?

**Telnack:** It must have been around 1957. The stained glass was not installed or hung in the Church until 1959. It took that long because we had so much work to do including getting materials and so forth. But the rest of the windows—we were not on a tight schedule but we had to get the building enclosed before winter—were done on a sort of a mass production scale. The design could not have been any more simple because they were just straight lines. I figured out a design scheme which was just a—it is kind of difficult to explain. There are two colors: pink and blue, of various shades. And the shades go from light to dark. So you have a counterpoint of pink and blue and light and dark. There were actu-

ally twenty-three colors in each window. And I figured out how many pieces of each color we put in each window.

So we cut that glass out and put it on an easel. I had at that time a mathematician living with us, a young scientist, who was working at Cape Canaveral. We built two big easels out of chicken wire, and I said take these trapezoidal pieces of glass and put the same amount of colors in each window, but put them in differently. We would put one up and critique it, and put another up and critique it, and so on. We used this method as a critique, or as a way to see what looked best. So we would examine each window and ask if it should be darker here, or lighter there. Should this section have more blue? Should this piece go somewhere else?

So now when you look around the Church, there is one window that is almost like a checkerboard. It is light-dark-light-dark-light-dark-light-dark-light-dark. It does not show up in the photograph, but there in the Church you can see it. It is very regular. But all the other windows are a commentary and a departure from that regularity. And the goodness of that is that there is an emotional element to each of those windows. Because when you see how the designs are distributed—again, it is difficult to describe, but it is an emotional thing. It is not rational. It affects your emotions when you look at the window. And they are always fresh because they are so simple.

We decided to put curves in the lower windows. It is just a simple art. And we did the same thing. We would put them up on an easel. As a matter of fact, we have Br. Louis here who lost one of his legs. He was actually born deaf but eventually he got hearing aids and was able to hear. He was an Italian boy from a poor family from, I guess, New York or New Jersey. Anyway, he did the windows on the south side of the Church. The windows on the north side were done by Father Andrew who was a professor of philosophy and theology for us. But he had no particular artistic background at all.

There is a logic in it, but it is not the kind of thing you can reason to. It is something felt. And I think it is completely within the Cistercian spirit because, I mean, how simple could you get? So, even though we used colored glass which is not traditionally Cistercian, I think the designs proclaim Cistercian simplicity.

I have not done that any place else because these were particular designs for this Church. Although I know that the chapel at the airport has the same sort of trapezoids that we have here. (I think it was done by Anselm after he left the monastery.)

**Crider:** How might your work here within the monastery compare to your work outside the monastery?

**Telnack:** Every job that I have done outside the monastery has been along with a particular community—either the pastor, architect, or the building committee. I like working with the architect because he can sell the idea to the church better than I can myself. And with my particular background, I speak the same language as the architect. I think the best work I have done has been along with an architect.

**Crider:** You had mentioned that stained glass evokes a feeling or an emotion. I assume you see your work more as a way to predispose others to contemplation. Is that true?

**Telnack:** Yes. It does the same thing as a text, a scriptural text. It is not the words, it is what is behind the words. It is not the picture. And I have been kind of against pictures because we are so sated with pictures through the media. It is not the picture that is communicated. What is communicated is that somehow through the beauty something spiritual is communicated. At least, that is the area that I hope I have been working in. The windows are alive in that respect.

**Crider:** Do you think this possible spiritual or contemplative connection is the motivation behind people wanting stained glass in churches in the first place?

**Telnack:** I do not know the exact cause and effect, but whatever is the cause, many feel that their church is not complete until it has stained glass. Just the words “stained glass” has a kind of magical connotation. Now there are many churches who want clear glass, and I think that is wonderful. If they want stained glass, I would be glad to do it. But as it is, the plain, white glass is pretty wonderful. You do not necessarily need the colored glass.

Every church does not necessarily need stained glass but it adds another dimension, another possibility of communicating contemplation. It can become another element in disposing people to a contemplative mood. Of course, that is another thing seen in Saint Bernard. The materials them-



selves are beautiful. But when the artist uses the materials wisely, Saint Bernard says that wise use is according to the "Truth," it adds another dimension to that experience of beauty, which is ultimately an experience of God.

**Crider:** Two contributors to the projected *Merton Annual*, Kevin Seasoltz and Charlotte Zalot, are writing articles about Frank Kacmarcik as a contemplative artist and visual theologian. What can you say about your connection to, or awareness of, Kacmarcik and his work?

**Telnack:** Well, Kacmarcik knew Merton, or Merton knew Kacmarcik. They had at least some correspondence and once Kacmarcik consulted at Gethsemani. I do not think that Father Louis was all that drawn to Kacmarcik. Father Louis also knew Bob Rambush who was our liturgical consultant.

Father Louis referred to Rambush as a "gentleman" but did not use that same term with Kacmarcik! I met Frank at Mepkin. That was the last time I saw him. Our meeting was cordial but I cannot say that we were friends because we had not had the opportunity of meeting until then. Of course, I was familiar with his work. I think there are couple of things to say about Mepkin. I do not think it is built well which may have to do with the resources they had. It is already showing signs of age. The stucco is discolored. Of course, with the climate, you might expect that. But it is impressive in its simple lines and that reflects Cistercian simplicity. I appreciate that. Do you know Richard Meyer who did the High Museum?

**Crider:** I am somewhat aware of him.

**Telnack:** I recently discovered a church Richard Meyer designed for the diocese of Rome which is in the suburbs. It is called the "Jubilee Church" and was designed in honor of Pope John Paul's twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination. It is a very contemporary building, much nicer than the High Museum. But the Church has no stained glass yet it is quite beautiful, very peaceful and, I think, contemplative.

**Crider:** With Kacmarcik, do you notice any differences in his work as a Benedictine versus a Cistercian?

**Telnack:** It just occurred to me that there is sometimes a sense of grandeur with his work. Even with Mepkin which is not a big church, there is a sense of grandeur which is not common to Cistercian tradition. Cistercian Churches can be huge

but they do not say “grandeur.” I had not thought of this before, but there is that different sense of spirit between the two. I had not identified that before, but when you think of the Benedictine churches like St. John’s in Collegetown, you see the grandeur. I am not sure how much Kacmarcik had to do with St. John’s. Marcel Breuer was the architect. I think Kacmarcik did some of the altars and perhaps crucifixes around the building which were very simple. Those were his designs. We actually have one of his designs here in our scriptorium.

**Crider:** Would you like to comment on your relationship with Thomas Merton as it might relate to this theme of Cistercian art and contemplation?

**Telnack:** I met Father Louis in 1957 which is when I started the stained glass work. As a matter of fact, I was at Gethsemani for eight weeks for a music class conducted by a French Benedictine named Ludo Berone who was a master of the interpretation of Gregorian chant. While I was there—of course Father Louis was well known by then—one of the first things I did when I saw the Abbot, Dom James Fox, was ask him to meet Father Louis. He said he would arrange it before I left. So I was there for several weeks and preparing to leave. And my ordination was coming up in a couple of weeks. Then I reminded Father James that I wanted to meet Father Louis. He said sure.

At that time, Father Louis was the Novice Master so I met him in his office in the novitiate which was piled with manuscripts and books. He was very cordial and very friendly. We had a nice, long talk. But I did not think much of it except that I really liked him.

A couple of months later, I had a chance to go back because of some glass work. It was probably around August of 1957. And I got to meet with him again. After that, I was able to visit at least once a year, and sometimes several times per year for quite some time. By that time he had moved into the hermitage, so I met him there often and we had some really nice talks. I am sure anyone who had contact with him would tell you the same thing—that he was their friend. He had that personality and was so easy to talk to. He was my friend.

Interesting enough, while I was there I met his confessor. He had a German name. I think he was John of the Cross. In any case, over the years I was able to see Merton. I was Cantor here at the time. And I had the idea of singing the Chant with English words. The Episcopalians had been doing it for years since they had adopted the Anglican translations which were very beautiful. So I talked to Father Louis about this idea, about singing the Chant in English. He said this would be an opportunity to do something different and original. So his suggestion was my impetus to make that transition, and not adapt the Gregorian melodies.

I did the whole Sunday schedule of Mass in English with my own melodies. Well, there were three or four hymns I adapted, but the rest was original. I incorporated a melodic line as opposed to the usual Gregorian lines which had a lot of notes going up and down. This was to give a simple yet strong melody, and be easy to sing.

**Crider:** Is your music used here still?

**Telneck:** Yes, it is used for Sunday Masses but we combine Mass with Lauds, so the Graduals and communion verses are not sung. So it is truncated. Two of the important pieces of Mass are not sung anymore. Unless we have a Mass at a later hour which we did at Easter and Christmas, then we sing the longer versions. It is interesting though because the choir itself knows the melodies better than the cantors. The cantors try too hard. You just have to attend to the melody.

**Crider:** Perhaps a concluding note on your glass work would be helpful. Do any of your jobs really stand out to you?

**Telneck:** I did some windows for Atlanta University, for their Lyke Catholic Center. There is clear glass only. The designs are sandblasted and glue chipped. We did forty windows. There is no stained glass at all. I think that is one of the most beautiful works I have done. It also depends on the circumstance, the Church and the architecture itself. If I see a church that is really well done with no colored glass, I really appreciate that.