A Merton Connection: Frank Kacmarcik, OblSB, Monk and Artist (1920-2004)

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I. Biography and Background

On February 22, 2004, a man who was, like Thomas Merton, both a monk and an artist, died peacefully yet unexpectedly in his sleep. His name was Frank Kacmarcik, a claustral oblate of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. One might wonder why an article about him appears in *The Merton Annual*, yet it will not take long to see that, in fact, this interdisciplinary journal is the rightful kind of place for this analysis.

Brother Frank Kacmarcik, OblSB, artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts (1920-2004), and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) were friends. Remnants of written correspondence trace this; passing mention of Kacmarcik in some Merton writings, and journal, supports this; prayers written by Merton for Kacmarcik evidence this; and a log of this author's personal conversations with Kacmarcik confirm this. While their interest in art might seem to be the foremost link in their association, the connective strands supporting and sustaining their relationship were many: rich yet simple, real yet fundamentally spiritual. Their journeys, although different in some ways were remarkably similar in others. They shared a profound sense of vocation; they respected and used their gifts so that God would be glorified; they were tireless in promoting what was right and good. Kacmarcik and Merton were artists, each in his own right. Kacmarcik and Merton were also theologians, each in his own right. Kacmarcik and Merton were monastics, each in his own right.

On March 15, 1920, Frank Kacmarcik, an ordinary man of extraordinary talents, was born to parents of Polish-Slovak descent who led a life given to hard work, family ideals and the pursuit of a God relationship through the practice of religion. Raised in this strongly devout Catholic family where regular church attendance and daily prayer were the norm, the initial molding of Kacmarcik's

religious consciousness began at a young age. In time, as these seeds took root, this faith force grew to motivate and animate Kacmarcik in every aspect of his life. Faith sustained by religion and devotion not only shaped Kacmarcik's life but greatly strengthened his character and his person.

Art was instinctive and natural to Kacmarcik in much the same way that art was instinctive and natural to Merton. It was part of who he was. For as long as he was able to remember, Kacmarcik was drawing and designing. It was a talent that was intuitive and innate, a natural gift which Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher who influenced both Merton and Kacmarcik, described as being "indispensable" to the creation of genuine art.[1] However, Kacmarcik had no formal study in art until he won a scholarship to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), in 1938 (then the Minneapolis School of Art.) It was during this time that Kacmarcik became a trained artist. He used his travel time to and from the school on the street car, a daily total of four hours, to read and study art books that were available in the school library. This insatiable quest for art knowledge also put Kacmarcik in touch with a number of important figures, among them the artist Eric Gill (1882-1940), who figuratively became a friend to Kacmarcik during his college years.

Gill's art work and writings strongly influenced Kacmarcik in his art and in some of his attitudes. Gill was a man who embraced the truth in his life, religion and art. When he converted to Catholicism he said: "I would not have anyone think that I became a Catholic because I was convinced of the truth, though I was convinced of the truth. I became a Catholic because I fell in love with the truth, and love is an experience I saw. I heard. I felt. I tasted. I touched."[2] Gill had a love affair with truth that resulted in a commitment to truth in any and all circumstances. His passion for truth and honesty was strong. His words and his deeds, and most certainly his art work, reflected this reality. "Compromise with truth was impossible for Gill."[3] Consequently, Gill was known, not only for his inability to compromise at any cost but for his directness in expressing his feelings and opinions. The same may well be said of Kacmarcik and Merton, both of whom possessed a courage for the truth that was free in its expression, significant in its meaningfulness, and challenging in its provocation.

Kacmarcik was known for not mincing words. Through the years various people noted this, not least among them Kacmarcik

himself. One of his most influential mentors, Michael Marx, OSB (1913-1996), explained it this way: "[Frank has] salty speech but I hope it has the salt of the Gospel. [He] does not spare the individual and that can be painful in the face of the reality of the truth."[4] In an article written a dozen years ago, Kacmarcik's friend, Abbot Patrick Regan, OSB, said: "Frank is quick to express his opinion, express it freely and accurately, but without always considering how the opinions are going to be received by other people."[5] While it is true that Kacmarcik's outspokenness more than likely built up a list of people who disliked him, it seems that the truth he spoke, always candidly and frankly, likewise earned him the respect of many. Kacmarcik's faithfulness to his talents and his mind to speak the truth, regardless of its impact, allowed it to be said that "Frank is one who would see his children whimper now and live forever rather than be satisfied in the moment."[6] With that greater good in mind, Frank did not think about himself and how he would be accepted or not accepted, liked or disliked. Surely this would have earned him the admiration of Merton who, in his view of the modern world, believed that "many [people] seemed to be losing any ability to distinguish the true: appreciation of truth was apparently being lost because of increasingly greedy, cruel, and lustful pressures common to a society which encourages [a person] to ignore the truth and to be primarily concerned with fitting in, or with his [or her] own satisfaction."[7]

Similarities between Kacmarcik and Gill do not end with the avid proclamation of truth at any cost. Gill is recognized as having used the gifts of mind and will that God had given him, not only to create things but to respond creatively to the direction his life took. In so doing he was able to complete what God had begun in him and to become a whole person.[8] The introduction to Gill's autobiography (Beatrice Warde) sums it up well:

> For Gill stands, to many of us, as the good man who knew what he was good for and knew for what he was good: the type of artist, craftsman and artisan—whether in sculpture, wood-engraving, carved lettering or controversial writing—who will stand fast though he attract passionate opponents and joyous adversaries with every provocative stroke of chisel or pen .... [9]

This could well be said of Kacmarcik and Merton. Both were attuned to God as the root of their talent and the One to whom all

glory and credit should be given for their accomplishments. The evolution of their wholeness resulted from their complete and total response to the gifts of God that resided within their person and took shape through their work.

In addition to becoming acquainted with Gill's work during his college years, Kacmarcik also became fascinated with the liturgy and learned about Saint John's Monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota. This happened as a result of having come in contact with the periodical *Orate Fratres*, now known as *Worship*. Kacmarcik was profoundly affected by the information and knowledge that he learned through reading this scholarly magazine. It fed his hunger to know as much as he could about the liturgy and inspired his ideas for designing church buildings that would enable people to truly worship God in the fullest way possible. Furthermore, because of its origin as a publication of the monks in Collegeville, he learned of this community of Benedictines, a learning that changed his life forever.

While Kacmarcik was inhaling everything he possibly could from the art library at MCAD, he discovered that there were such persons as brother-artists. He was fascinated by the work at Maria Laach Abbey. This famous Benedictine Abbey in Germany was the nascent home of the liturgical movement and its beginnings. It was here that a great deal was done in liturgical studies, including liturgical art and architecture, and Kacmarcik found this most alluring. When he discovered Saint John's in Collegeville and came in contact with Brother Clement Frischauf, OSB, an influential liturgical artist trained at the Abbey of Beuron, a new hope took root within him. Not only did his desire to be a liturgical artist deepen; now the possibility of being an artist within the context of the vowed life became plausible. When asked whether this was his awakening to the possibility of a religious vocation, Kacmarcik replied: "No, this was not the beginning of the stirrings of a religious vocation. The stirrings had always been there. It wasn't until I realized that there were such things as brother-artists that it became clarified."[10]

II. Early Years and Basic Aesthetics

In 1941, the same year that Merton entered the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Kacmarcik entered the Benedictine Abbey of Saint John's in Minnesota. Although hopeful that he would be able to pursue his art, there was no guarantee of this.

Despite that, he entered the community anyway to pursue his heart's desire to seek God. It was a story similar to that of Merton, about whom it has been said that "as a monk Merton never desired to relinquish fully all hopes to be a successful writer; but it is significant that as a young monk he was willing to cease writing if that appeared to be God's will."[11] While Kacmarcik admitted that there were not many opportunities to develop his artistic talent and interest, he simultaneously acknowledged that he was provided with more opportunities than might have been considered typical in those days. As a result of that, Kacmarcik was able to make his artistic mark on Saint John's.

When it came time for his first profession of vows, however, the community vote did not go in his favor and Kacmarcik was asked to leave. His forthrightness and honest expression of truth had not served him well; it suggested that he would never be able to fit into community life. The consequences of Kacmarcik's manner of veracity caused a very painful period in his life. He believed strongly in his Benedictine vocation but it was not to be at that time. The Abbot told him to go out into the world to mature and get more experience. Kacmarcik, without losing his love for Saint John's or his longing to be a monk, moved on with his life. In hindsight, he acknowledged that what happened was providential. He came to understand that his novitiate sojourn provided an important time in his personal formation.

After leaving the monastery Kacmarcik was drafted into the army. Kacmarcik admitted that he was not in favor of the war. However, unlike Merton, Kacmarcik did not seek conscientious objector status. Based on just war principles it is known that Merton did apply for noncombatant conscientious objector status. He never knew whether this was granted because with his entrance into religious life this became a non-issue. On the other hand, Kacmarcik became an army sergeant. During World War II he was in noncombative duty and served first as a surgical technician and then as a chaplain's assistant. This was a fortuitous happening as it permitted Kacmarcik to travel throughout Europe. Far from bringing a halt to his education, the years Kacmarcik spent in the Army, from 1944 to 1947, were important ones in his personal growth and artistic development. After the war, he went back to MCAD for one more year before he returned to Europe to study in Paris from 1948 to1950. While in Europe Kacmarcik traveled extensively; he visited churches and monasteries, museums

and monuments, all of which contributed to the critical maturing of his background in church art and architecture. It was a time in which Kacmarcik's creativity was nurtured and stimulated. As a result, he was eventually able to respond to the art needs of the Church in very significant ways.

When his European study neared its end Kacmarcik was invited back to Saint John's, where he became a teacher in the art department. Although Kacmarcik was glad to be back at Saint John's as a professor of art, teaching and promoting the importance of sacred art and the vocation of sacred artists, it was not always smooth sailing for him. His honesty and frankness continued to be an irritant. Un-Christian he was not; straightforward, without concession, he was. Oddly enough, it was while doing work close to his heart that he was once again asked to leave Saint John's.

During Kacmarcik's tenure at Saint John's University the Benedictine community undertook a building project for the construction of a new Abbey church. Kacmarcik was asked to be the Art Coordinator for this effort. However, as the endeavor evolved, the Abbot feared the monks would not accept the plans if Kacmarcik's name was associated with them. The memory of Kacmarcik as an unreservedly opinionated young monk, combined with the experience of Kacmarcik as an authoritatively outspoken young professor, constituted Kacmarcik as a risk. Hence, despite having proved himself a successful teacher of great merit, Kacmarcik again left Saint John's and embarked on a journey that would have far-reaching and long-lasting effects in the liturgical world of the Catholic Church. As an artist, typographer, collector and liturgical consultant, Kacmarcik made an indelible mark, one that exemplified his creativity.

In describing Kacmarcik as creative, the word is not used lightly. In a Merton essay entitled: "The Catholic and Creativity," Merton set out to develop a theology of creativity. Basically, what Merton came to understand was that there is no genuine creativity apart from God: "The dignity of [a person] is to stand before God on his [or her] own feet, alive, conscious, alert to the light that has been placed in him [or her], and perfectly obedient to that light."[12] Merton went on further to say that one's creative gifts should be used "for the good of others and for the glory of God instead of exploiting them to draw attention to [oneself]."[13] Undoubtedly, Kacmarcik was creative in this truest and finest sense

of the word. As stated by Merton, creativity becomes possible insofar as one can forget one's limitations and selfhood and lose oneself in "abandonment to the immense creative power of a love too great to be seen or comprehended."[14] Kacmarcik was a liturgical artist and designer who did that very thing; he was able to give himself over to the gifts and talents and abilities that he knew and was fully convinced were God-given. At the same time, while using his artistic ability in service to the Church as artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts, he had a keen sense of the importance of investing self without imposing self. Particularly in his work of designing liturgical space and furnishings, Kacmarcik was clear that an artist did not have absolute freedom to do whatever he or she wanted to do. Any art or design in service to the Church would seek to emphasize and clarify the action of the Church and its liturgy and not compete with it. According to Kacmarcik, the artistic design of the space and furnishings, as well as any art work in the space, should never dominate the action of the liturgy. In response to questions about this, Kacmarcik was quite clear that, while not imposing themselves, artists do have distinctive styles: "You can't avoid yourself. If you did, you would be nothing. Every person is given a personage and there is no reason why they should hide it. Of course, they have to govern it in the circumstances but they should be true to themselves."[15] Merton's thoughts on artistic freedom extend the discussion:

> True artistic freedom can never be a matter of sheer willfulness, or arbitrary posturing. It is the outcome of authentic possibilities, understood and accepted in their own terms, not the refusal of the concrete in favor of the purely "interior." In the last analysis, the only valid witness to the artist's creative freedom is his [or her] work itself. The artist builds his [or her] own freedom and forms his [or her] own artistic conscience, by the work of his [or her] hands.[16]

Being true to yourself without imposing yourself or giving in to "sheer willfulness" or "arbitrary posturing," and instead allowing the honesty of function and the confession of truth in art and design to be primary, is a challenge for the liturgical artist. It is a challenge Kacmarcik accepted and handled quite well. In large part this is due to his view of himself as a sacred artist. In the words of Daisetz Suzuki, a spokesman of Zen who was greatly admired by Merton and whose contacts with the West allowed

him to explain his basic Zen idea of art in Christian terms: "The greatest productions of art, whether painting, music, sculpture or poetry, have invariably this quality—something approaching the work of God. The artist, at the moment when his creativeness is at its height, is transformed into an agent of the creator."[17] This is a concept that Kacmarcik also took seriously. He never credited his work to himself but to the gifts and special talents from God that enabled him to do what he did. It is probably the reason why he was the successful designer of the covers and interior layout for *Worship* from 1950 until his death, why he received numerous awards for his work in book design and graphic arts, why so many of the more than 200 churches in whose design he was involved were so successful and very often award-winning.

Kacmarcik had specific ideas about what it meant to be a sacred artist. He professed that a sacred artist is one who is "to serve as a spokes[person] and minister of the Christian mystery, to provide a prophetic and priestly mediation of God's truth to God's people."[18] As a sacred artist, Kacmarcik felt a large responsibility to put himself at the service of truth, of the mystery, so as to glorify God by the service he rendered to the Church through his work. For Kacmarcik, his service as an artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts became his vocation. It was a way of serving God and God's people. It was a way of joining self and service. "True vocation begins in the self where we know we are here on earth to be the gifts God created"[19] and in so doing to use the gifts God gives in order to satisfy that purpose. While vocation is related to one's work it was clearly much more than that for Kacmarcik. Essentially, the biblical understanding of vocation is rooted in the belief that God is the fundamental source and initiator of vocation. God is the One who calls and therefore, a vocation is from God. Merton believed a vocation was a personal call. Kacmarcik, too, embraced this sense of vocation, one in which God initiated and he responded. "A vocation means that one lives in responsible obedience to God in the way that God has so destined" and to this end, although the actual work is not the vocation, "it is the significant opportunity for the person to give evidence of the calling given them."[20]

Those who discern a vocation sort through the movements of their heart and unfold the truth of who they most deeply are. It is discernment that reveals the best way to live in truth before God. When Kacmarcik looked deeply into himself and when, with typi-

cal Kacmarcik integrity, he defined his true self and his God-given gifts, he knew that to be a sacred artist was his calling in life. He said: "And since then, I have never had any question about my vocation in life. I have been spared that uncertainty and indecision . . . [T]he conviction that I was going to be some sort of church artist has remained with me."[21] Looking at this part of Kacmarcik's life and his dedication to it allows one to conclude that the energy of the religious vocation that was not meant to be his in the early 1940s fueled what he then considered to be his true vocation as artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts. To amplify, I quote Parker Palmer, internationally renowned teacher, author and education activist: "We must take the no of the way that closes and find the guidance it has to offer—and take the yes of the way that opens and respond with the yes of our lives."[22] This is what Kacmarcik did. He responded with a full and resounding yes to the way that opened to him when he was first asked to leave Saint John's Abbey and then several years later, when he was likewise asked to leave Saint John's University.

III. Kindred Spirits in Relation to Vocation

Kacmarcik and Merton seemed to have been kindred spirits in their understanding of vocation. It has been written:

> Retrospectively, it is clear that Merton conceived of his vocation as fundamentally that of a writer—a monk striving to find God through language. . . . What the mature writer knows is that God chose to place him in a monastery, but since he was first a writer, and a monk second, God allowed him to work his way closer to the Divine through the writing.[23]

In Merton's own words: " . . . it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one . . . this seems to be my lot and my vocation. It is what God has given me in order that I might give it back to Him."[24] Similarly, Kacmarcik said: "I can't sing. I have no charm. I have no beauty. But I do have gifts in art. I cannot take pride in this. It is from God. It could be lost in a moment."[25] These statements are like a clear window into the souls and motivations of these two artists and monks. Both were committed to their God-given gifts and talents. Both took their gifts seriously and spent their lives stewarding them. There are not many people who have such confi-

dence in their gifts and who are able to acknowledge them so truthfully. However, when one has an accurate view of him- or herself this is humility at its best and the kind that brings with it the freedom to respond to the gifts and talents that have been given so they do not become sterile or ineffective. For Kacmarcik, and likewise for Merton, their vocation as sacred artist and writer respectively, was never a goal to be achieved. Rather, it was a calling to be received, responded to, and lived. It was a gift that became an obligation. It was a gift to be lived out in service. "True vocation joins self and service."[26] This is what Kacmarcik, and undoubtedly Merton as well, did. Each of them joined who they were with service and as a result of that partnership were able to make remarkable contributions.

In 1947, the year that Merton professed his solemn vows, Kacmarcik became involved in his first church project. It was the year that *Mediator Dei* was promulgated by Pope Pius XII. This is the document believed to have given official endorsement to the American Liturgical Movement. From then until his death in 2004 Kacmarcik rendered considerable and distinguished additions to the artistic sphere of the liturgical movement, designing worship spaces that both anticipated and supported the liturgical renewal called for by Vatican II and the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963). It has been said that "it was not until Frank Kacmarcik came onto the scene . . . that modern church architecture took its rightful place within the liturgical movement, with the creation of high-quality, uniquely American structures for the gathering of the Mystical Body of Christ."[27] Like Merton, Kacmarcik was a prophet of sorts. While it is true that he did not necessarily discover new things, Kacmarcik was able to make fresh designs from a deep understanding of tradition and thus create that which would be able to speak to people of the present age in a manner that was both timeless and enduring. Moreover, the prominence and effectiveness of Merton and Kacmarcik resulted from one of the essential characteristics of a prophet: the courage to be critical. Both men were known for outspoken criticism in their respective fields. It cannot be denied that if one is truly to be a prophet, the ability to be penetratingly demanding is imperative. Critical confrontation, whether in written word or visual art, provided it is based on truth and rooted in love, can be a positive propheticism calling the Church and the people of God to be more. In this regard, Kacmarcik, along with Merton, excelled.

Kacmarcik's contributions to the development and design of liturgical space and furnishings in American Roman Catholic churches for more than fifty-five years are noteworthy. They are contributions that called the Church and the people of God to be more. A vision that grew from within enabled Kacmarcik to pioneer the role of liturgical consultant. By honoring his truest self and his authentic talents Kacmarcik was able to set the standards and identify an essential ministry in the Church. This ministry proved itself to be indispensable to the proper renovation and design of church buildings and furnishings for worship. Taking the responsibility seriously and using his talented response-ability Kacmarcik gave shape and form to a role in the Church that would more than likely not have been had otherwise. "Liturgical Consultant" is the title that Kacmarcik first coined in 1954 and subsequently sanctioned by his work. Although this ministry was accepted and valued by many, it was not given official recognition until 1978 when *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW), guidelines for the building and renovation of liturgical space, was issued by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. In this document the liturgical consultant is acknowledged for the first time as "an invaluable partner of the architect, for the purposes of the space can be imagined and the place creatively designed only by a competent designer who is nourished with the liturgy's tradition . . ." (EACW, Article 48). Kacmarcik was indeed a competent designer but he viewed himself as more than a designer. As a liturgical consultant Kacmarcik considered himself a deacon and a visual theologian, roles that he took most seriously.

The word deacon is known to be derived from the Greek word *diakonos* meaning servant and helper. In the early centuries of the Church it referred to a specific office. The designated mission of the deacon was one of service to the people of God. While it is true that the role of deacon had its ups and downs, thus causing its importance to shift and decline throughout the centuries before being reinstated by Vatican II as a permanent ministry of service in the Catholic Church, its essence was always about service.[28] This is primarily why Kacmarcik described himself as a deacon. Although his ministry and service as a liturgical consultant was not an ordained one in the literal sense, for him it was holy and sacred, one conferred on him by the power of God. Kacmarcik believed strongly that a sacred artist is one who has a Christian

vocation, a diaconal ministry as it were, just as surely as does a priest. His belief was rooted in an understanding of the common priesthood, the priesthood of all believers.

The Church teaches that Christ, high priest and mediator, has made the Church "a kingdom, priests for his God and Father" (Revelation 1: 6). The whole community of believers, by virtue of their baptism, is priestly. They exercise their priesthood through their vocation and participation in "Christ's mission as priest, prophet and king."[29] In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in November of 1964, it is clear that the faithful share in the one priesthood of Christ. Articles 10-12 of Chapter II, "The People of God," are a well-defined description of the dignity of the people of God as they are called to be participants in the kingship, priesthood and prophetic office of Christ. The concept of the common priesthood is dealt with extensively and finds its basis in strong biblical foundations.[30]

The ministry of the people of God derives its nature from the ministry of Jesus Christ. All believers, by virtue of their baptism, are participants in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ and are called to use their gifts in service to the Church. In quoting Martin Luther it can be further explained:

> Luther said, "All Christians are priests and all priests are Christians." Luther argued that the simple milkmaid or tailor with the Word of God in his or her hands was able to please God and minister the things of God as effectively as the priest, the prelate and the pope himself (*Babylonian Captivity of the Church* 2.284).[31]

This kind of explanation and understanding gave Kacmarcik the validity he felt was necessary to call himself a deacon of the visual arts:

> I have the role of deacon. It is not yet formalized but we already have the power. We are baptized into the common priesthood and into ministry. And I started that right off from the beginning. There has been no following consultant who quite operated the way I do. I always insisted that my service was a religious service.[32]
>
> I function as a deacon. In the 1940s you knew that was officially an impossibility but when you already have the power you do not worry about such trivialities.[33]

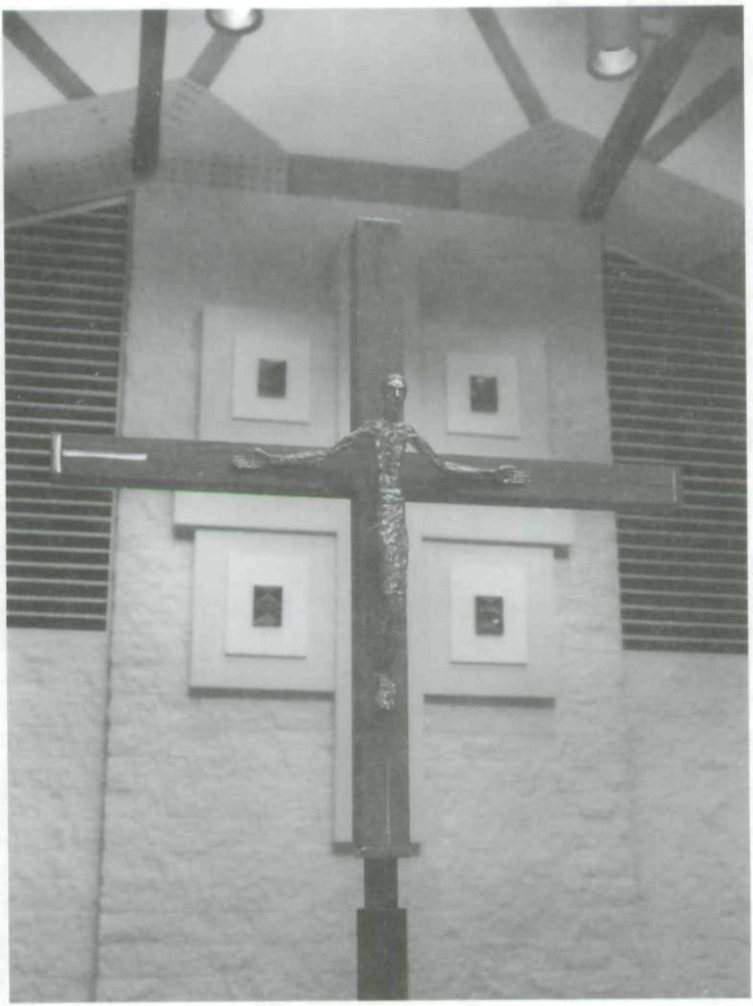
It is conceivable that the nature of Kacmarcik's work also contributed to his view of it as a religious service, a ministry. Being involved in the design of liturgical space and furnishings meant that the fruit of his labors would impact the worship of the people of God. Likewise, it would influence the people's understanding of their participation in the mission of the Church to which they are called by virtue of their baptism. Kacmarcik's consciousness of the priesthood of the laity could not help but impact his church design. His understanding of the priesthood of believers not only shaped his role as a "deacon" of the arts but likewise shaped his design work as a liturgical consultant.

Although Kacmarcik never earned a degree in theology or formally studied theology, he still considered himself a theologian, specifically a visual theologian. According to the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, issued in 1990 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the role of the theologian is to seek the truth which is the living God, to respond dynamically and to communicate that truth.[34] If a theologian is one who seeks, responds to and communicates truth, then a theologian such as Kacmarcik, a sacred artist, would be one who accomplishes that through the visual arts. The artist, in the role of teacher of knowledge and truth, imparts a visual theology through the work of art and design.

Another interesting insight into the definition of a theologian is proposed by Jürgen Moltmann. His thesis is that every believer is a theologian: "Every Christian, man or woman, young or old, who believes and thinks at all about that belief is a theologian."[35] Moltmann recognizes that theology is about seeking understanding and theologians are those who teach that understanding. At the same time, it is his conviction that theology does not aim to know its object, God, in order to dominate God; rather:

> Theology belongs to the sphere of knowledge that sustains existence, [which] gives us courage to live and consolation in dying. It is the knowledge that lends us bearings, the knowledge we seek in order to perceive the path we are to take.[36]

While one might wonder what this has to do with the design of liturgical space, it can be clarified in the work of Kacmarcik who saw himself as a visual theologian who strove for the truth and who believed that the theology and truth communicated by the design of the space is indispensable for the Church and the educa-



Saint Francis of Assisi Processional Cross
Raleigh, North Carolina
1995

tion and spiritual growth of its community of worshiping faithful. Kacmarcik was a fervent believer that the liturgical environment has a purpose far greater than the designer behind it and is about much more than advanced technology and pure aesthetics. As leading Lutheran architect Edward Sovik has said, the design of liturgical space "is a means not simply of accomplishing technical intention, but of dealing with ideas, and at its most serious, with the disclosure of truth."[37] Although not specifically using the term "visual theology," Sovik is clear that architecture can, and must, reflect "commitment to truth and to the authentic" and as such, church architecture "ought to be absolutely forthright, entirely authentic" in its expression of the truth which it is about.[38]

As a liturgical consultant and as a visual theologian, by his design of liturgical space and furnishings Kacmarcik was a communicator. As an artist, and in the role of teacher of knowledge and truth, Kacmarcik imparted visual theology through his work. Visual theology, according to Frank Nieset, has three parts. Several years ago, Nieset spoke of visual theology in terms of the how, the what and the why. He specified that it is the artist's talent that enables the how of the expression; the sincerity in the spiritual life based on true knowledge of theology that brings about the what of the expression; and the courage of the artist to combine the how and the what for the education and enlightenment of others that defines the why of the expression.[39] In light of this explanation Kacmarcik stands as an example of one who was talented and sincerely spiritual; he was courageous in using those two traits to produce visual arts that were theologically sound. An example would be the Glorified Crucifix, a major theological symbol in Kacmarcik's work and one that appeared frequently throughout his career as an artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts.

Kacmarcik had strong feelings about the crucifix that finds its place in a worship space. Early in his career he was encouraged by friend and mentor, Paschal Botz, OSB, to design a Glorified Crucifix. It was designed for homes, offices, classrooms and sick rooms but almost immediately became his inspiration for the crucifix to be used in a worship space as well. The Glorified Crucifix is a perfect specimen of visual theology. Botz taught Kacmarcik that a crucifix of this type would be a return to the glorified conception of the cross that had prevailed in the Church for many centuries, the concept of which prevails in the liturgy. It is a type of crucifix that preceded the sorrowful type. However, it does not

deny Christ's sufferings and this is apparent in Kacmarcik's design. The corpus that graces the cross always shows the wounds of Christ while visualizing the living Christ "in the glorified state in which he now exists."[40] It does not deny the way of the cross for Christians but recalls that the full Christian mystery is suffering, death and resurrection. It serves as a strong reminder that the vision of the Glorified Christ is the power that transforms ordinary suffering into Christian suffering. A message of faith is conveyed as well as a challenge of hope. This is the visual theology that is manifested in the crucifixes Kacmarcik advocated for a worship space. Through the years many different designs revolving around the theological concept of the Glorified Christ on the cross were fashioned by Kacmarcik. The designs, while most pleasing, are, more importantly, theologically sound and in possession of context and truth. This was very important to Kacmarcik. The visual theology that the design communicated was the theology by which the worshiping assembly would be shaped. That the crucifix will allow an assembly of believers to imagine the entire paschal mystery is a conviction that Kacmarcik maintained throughout his entire career as a liturgical consultant. Informed by sound Catholic doctrine, created with intuitive artistic talent, and exhibitive of a reliable visual theology, the designs of Kacmarcik's Glorified Crucifix have endured through the years and continue to be viable. The integrity of their message and design is of a quality that is indeed timeless and a confidence that was both accurate and precise.

As a visual theologian Kacmarcik had a "homiletic," a message as it were, an instruction that he preached faithfully throughout his life. It was simple yet profound and it was his mantra as a liturgical consultant. Based on the famous words of Winston Churchill, "we shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us," Kacmarcik consistently stated over and over again that "we are formed or deformed by the art and environment we experience around us."[41] Whether it was a workshop or a seminar, a symposium or an interview, a conference or a consultation, Kacmarcik always found a way to convey this message to any and all audiences.

It was Kacmarcik's opinion that the visual environment is not merely about aesthetics, and thus he was insistent that at all times people should be in touch with the realization that the environment, any environment, is very influential. Comprehension of this

fact leads to an alertness and awareness that will unfold in critical discernment, judicious evaluation and a demand for quality in the renovation or design of liturgical space. Kacmarcik saw this as a huge challenge as a result of what he termed visual literacy.

Back in the 1960s Kacmarcik made the headlines when he said that 98% of the clergy were visually illiterate and a somewhat higher percentage of the hierarchy.[42] His audacity to say such a thing caused quite a furor. Although it meant losing a job or two his integrity and his certainty of accuracy in this regard prevented him from any retraction of the statement whatsoever. Several years later, while in a panel discussion about the need artists and clergy have for one another, Kacmarcik reiterated this same view and said quite strongly:

> Most clergymen are visually illiterate. If the church needed the artist in the past, it needs him [or her] more than ever today because we are living in the most visual age in history. Through visual environment, we form or deform people spiritually. Religious leaders should be concerned about the witnessing power of a visual setting.[43]

Liturgical space is a teacher and this is what Kacmarcik hoped to convey by his firm conviction that as teacher it has the potential to form or deform. In support of this position William Seth Adams makes an important statement:

> The setting, the environment in which the liturgy is celebrated is where the body of Christ is formed, edified, nourished. Liturgical spaces are profound teachers of the nature of the church and they are central to the process of formation. Thus, theological deliberation about liturgical space, about spatial expression, about "meaning," is fundamental to the making of Christians.[44]

Everything about liturgical space, everything that contributes to its arrangement and quality, has the ability to shape the faith community who gathers in it. Therefore, the space must possess an honesty that allows it to be faithful and true to its function, thus enabling it to form rather than deform the worshipers. This honesty must be one that evolves from truthfulness in design, in use of materials and in the actual building of the place. This is a concept that was roundly supported by Sovik:

> Architecture is an expression and communicative medium, revealing and echoing the minds of its builders and forming or deforming those who subject themselves to its message. Therefore, a church will attempt in its configuration of space and substance to be a faithful and lucid evocation, a shelter which asserts in the language of architecture the self-understanding of the community and thus helps it to become what it is.[45]

Sovik strongly believes in the power of a church building to communicate and if it was to communicate well, then it must be true and honest in every respect. In his book, *Architecture for Worship*, he outlines some misconceptions about church architecture, all of which could lend to making a liturgical space more deformative than formative. It is his contention that good church architecture is about more than skillful solutions to technical problems, more than a pleasant appeal to the senses, more than a space that simply provides an exciting sensual experience, and more than a matter of self-expression.[46] True and lasting meaning must be suggested, inspiration as to the purpose of community must be imparted, and spiritual significance must be conveyed so that values not communicable by any other means can be expressed and embraced, taught and learned. It is only when guided by an understanding such as this that a liturgical space can indeed be formative as it should be.

This corresponds well to some of Merton's feelings about architecture. Merton was convinced that Cistercian architecture was beautiful primarily because it was right: "Our Fathers did not build according to canons of beauty, but according to notions of what was right for monks."[47] Merton suggested as well that what was "right" was also formative. In one of his journals he made a correlation between the architecture and the prayer of Cistercians saying that "Cistercian architecture explains many things about our rule and life. A church . . . is born of prayer and is a prayer. Its simplicity and its energy tell us what our prayer should be . . . ."[48] Consequently, in its effective telling the environment makes an impression and is thus able to be formative. The liturgical space influences and impacts the individual and the community and has the potential to shape and enable the community's prayer.

Another liturgical consultant, Robert Rambusch, a contemporary as well as a friend of Kacmarcik, also supported Kacmarcik's

idea about the ability of the liturgical environment to form or deform:

> The designs of church buildings will either encourage and enhance participation or limit and frustrate it. Whatever is newly built has consequences; whatever is left unchanged has consequences. We are formed or deformed by our worship environment. If you are going to build a church you are going to create something that speaks. It will speak of values and meanings, it will go on speaking. If it speaks of wrong values it will go on destroying.[49]

Clearly, this insight gives credence to the power of a liturgical environment and the reality that the created and established space will, by its very nature, continue to have an effect long after the last stone is laid and the doors are opened. The articulation of theology with stones and mortar makes of itself a lasting image and one that is not easily reworded. Therefore, great care must be taken to insure that the expressed theology is indeed one that is true so as to be formative in the best possible sense. As Rambusch further explains, "Church architecture is not only a reflection of values, it is an imposition of values."[50] As such, those values must be carefully thought out and planned for in design and representation. Kacmarcik had remarked on more than one occasion that the Church structure forms the people's spirit. Therefore, liturgical design is not something that can be taken lightly or done thoughtlessly. Much is at stake in the liturgical, theological and spiritual formation that will result because of it.

Marchita Mauck, a teacher and author who also works as a liturgical design consultant, expresses the importance of the environment being a vehicle of liturgical theology but also adds to the concept:

> Building and renovating is about translating a liturgical theology . . . and beauty into three dimensions. It is about forming a holy people whose lives are transformed, motivated, formed and sustained by their experience in that place.[51]

While the space is indeed formative or deformative, what happens in the space is likewise formative and deformative. Her thesis is that buildings themselves don't do the forming or deforming; rather, the buildings can "invite experiences" that enable the forming or deforming.[52] Her point is well made and is certainly

not at odds with Kacmarcik's "homiletic." Undoubtedly, this is the basis for a design solution with the potential to be formative: an understanding of how the building is to function, an understanding of what is to take place in the building. Building or renovating liturgical space is about much more than construction. At its very best it is about instruction, about a space that teaches and communicates, about a space that forms and transforms. While it is true that a liturgical space should delight the worshipers, it is equally true and doubly important that it direct the worshipers. It must be a space that leads them to an ever-growing and ever-deepening understanding of what it means to be the mystical body of Christ at work together in the celebration of God in worship.

Essentially, Kacmarcik had an intuitive sense of the ability of a liturgical space to be a teacher. As well-stated, again by Adams, "Liturgical spaces are powerful teachers. They teach the Church about the Church: about who we are, how we work, what we do, what is important to us, who is important to us; and they teach us about God."[53] In this respect, Kacmarcik's knowledge and understanding of the power of sacred art and architecture cannot be minimized. His commitment to authentic truth is foundational to the visual theology to which his designs and works give form, forms whose value could be easily acknowledged by an explanation given by Romano Guardini (1885-1968), one of the generators of the Liturgical Movement: "Authentic religious [sacred] art [and architecture] is essentially a way to God and vice versa."[54]

IV. Parallels in How Kacmarcik and Merton Function as Theologians

Kacmarcik functioned as a theologian in much the same way that Merton did. Insight into Merton as "theologian" is particularly apropos: "In a profound way, Merton is a 'theologian' in the oldest sense of the term—not as a professional thinker in the service of ideas and not as a person of systematic theological reflection, but as someone who knows how to speak of God authentically."[55] Like Merton, who knew how to speak of God authentically through his writings, Kacmarcik knew how to speak of God authentically as a deacon of the arts and a visual theologian. As a Visual Theologian, Kacmarcik's "homiletic" was his first and foremost impulse of design. Respecting and reverencing the power of a liturgical environment to be either formative or deformative is what enabled Kacmarcik's works to be both exceptional and distinguished. As

such, they are sometimes acclaimed and other times roundly criticized, acknowledged though not always appreciated. Nevertheless, it was work that became noteworthy and important to the development of Roman Catholic liturgical space and furnishings both before and after Vatican II, making its mark over a period of more than fifty-five years and continuing to have impact to the present day.

As theologians, each in their own right, Merton and Kacmarcik not only spoke of God, they led others to God. Through their words and their works, their lives and their living, they guided and inspired, persuaded and convinced. Merton strongly adhered to the belief that authenticity made a good monk and a good theologian. The Truth upheld was to be genuine; the Truth served was to be undisguised. Throughout his career as a liturgical consultant Kacmarcik had been clear that sacred artists perform a spiritual service through their work and as a result, are to be considered spiritual directors of the visual form. By taking his role as theologian seriously, he became a master who performed his duties well. His work was a service and as servant, Kacmarcik served the Church and its tradition with sensitivity and excellence, creating images and spaces that had the power to speak with clarity and distinction. The value of any art work or design as regards liturgical space is the instruction and inspiration it provides. Kacmarcik understood this and had a clear perception of how the artist-designer and consultant in the sacred arts, the liturgical consultant, functioned as a visual theologian.

Merton knew Kacmarcik as a liturgical consultant and champion of the arts. He expressed that he was "glad Frank [Kacmarcik] is keeping his head above water and defending the cause of sacred art step by step."[56] To this end, Merton further supported him by responding to Kacmarcik's request in the 1950s for specific prayers related to his cause and composed three prayers: the first, "For Vocations in the Realm of Sacred Art;" the second, "In Selecting an Artist for a Sacred Work;' and the third, "For the Artist and for the Work in Progress." Kacmarcik used these prayers throughout his career, particularly the one for more vocations in Sacred Art, a vocation he believed in and lived, embraced and encouraged. At the same time, he never gave up his monastic heart and, as he was fond of saying, "after maturing and getting experience out in the world for forty-five years," he found his way back to the monastery. He was accepted as a claustral oblate and made his

promises in 1988. For Kacmarcik, it was a homecoming for which he had longed and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to live the life of a monk, welcomed by his brother monks as a community member of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville.

Kacmarcik and Merton were men committed to their faith, to their God-given gifts, to their monastic vocations. Robert Rambusch, good friend of Kacmarcik and admirer of Merton, recalled visiting Gethsemani with Kacmarcik around 1960. He said that Merton knew Kacmarcik's work and was appreciative of it. His observation of Kacmarcik and Merton interacting with one another clearly revealed Kacmarcik and Merton as two men who shared a love for art as well as a love for monasticism. Rambusch said, "They were real gangbusters; they were both exciting and successful and they shared vigor and zeal." Rambusch particularly appreciated the openness they exhibited and recounted Kacmarcik's extreme reaction to the room where they were received at the monastery. The reception room was, in Kacmarcik's opinion, a very sensual purple. When Merton arrived to greet them, Kacmarcik asked him whoever chose such a color, one that Kacmarcik declared made the room "look like a brothel." Merton heartily agreed while adding that it was "reminiscent of [his] pre-*Seven Storey Mountain* days!" Rambusch further recounted that Kacmarcik had a knack for enlivening conversations and remarked that "interesting people were interested in him and it was not surprising that he and Merton hit it off so well." Combine this with Merton's ability to unleash inquisitive minds and you find that any time shared by Merton and Kacmarcik was more than likely a real heyday for both of them.[57]

As artists and as monks Kacmarcik and Merton lived their lives powerfully motivated to glorify God in all things. By embracing their talents and using them in service to God and God's people, they were successful. The contributions they made to the Church and to the world were exceptional as a result of their entering deeply into their Christian vocation and as a result of their being faithful to their unique abilities. However, perhaps in the end, what was most important was the communion with God that their vocation as monk and artist provided them for it is without doubt that the "Divine Being pulsed through [their] talent"[58] and took flesh in exciting and innovative ways through their creative genius.

It is well known that Eric Gill said that the artist is not a special kind of person, but every person is a special kind of artist. This same idea was supported by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), friend of Gill and admired by Merton. Merton took the concept a step further and suggested that it applied not only to artists but to Christians and proposed that "the creative Christian is not a special kind of Christian, but every Christian has his [or her] own creative work to do, his [or her] own part in the mystery of the 'new creation.'"[59] As such, Kacmarcik and Merton, good artists as well as good Christians, accepted the responsibility to participate in "the work of restoring all things in Christ" through their creative activities and, as a result, brought God to fuller revelation in the world. No doubt, from their home in eternity they both echo the words Merton wrote for Kacmarcik and together pray: "Send [them] now people of vision who will open [their] eyes once again to see your incorruptible light . . . teach [them] to see with pure hearts the splendor of your Son Jesus Christ and to express what they have seen in images [and words and actions] 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."[60]

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