

Selected 1999 International Thomas Merton Society Papers

Introduction: To See the Beauty of their Hearts: The Contemplative Aesthetics of Thomas Merton

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When I was asked to be a guest editor for this volume of *The Merton Annual* by George Kilcourse, I faced the challenge with more than a little apprehension. After all, for the past 20 years I was the one whose work had been constantly scrutinized, critiqued and edited by others. Now, suddenly, I was the editor, but one who had hopefully learned enough to say something intelligent and helpful for other Merton writers.

As I entered into the process of editing, I discovered that my apprehension soon turned into enthusiasm and joy as I caught glimpses of how Merton's works had been perceived and understood by others. And, as I read the manuscripts over and over again, it struck me that they were interwoven by a common thread—that of beauty. I would like to explore a bit of this dimension of beauty by retelling a story by Merton's friend John Howard Griffin.¹ Next I will relate how this same story has had an impact in my own life. I will then introduce the papers that I edited in light of the unifying image of beauty. In conclusion I will offer some remarks about how Merton's experience of what is fundamentally the beauty of God, could be an important focal point for dialogue in a post-Christian culture.²

1. John Howard Griffin, 'The Controversial Merton', in Gerald Twomey (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 80-91.

2. For an insightful essay regarding the influence of beauty in Merton's own conversion, see Robert Barron, 'The Mind of Trust: Beginning with Merton', in *idem, And Now I See... A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp. 55-68.

The original telling of the story happened on a cold, blustery day in late February 1963. John Griffin had come to the Abbey of Gethsemani to see Thomas Merton and when they met Merton immediately asked Griffin to tell him about Clyde Kennard. Griffin told the following story.

Kennard was a young African American man who, while serving in the military, had completed three years of college courses at the University of Chicago. After leaving the military he returned to his hometown in Hattisburg, Mississippi and there became a successful farmer. Yet this success was not enough; Kennard decided that he wanted to complete his college education and announced his desire to attend the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattisburg. As you read about this request now it probably raises no concern, but in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with segregated schooling still the norm in this country, the mere mention of seeking enrollment in an all-white institution raised great alarm in the community. Although warned that he might face death or a trumped-up prison sentence if he persisted in his efforts, Clyde Kennard refused to back away from the injustices of racism and segregation because of a sense of responsibility he felt for the children he hoped to have in the future. The promise of retaliation for his desire to complete his education was kept. To prevent him from attempting to enroll at the university Kennard was arrested and accused of purchasing \$25 of chicken feed, that the authorities claimed, he knew had been stolen. A trial was held and he was sentenced to seven years at Parchemin Penitentiary.

After he had served three years of his prison sentence Clyde Kennard became critically ill and was diagnosed with cancer that had gone untreated. When his condition was determined to be terminal and the news of his impending demise became public, he was released from prison and flown to a hospital in Chicago where his diagnosis and prognosis was confirmed. Now, as John Griffin related the story to Thomas Merton, Clyde Kennard had only a short time to live.

Visibly shaken by the story that he heard, Merton wrote about it in his journal and lamented about the future of a country that would allow such injustice to prevail.³ When they met again at dusk to say goodbye, Merton gave Griffin one of 96 copies of the collector's edition of 'Hagia Sophia', his poem that had been hand-printed by

3. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960-1963; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 330, 338.

Victor Hammer, and asked him to give it to Clyde Kennard.⁴ Griffin, in re-telling the story wrote, 'It was in many ways a foolish gesture, an "absurd" act—to give such a treasure to a man who was already virtually dead; an act of gratuitous charity so spontaneous it carried the message not only to Clyde Kennard, but to much of the black population of the United States'.⁵

But Clyde Kennard did not think Merton's gift to be either foolish or absurd. Denied books during his imprisonment, he accepted Merton's gift, not because of the handsome leather binding, the fineness of the paper, or the exquisite nature of the hand-printing, but because of the gift of Wisdom that he discovered in reading the book. Here, in pain and suffering, helplessly dying from the cancer that raged throughout his body, as well as the cancer of racism, Kennard, defenseless and radically poor, was awakened by the gentle, silent sweetness of Wisdom. Here he gave himself to God as Mother, the feminine tenderness of the divine, experienced as mercy and love. Here, he was found by the Blessed Virgin Mary and was joined to the sufferings of the Crucified One, who in weakness and agony dies for the love of us. With his life ending, he clung to Merton's gift; three and a half months later he died, holding it to his chest; and was buried with it still held to his chest. Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, had given him and the African American community a source of healing and hope. As Clyde Kennard's mother stated, 'Father Louis' gift was one of the few acts of mercy her son had known at the hands of white people during the last agonizing years of his life'.⁶

I was also given healing and hope by Merton's beautiful gift of Hagia Sophia. In my work as a newborn intensive care nurse, I too was in need of the mercy and grace of Wisdom, for I found myself in the desert confronting the apparent absence of God and broken by the deaths of innocent babies. Time and time again I stood helpless at the bedside of dying infants and in my helplessness found myself angry because God had not intervened to save these poor innocent little ones. And yet, one day, sad and lost, I read the story of Clyde Kennard and of Merton's seemingly useless gift of 'Hagia Sophia'. Suddenly I realized that although Merton's gift had neither healed Kennard's cancer and saved his life, nor ended racism, segregation

4. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', poem originally in *Emblems in a Season of Fury* (1963), in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 363-71.

5. Griffin, 'The Controversial Merton', p. 88.

6. Griffin, 'The Controversial Merton', p. 89.

and violence, it had softened one man's dying and given hope to the community around him. It was then that I knew I had been demanding answers to the wrong questions. The questions were not about why God allowed babies to suffer, or what God was going to do about dying babies—but what was I going to do about it? It was then that I experienced the compassion and gentleness of Wisdom who came to me as a mother and a sister, not when I was strong and capable, but when my heart was broken. Now, I was prepared to listen.

And listen I did. I began to read, to think, to pray, and to pay attention to what parents told me they needed when their infants were dying. Slowly I began to be with them in their pain, not with easy answers or quick fixes, but hopefully by sharing with them the compassion and mercy that I have been given by Wisdom. I began to see a certain but almost inexplicable beauty of being with dying babies and their parents; I began to sense the presence of Christ and in that presence to experience a depth of healing, paradoxically revealed in and through the sorrow and pain. When parents could not be present I held their dying children and encouraged my colleagues to do the same, so that no baby would die alone. There I found myself acutely aware of the sacredness of each breath and each heartbeat, all a revelation of God in the simplicity of living and of dying in the hope of the resurrection. There I discovered the many dimensions of healing, some of which seem incomprehensible according to the standards of human calculation. There I contemplated the seeming absurdity of death and the freedom of letting go of the illusions that seemed to promise to protect me from pain, suffering and death itself. And there I knew gentleness and tenderness and compassion of Wisdom—and the poverty and love of the Crucified Christ, all precipitated by a monk who reached out to a dying man and offered him a beautiful gift of divine care.

This beauty, a manifestation of the divine Beauty of God can also be found as a unifying theme in the essays that I was privileged to edit for this volume. William Apel, in his essay 'Ninevah to Calvary: Thomas Merton and a Spiritual Geography of the Bible', examines the meaning, use, and influence of sacred scripture in Merton's spiritual journey. Scripture not only provided Merton with a fundamental grounding for his spirituality, but also formed a living tradition, from Jonas to the Crucified Christ, which enlivened his religious imagination. This led him into a heightened awareness of the depths of his intimate relationship with God and with the scope of God's love, compassion, and mercy for all people.

In 'Merton's Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God',

Margaret Bridget Betz, skilfully unfolds the complex interweaving of the spiritual and psychological integration of the masculine and feminine in Merton's on-going transformation. In an analysis of Merton's art, his poetry, particularly 'Hagia Sophia', his own contemplative vision and the transforming power of icons, Margy traces the contours of this integration. As a person who has 'looked at' Merton's drawings many times, but has never really 'seen' them, I found this essay to be particularly fascinating.

Mitch Finley, who originally presented his paper as one of keynote addresses at the ITMS Meeting in Canada last summer, writes of 'The Joy of Being Catholic: The Relationship of the Conversion of Thomas Merton to the RCIA'. In doing so he presents dynamics of Merton's on-going conversion from his youth to his final years and draws out implications for those who participate in the RCIA. Here is found, in the words of the author, '...a Catholicism that is open to goodness, truth, and beauty wherever it may be found', and one that calls forth a spirit of freedom and a faith which transcends and challenges mere cultural respectability.

'Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry: Reflections from a Parallel Universe', written by Dennis Patrick O'Hara, is a presentation of the complementary work of Thomas Berry and Thomas Merton regarding the ecological crisis of the cosmos. For both writers this crisis is caused by the sinful human failure to recognize creation as a transparent manifestation of God's love and beauty in and through Christ in which God, human persons, and the cosmos are created to be in communion with one another. As such, the restoration of this original divine design of communion would involve a radical transformation of human consciousness for authentic critical thinking and contemplative awareness.

Lynn Szabo's presentation, 'The Sound of Sheer Silence: A Study in the Poetics of Thomas Merton', is an exploration of the dynamic contemplative dimension of silence in Merton's poetry from *The Early Poems* to *The Geography of Lograire*. Such a study is, I believe, particularly important in addressing a question that has yet to be considered seriously by Merton scholars. Was Merton a mystic? It is surprising to me, that to my knowledge, although he is often identified by scholars as a mystic, a critical systematic consideration of this question has not been presented. It is my contention that in considering the question, the answer may lie in an investigation of his poetry and in the relationship between Merton as poet and Merton as possible mystic.

A last essay, 'The Road to Simplicity Followed by Merton's Friends: Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax', by Paul Spaeth, is a consideration of

simplicity as a formative, unifying dimension of the monastic Cistercian spirituality of Thomas Merton, of the paintings of Ad Reinhardt, and of the poetry of Robert Lax. These three college friends discovered, each in his own way, the power of simplicity as a channel leading to the divine.

Thomas Merton experienced the transformative beauty of God reflected in nature, in art, in the words of scripture and poetry, in wordless silence, in the Catholic Church, and as shining from the hearts of human persons. It is this beauty that captured his own heart and led him not only inward, but also outside of himself in the service of others. It is this same beauty that, I believe, can be an attractive alternative to the illusory beauties presented by a culture vainly searching for peace and love. Thomas Merton's words, as these authors have shown, can direct us to be awake to the beauty of paradise that is all around us and calls, if we but dare to listen, to us to be holy and good.