

God Accompanies Persons: Thomas Merton and Pope Francis on Gender and Sexual Diversity

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We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty.

Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*¹

In their preparations for the 2015 centenary celebration of Thomas Merton's birth, the organizing team of the International Thomas Merton Society took their inspiration in part from a wonderfully provocative untitled poem in which Merton writes: "All theology is a kind of birthday / Each one who is born / Comes into the world as a question / For which old answers / Are not sufficient."² Extending these images from the poem into its call for papers, the committee suggested that Merton's life and writings "are not merely historically important, but offer a prophetic witness to a vision that points a way into the future. The centenary offers an opportunity to consider how we too might set aside easy answers and wrestle with the urgent questions of our day."³

There are few questions more urgent today for which "old answers are not sufficient" than the question of how to account for gender and sexual diversity theologically, sacramentally, in God and in the life of the church. Merton's intuition that "all theology is a kind of birthday" is especially poignant in light of this question. As Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland of Boston College asks, "What are gays and lesbians to do with their bodies, their selves?"⁴ A great many thoughtful people who love the church and who also love their gay and lesbian friends,

1. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel* n. 167 (<http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/>).

2. *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 191; subsequent references will be cited as "IDD" parenthetically in the text.

3. International Thomas Merton Society website (<http://merton.org/2015>).

4. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 55-84; subsequent references will be cited as "Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*" parenthetically in the text.

transgender and bisexual sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, are asking for theological clarity on this most vexatious of all issues of human difference. A great many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have suffered for too long a kind of existential and theological loneliness, with too little room for their bodies, their very selves, in the life and language of the church. With respect to women, and a patriarchal culture deeply embedded in church life and practice, where does one even begin?

I approach this topic as a Roman Catholic theologian, as a male heterosexual, as a teacher of young people, as a father, husband and friend. In my view, it is not the case – as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and other bishops suggested after the citizens of Ireland voted overwhelmingly to legalize same-sex marriage – that the church primarily has a messaging problem, that it has failed to communicate its teachings on sexuality adequately to the faithful.⁵ It is rather that the church's teachings have been heard, pondered carefully and prayed with, and yet have not been received by a great many of the faithful as reflective of the full dignity and mystery of our sexual and sacramental lives as persons. The theological anthropology that grounds church teachings has been considered carefully and found wanting. To paraphrase Merton's epiphany at Fourth and Walnut, how do you tell gays and lesbians, how do you tell your transgender son or daughter, how do you tell young girls and women that they are walking around shining like the sun?⁶ It begins with the language and imagery with which we surround ourselves and our children in the formative womb of the church.

The intuition I wish to explore in this essay is that both Merton and Pope Francis offer signposts for a way of approaching theological discernment as a kind of birthday, which is to say, they both witness to a profound

5. "[It is very clear that] the church has a huge task in front of it to find the language to be able to talk to and to get its message across to young people, not just on this issue, but in general," Archbishop Martin said after the Irish referendum. Cardinal Pietro Parolin described the outcome as not only "a defeat for Christian principles, but a defeat for humanity," and echoed Archbishop Martin's call for stronger "efforts in evangelization." German Cardinal Walter Kasper described the Irish vote as "emblematic" of today's postmodern belief that "everything is equal," in sharp contrast to church doctrine. The church needs to find new ways and a "new language," said Kasper, to express its fundamental teachings about love, marriage, sexuality and the equal dignity and reciprocal "diversity of man and woman in the order of creation. It's necessary to be careful about not using expressions that can sound offensive without, however, hiding the truth." All citations Catholic News Service, May 26, 2015, cited in *America* online: <http://americamagazine.org/issue/dublin-archbishop-church-needs-reality-check-after-marriage-vote>.

6. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.

openness to dialogue and development on these contested questions. While Pope Francis has thus far given little indication of a willingness to shift the boundary lines of traditional Catholic anthropology, both he and Merton, by emphasizing the dignity of persons over predetermined ideals or fixed principles, gesture to much-needed avenues for renewal in the church's theology of the human person, including new pastoral and theological approaches to sexuality. "In life, God accompanies persons," notes Pope Francis, "and we must accompany them, starting from their situation."⁷ What might be the implications of taking such a starting point utterly seriously, or, for that matter, more playfully and joyfully?

A number of Christian churches have been well out in front of the Roman Catholic Church in wrestling openly through questions around gender and sexuality, not least the Anglican Communion under the courageous leadership of Rowan Williams.⁸ Here my aim is in no way comprehensive but is rather to lay down just a few constructive markers from a Catholic perspective, looking first to Merton, then Pope Francis, and finally a few schematic conclusions. For readers looking to explore these avenues further, the footnotes gesture to a wealth of resources that go much deeper and further theologically than I can hope to do in this essay.

Merton on Gender and Sexual Diversity

From the outset it must be noted that there are few and only scattered references to homosexuality in Merton's writings. The late Fr. Robert Nugent, co-founder of New Ways Ministry and long-time advocate for gay and lesbian Catholics, explores this material in a number of valuable, if now somewhat dated essays, attempting to form a coherent picture of Merton's views on homosexuality in particular.⁹ As Nugent notes, specific

7. Anthony Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis," *America* 209.8 (30 Sept. 2013) 26; subsequent references will be cited as "Spadaro" parenthetically in the text.

8. The Anglican Communion comprises some 85 million people in over 165 countries. Rowan Williams served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002-2012, presiding over a period of controversial developments in its teachings and practices with respect to gender and sexuality in the life of the church. See Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002) 309-21; Rowan Williams, "Women Bishops: Enough Waiting" (19 Oct. 2012); and his successor, Justin Welby, "Sermon to Mark the Twentieth Anniversary of Women Priests" (6 May 2014). For other related writings and addresses, see www.rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org; and www.anglicancommunion.org.

9. See Robert Nugent, "Thomas Merton and the Fairies," *Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement Journal* 49 (October 1990) 4-7, reprinted as "Thomas Merton and Sexual Wholeness," *The Merton Seasonal* 17.1 (Winter 1992) 9-15 (subsequent references will

references to same-sex attraction in Merton's writings typically appear amid broader discussions of chastity and rules for living the monastic life, and are most often couched in the ecclesial code language of "particular friendships."¹⁰ Most come from conferences Merton gave to the novices, and by and large his attitudes reflect those characteristic of the beliefs and presumptions of the Catholic seminary and monastic culture of the 1940s and 1950s, teachings Merton would later describe as "crude theology."¹¹ There is at least one journal reference of 1965, no doubt rather jarring to our ears today, in which Merton, recalling an episode during his student days at Cambridge, refers to homosexuals as "fairies";¹² nevertheless Merton's attitudes on the whole reflect pastoral sensitivity and reticence to pass judgment.

The most explicit reference is found in his letter of January 9, 1967 to an unnamed homosexual, published in *The Road to Joy*, who had written to him for counsel.¹³ Merton addresses the person as "Dear Friend," and,

be cited as "Nugent, 'Sexual Wholeness'" parenthetically in the text); Robert Nugent, "A Movement of Grace," *Emmanuel* (March 1986) 81-88; Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick, *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992) 116. See also John Albert, "Monastica moderna" Bulletin on "Oscar Wilde and Monasticism Today: The Homosexual Question," and on "Thomas Merton and the Fairies," by Robert Nugent, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 27 (1992) 6-7. Other significant studies bearing theologically on gender and sexuality in Merton's writings include: George A. Kilcourse, "Introduction: Spirituality as the Freedom to Channel Eros," *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 7-15; Margaret Betz, "Merton's Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God," *Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 190-207; Victor A. Kramer, "Introduction: Merton's Openness to Change and his Foreshadowing of a Feminist Spirituality," *Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 7-11; Jonathan Montaldo, "A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women from the Drawings and Journals of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 155-72; Dorothy LeBeau, "With Love in the Lord: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether," *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 96-120; Daniel Horan, OFM, "No Spouse Is an Island: Thomas Merton's Contribution Toward a Contemporary Spirituality of Marriage," *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 177-96.

10. On chastity and real and particular friendships, see Thomas Merton Center [TMC] archives: <http://www.merton.org/Research/Manuscripts/search.asp?phrase=%22particular+friendship%22>. There is also a reference to homosexuality in Merton's letter to Abbot James Fox regarding rules for the hermit life (Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994] 239-41).

11. Thomas P. McDonnell, "An Interview with Thomas Merton," *Motive* 27 (Oct. 1967) 33-34.

12. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 198 [1/30/1965]; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.

13. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert

while his advice once again reflects many of the pastoral and psychological assumptions of 1967 – do the best you can, try to fight it, be sorry and avoid the occasions – the central message he conveys to the person is one of patience, self-care and trust in God’s mercy. Surveying all of these references, Nugent judges that Merton “would certainly have been comfortable defending [the] human and civil rights” of homosexuals, and it is likely he would have done so publicly; moreover, his “deep pastoral interests could probably have allowed him to support exceptional pastoral accommodations for certain situations” (Nugent, “Sexual Wholeness” 10). On the other hand, while it would not be fair in Nugent’s judgment to describe Merton as homophobic, nevertheless his belief in the principle of male-female sexual complementarity “probably would have prevented [Merton] from any public wholesale endorsement of homosexual relationships” (Nugent, “Sexual Wholeness” 12, 10).

Nugent is wise to be cautious about reading too much into the scattered material we have on same-sex attraction in Merton’s writings. It certainly would not be fair to pin Merton to a single moment or view surrounding human sexuality. As in everything else, new experiences and exposure to wider horizons opened and transformed him. Yet there are also compelling reasons to suggest that Merton’s perspectives in the late 1960s were developing in directions that would resist and even reject certain pillars of church teachings on sexuality and gender, including classical binary notions of male-female sex and gender complementarity. On this point, the role of Merton’s relationships with women during the 1960s – e.g. his agent Naomi Burton Stone, women religious such as Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, his love affair with Margie in 1966, his reading of feminist literature and dialogue with theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther – probably cannot be overstated.¹⁴

Perhaps the most illuminating window into Merton’s evolving thinking on sexuality – and significantly, a text that Nugent does not consider – is found in a series of retreat conferences given to religious women at Gethsemani in 1967-1968.¹⁵ Of special importance is a conference titled

E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 344-45.

14. See for example Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “‘I Never Had a Sister’: Merton’s friendships with Women,” *The Merton Seasonal* 17.1 (Winter 1992) 4-8.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text. The conferences were transcribed from audiotapes and published after Nugent’s studies were completed. It seems unlikely Nugent was aware of these conferences or the specific nature of their content, since at the time of his research the available indices for these and other audio conferences were poor.

“The Feminine Mystique,” inspired by Betty Friedan’s ground-breaking 1963 book of the same title (*SC* 161-76). Here Merton resists strict binary notions of gender complementarity and, most strikingly, for me, underscores the impoverishment that results for both women and men when our theology of the human person is built on an idealized or rigid conception of what it means to be a woman or man. Commenting on the cultural “mystique” that imbues feminine and masculine identities with certain “necessary” or “essential” characteristics – in contemporary terms, “essentialist” notions of gender identity – Merton says: “We all have to fight against this. We need a whole new theological anthropology, a whole new understanding of what a human being is, what a woman is, what a man is. . . . If our theology is based on this erroneous view of the differences between the sexes, it’s a false theology. It doesn’t work and it will never work” (*SC* 172-73).

Reflecting further on how such a “false theology” plays out in the life of the church, Merton makes some fascinating observations about priestly and religious life in the context of gender essentialism, lamenting the confused and distorted power dynamics between men and women in the life of the church and cloister, as well as the double bind the feminine mystique presents for women, who are expected to conform to either of two extremes: the “Madonna” or “Playboy Bunny” mystique (see *SC* 166-67). Neither is worthy of the dignity and complexity of human personality. No less damaging, Merton insists, are constricted or essentialized images of masculinity: the “American man is half a human being, with his masculinity overemphasized. Think of the things a man cannot allow himself to do because he thinks they’re feminine” (*SC* 166). Gesturing to Jungian psychology, he speaks of the importance of integration and wholeness in the development of our lives as sexual persons: “we have to come to terms with the masculine and the feminine in ourselves” (*SC* 174). He praises Saint Teresa as an exemplar of a Christian who, guided by grace, “broke through” the feminine mystique and “then transcended it.” In sum, the growth of a person, inclusive of sexuality, “is more than the development of aesthetic or intuitive qualities, or of a special tendency to prayer or a special tendency to love.” It is about becoming “a fully developed human being” (*SC* 173).

We could spend many more pages on this remarkable text alone. What stands out for me is not just what was said between Merton and the women religious but the manner of their back-and-forth conversation and dialogue. What shines between the lines is a spirit of mutuality, respect and shared discernment. “[I]t should be much more common,” Merton exclaims with evident energy, “for women and men to be getting together

and discussing things and solving problems together and working out things together. We're capable of that" (*SC* 174). To be getting together and discussing things and solving problems together and working out things together: yes, we are capable of that.

The Wholeness and Freedom of God

As Merton sees it the problem of essentializing differences goes well beyond a problem of messaging; there is a deeper refusal involved, a refusal to fully see and encounter the other, to know and seek to love the other as a whole person, in all their beauty and complexity. Here is the corner into which we constantly paint ourselves: when you nail somebody to a singular definition, a static essence – male/female, black/white, gay/straight, priest/laity, Christian/Muslim, Hindu/Jew – there can be *no room for change*, no room for growth, no room for dialogue, no room for transformation, no room for curiosity, no room for encounter, no room for spontaneity, no room for discovery, no room for risk, no room for error, and perhaps above all, no room for mercy. In short, depending on your essence, *you are innocent or guilty*, never both. There can be no room for freedom or discernment before God in the secret places of conscience. There can be no room for love.¹⁶

The gathering chorus of Christians who question an essentialist or strictly heterosexual vision of sacred eros, or still more the characterization of homosexuality as “objectively disordered,” do so evidently from the intuition, rooted in the loving witness of gays and lesbians themselves, that homosexual love can be and in practice often is sacramental, an incarnate sign and instrument of covenantal love and divine grace. For many thoughtful Christians, the realization at play here has little to do with political correctness or accommodation to liberal culture; it is rather of a question of love for persons, of psychological wholeness, and of theological integrity and development in view of new horizons

16. See the remarkable journal from Merton's fiftieth birthday, January 31, 1965 (*DWL* 200-201), which includes a devastating indictment of racism and other forms of dehumanization poisoning the atmosphere of modern mass society. Merton suggests that the “fundamental error” underlying all manner of dangerous “isms” or phobias of the other – racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, clericalism, homophobia, xenophobia – is “the logical consequence of an essentialist style of thought.” For a more systematic discussion of essentialism in view of racial, gender and sex differences, see Christopher Pramuk, “Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice,” *New Theology Review* 26.1 (2013) 42-52; Christopher Pramuk, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line* (2013) 123-42; also “Merton and Race,” panel talk at the 2015 Festival of Faiths (16 May 2015) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHOd5bke3U4>).

of understanding. Given what we know today and have still yet to learn about the complex biological and social factors contributing to gender and sexual identity, Merton might well ask, and he would ask from an incarnational theological perspective: is it commensurate with the full range of our experience that sexual love can be fixed to a *single* image and essence, such that the mystery of love-becoming-flesh is resolved, managed and contained ahead of time?

To say it another way, the error of an essentialist style of thought applies to God no less than to human beings. To affix God to a one-sided image or reflection of a particular human visage or culture – white, male, heterosexual, European – yields a host of dangerous distortions in the life and pastoral practices of the church. For Christians, the Christ of our hope is not (simply) the male Jew from Nazareth whose “essence” we must all physically mirror or whose actions we must all robotically emulate – as if the New Testament presented such a cookie-cutter model of holiness and discipleship (it clearly does not). It is not Christ as essence that we worship but Christ the humanity of God, who hides and “plays” in every person’s unique God-given gifts and freedom for love, our call to share in the very life of God. “For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not His,”¹⁷ says Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Merton’s favorite poets. Or, with Merton, “If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.”¹⁸ In other words, we are still living, breathing and stumbling our way into the glorious mystery and meaning of the Incarnation.

Merton had already gone some distance toward a more expansive vision of divine-humanity in his sublime prose poem of 1962, *Hagia Sophia*, his hymn to Holy Wisdom, the feminine manifestation of God – a mystical text, we could say, that gestated and sprung forth in Merton like a kind of birthday.¹⁹ There he writes, in an astonishing figure of hopeful-

17. “As kingfishers catch fire,” ll. 12-13, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 129.

18. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 296; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.

19. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 61-69 (subsequent references will be cited as “ESF” parenthetically in the text). For the poem’s genesis in Merton and its significance for theology and spirituality, see Christopher Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton’s Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015); Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) (subsequent references will be cited as “Pramuk, *Sophia*” parenthetically in the text); Christopher Pramuk, “Wisdom Our Sister: Thomas Merton’s Reception of Russian

ness and daring theological imagination, “We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner” (*ESF* 63-64). Yet it would still be some years, through deep and often quite challenging peer-to-peer relationships with women, before Merton would more fully integrate what he had grasped mystically and theologically years earlier. In truth, isn’t this the case for us all? We grow as whole persons in the dance with other whole persons; and in doing so we grow into the wholeness and freedom of God, both masculine and feminine, God whose love plays out in manifold forms of bodily human agency.

Imagination, Theology and Poetics

With the mention of *Hagia Sophia*, I want to extend a number of insights offered by Rowan Williams in his address for the ITMS centenary that deserve to be emphasized.²⁰ In *Hagia Sophia* and throughout his literary corpus, Merton witnesses to a style of theological reasoning that dares to move through and beyond *theo-logos* (descriptive or categorical words *about* God) to mystical biography and *theo-poesis* (evocative speech rising in and from prayerful relationship *with* God). To risk the movement from theology in a narrowly scholastic mode to theopoetics – and I am thinking here not just of Merton but of his contemporaries like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dorothee Soelle, Howard Thurman, Simone Weil and others²¹ – is to register an implicit protest against what Archbishop Wil-

Sophiology,” *Spiritus* 11.2 (Fall 2011) 177-99; Christopher Pramuk, “‘Something Breaks Through a Little’: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (2008) 67-89; Christopher Pramuk, “Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton’s ‘Hagia Sophia’ in Dialogue with Western Theology,” *Theological Studies* 77.1 (2016) 48-76.

20. See Rowan Williams, “Words, War and Silence: Thomas Merton for the Twenty-first Century” earlier in this volume; subsequent references will be cited as “Williams, ‘Words’” parenthetically in the text.

21. The integration of poetry, storytelling and mystical experience into theological method as counterpoint to the limits of “scientific theology” is a consistent theme of German Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle: see *Dorothee Soelle: Essential Writings*, selected with an Introduction by Dianne L. Oliver (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006). Abraham Joshua Heschel coined the term “depth theology” to describe his mystical-poetical and phenomenological approach to philosophy of religion. Heschel writes: “Theology speaks for the people; depth theology speaks for the individual. Theology strives for communication, for universality; depth theology strives for insight, for uniqueness. Theology is like sculpture, depth theology like music. Theology is in the books; depth theology is in the hearts. The former is doctrine, the latter an event. Theologies divide us; depth theology unites us”: see Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966) 115-26. Howard Thurman

liams describes as the “hyper-prosing” of discourse about God, where “prose” refers to “a world in which language is used as a means of power,” a means of “submission of the other” – a danger that applies no less to the ways we talk about human personhood, inclusive of gender and sexuality (Williams, “Words” 40-41).²² To put it another way, counterbalancing our negative theology (our respect for the limits of human comprehension and language before the mystery of God) we need to preserve spaces in theological discourse for a “negative anthropology,” a deep respect for the mystery and mosaic diversity of persons, all made in the *imago Dei*, each of whom holds a unique and irreplaceable place in God’s heart “from the beginning.” We are still learning how to be attentive and compassionate hearers of the Word made flesh, the divine Child who hides in each of us. Indeed, the invitation and the challenge never cease.

It is also to confess our hope that poetry can go where the banality and hyper-regulation of theological (and scientific!) prose cannot. In truth, Merton was retrieving a style of theological reasoning and prayerful discernment inherited from his monastic forebears, who saw the Bible as a living word, a “poetics of piety.”²³ What does this have to do with sacred eros or sexuality? Consider that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a giant in the Cistercian tradition, wrote not less than eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, that poetical celebration of sacred eros and much neglected “holy of holies” hidden in the heart of the Hebrew Bible. Bernard wrote eight sermons on the first verse alone: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”²⁴ What wondrous readings might emerge if we dared to ask our

was likewise a master of giving voice to the language of experience and desire at the level of “pre-religious” or “pre-theological” imagination in ways that potentially unite the religious and non-religious seeker in the realm of literary-poetic participation: see *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*, selected with an Introduction by Luther E. Smith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

22. See also Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 50-52.

23. See Pramuk, *Sophia* 77-129. It should be clear that Merton was no biblical literalist but saw theology’s task as discerning “the theological content of the Bible” in the context of the “atmosphere of proclamation and liturgy [in which] the sacred texts themselves took shape” (Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979] 223). I borrow the term “poetics of piety” from Edward Kaplan in his masterful study, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Poetics of Piety* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996).

24. See Bernard of Clairvaux. *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, in his *Selected Works*, ed. G. R. Evans, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 207-78. For Merton’s discussion of these sermons, see Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 8, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom [MW] vol. 42 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications,

LGBT brothers and sisters to read and interpret the Song of Songs for us through the lens of their own “book of experience,” as Bernard counsels his brother monks to do? Perhaps what queer theology is doing from the margins of the church today is precisely this: resisting the hyper-prosing of theological speech in favor of the theo-poetics of incarnate love.²⁵

Williams’ analysis of the “crisis of language” in Merton’s era presses still further in ways that illumine, if darkly, the crisis of language in our own. Underscoring one of Merton’s most salient points, he observes that where language is employed solely in ways that have to do with power, conflict, or hierarchies of advantage – whether maintaining them or seeking to dismantle them – the environment created on all sides, paradoxically, “is one of a final, deadening banality” (Williams, “Words” 41). Once again, “there is no real exchange going on. And if there is no real exchange going on, there is no learning going on. And if there is no learning going on, there is no newness happening. And if there is no newness happening, I am indeed imprisoned in banality” (Williams, “Words” 42). In short, where language is only about power “you can finally only talk about yourself, and there is, as we all know, no subject in the universe so short-term fascinating and so long-term boring as ourselves” (Williams, “Words” 41). In other words, the “self” or social body that builds its core identity on power – again, whether drunk with it or grasping for its rightful share – is doomed eventually to perish in its own self-absorbed toxicity. The stranger, even the bitter enemy, comes to us precisely as a Gift insofar as she pierces this self-reflexive bubble. Though unsettling, even frightening, her counter-claims upon us compel us either to fight each other to the death or to release the “bad air” of our own toxic certitudes, so as to breathe *common air* again, and to behold the other’s divine humanity, in the climate of Mercy that silently links us both.

There is one other aspect of Merton’s legacy that bears on this dis-

2016) 244-308, 338-56, 380-95; see also Christopher Pramuk, “Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Song of Songs,” *America* 193 (31 October 2005) 8-12.

25. Queer theology as such remains marginal if not wholly excluded from the normative canons of Roman Catholic theology, though some inroads have been made into the academy and in popular U.S. Catholic consciousness. Notable authors include Catholic priest James Alison, *Faith beyond Resentment* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) and *On Being Liked* (New York: Crossroad, 2004); author and popular blogger Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (New York: Knopf, 1996) and *Love Undetectable* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and openly lesbian and celibate spiritual writer Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2014). Influential theologians beyond the Catholic realm include Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love* (New York: Seabury, 2011) and *Rainbow Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2013).

cussion, which is his profound theology of the true self (see *NSC 35* and *passim*), a now-classic teaching which resonates beautifully with Vatican II's teachings on the dignity of conscience.²⁶ For Merton the "true self" is not the self-enclosed individual fixated, however justifiably, on his or her own survival or happiness at all costs. It is the self both "hidden in the love and mercy of God" and at once *found* in the love and mercy of the community. "No one ever got born / All by himself: It takes more than one," Merton writes in the poem referenced above (*IDD* 194). Yet how many gays and lesbians in the church, how many women and girls down through the generations, have been wounded and variously imprisoned by the message that their sexual identity or gender is in truth the mark of a disordered, sinful or false self, a threat to society and to the people of God? That there is little room in the church to discern these questions openly, safely and honestly should be a matter of deep concern for every Catholic and Christian, no matter where one's convictions lie on the spectrum of sexuality.²⁷

God Accompanies Persons

This brings us to Pope Francis. As with Merton, some of the Pope's statements thus far are not particularly encouraging for those yearning for development in Catholic theological anthropology regarding gender and sexuality.²⁸ During a recent Vatican forum, the pope criticized what he

26. See *Gaudium et Spes* 16, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

27. Retired Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton is one of a very few U.S. Catholic bishops to apply Vatican II's teachings on conscience to the existential dilemma of homosexual persons in the church and to do so with profound theological insight and pastoral sensitivity: see Thomas Gumbleton, "A Call to Listen: The Church's Theological and Pastoral Response to Gays and Lesbians," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001) 3-21. With respect to sexual diversity and gender roles in the church, discussions that would have been rare or stifled by editors in the popular Catholic press a few decades ago are becoming increasingly common, if no less settled; see for example Helen Alvare, "Outside the Lines," *America* (27 April 2015) 12; James Martin, "Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity," *America* online (12 January 2012) and "She Loved Prophetically," *America* online (9 January 2013).

28. The relevant church teachings include *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2331-2400 (www.usccb.org); "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (1997); "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (1986); John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (2011); *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994). For a balanced discussion of "gender essentialism" and "complementarity of the sexes" in church teachings, see Beth Haile, "Catechism Commentary: The Sixth Commandment" (<http://catholicmoraltheology>).

called “gender ideology” in the strongest terms, and a recent symposium sponsored by the Pontifical Council on Cultures was replete with references to the “feminine genius” – a phrase that derives directly from John Paul II’s “theology of woman.”²⁹ Note the singular categorical abstraction, which is deliberate, and a key pillar in John Paul II’s opposition to women’s ordination. Such notions may ground Francis’s opposition to women’s ordination as well, though some have suggested the pope may just be choosing his battles. Still, I want to suggest that there are signs of openness to development if not in the substance of Francis’s statements thus far then in the process of communal discernment to which the pope appears to be committed at every level. Francis is not, in my view, simply choosing his battles. He is listening, waiting, praying and consulting widely through these questions, and he is asking the whole church to do the same.

Consider his now famous (or infamous) response to a question about homosexuals in the church, “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?” Notice how Francis turns the question around in a way that forces the questioner, indeed asks all of us, to self-critically examine our own presumptions and biases:

Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person? We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to

com/catechism-commentary-the-sixth-commandment). Recent moral and systematic approaches in Catholic thought include Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008); Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*; Dennis Doyle, Timothy J. Furry and Pascal D. Bazzell, eds., *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012); John Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Lisa Fullam, “Civil Same-Sex Marriage: A Catholic Affirmation” (<https://newwaysministryblog.wordpress.com/civil-same-sex-marriage-a-catholic-affirmation>).

29. See David Gibson, “Lost in Translation? Seven Reasons Some Women Wince When Pope Francis Starts Talking,” *Religion News Service* (10 Dec. 2014); Joshua McElwee, “Francis Strongly Criticizes Gender Theory,” *NCR Online* (13 Feb. 2015); Thomas Reese, “Where Pope Francis Stands When it Comes to Women,” *NCR Online* (20 March 2015); Michael O’Laughlin, “With Mormons Addressing LGBT Issues, Catholics and Baptists Press On,” *Crux* (30 Jan. 2015).

accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires [us] to say the right thing. (Spadaro 26)

One might recall here the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), which is as much about Jesus' response to the religious authorities in the mob who were prepared to stone her. In Francis I think we are seeing, as we see in the life of Jesus, what the Jesuits call *cura personalis*, "care for the whole person," including, by the way, the persons in the mob. Christ calls us to see the person first, their dignity as a child of God, to see them in the light of God's care and mercy. But we are also seeing a kind of "negative anthropology," Francis's foregrounding of "the mystery of the human being" that eludes complete rational or juridical control.

If a person says that he [has] met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble. . . . Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing. (Spadaro 30, 32)

It is important to note that those five words "Who am I to judge?" do not solve the categorical debate about homosexuality in the life of the church. To be sure, in view of the terrifying situation for sexual minorities in Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and many other African countries, where not a few Catholic bishops and priests have been at the forefront of anti-LGBT campaigns, the pope must arguably take a much stronger stand in the defense of the rights and transcendent dignity of homosexual persons. "Who am I to judge?" in such a context could seem little more than an evasion.³⁰ And yet the pastoral beauty, the Christ-like humility of Francis's approach, is quite clear and has clearly electrified the world, delighting many and disturbing not a few others. With those five words it seems to me that Francis is not only foregrounding God's loving mercy and care for the person in the pattern of Jesus, he is also re-centering intellectual humility as foremost in any properly Christian approach to

30. See Francis DeBernardo, "African Bishops' Meetings Reveal Underlying Assumptions about LGBT Issues" (<https://newwaysministryblog.wordpress.com/?s=african+bishops>, and references therein); and Jamie Manson, "LGBTQ People Need Justice, Not Mercy, from Pope Francis," *National Catholic Reporter* 52.8 (29 Jan.-11 Feb. 2016) 26.

theological discernment. Pastorally, intellectual humility means resisting the temptation to simply impose uniformity of belief and practice through juridical authority; it means being supremely patient and trusting that a way forward will emerge from sustained consultation and dialogue. Unity in Christ is unity-in-diversity. It is not uniformity, and still less is it coerced uniformity. In short, Francis is calling the church to be and become a listening church, to build what he calls “a culture of encounter.”³¹

Repeatedly Francis invokes a phrase from Vatican II not often heard from the lips of his predecessors: the “*sensus fidei*,”³² or sense of the faithful. In one of his earliest interviews he spoke not about the infallibility of the pope, of ecumenical councils or the ordinary universal magisterium, but of “the infallibility of the Church *in credendo*, the believing Church” (Spadaro 22). To the bishops of Latin America he said, “We bishops have been lousy at listening to the faithful.” When asked about divisions among the cardinals on the situation of divorced and remarried Catholics, Francis said he would be “worried” if there had not been “intense discussion” among the cardinals or if their deliberations lacked a climate of trust in which they felt they could speak freely. “The fraternal and open confrontations make the theological and pastoral theology develop,” he said. “I do not fear this; on the contrary I seek it.”³³ The job of the theologian, he emphasizes, citing Vatican II, is “to ‘hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our time, and judge them in the light of the word of God.’” He asked the International Theological Commission to heed especially the contributions of female theologians who “can detect, for the benefit of all, some unexplored aspects of the unfathomable mystery of Christ.”³⁴

Humility, Encounter, Boldness: The Way of Pilgrims

Notice that last phrase: to “detect, for the benefit of all, some unexplored aspects of the unfathomable mystery of Christ.” Much like Merton, Francis’s root spirituality is profoundly incarnational; true to his Jesuit and Franciscan sensibilities, it is also profoundly cosmic and creational,

31. “Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day: Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter” (1 June 2014) (https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html).

32. See “Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church,” International Theological Commission (2014) (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

33. Pope Francis, “Address to the International Theological Commission” (12 May 2014) (<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/12/05/0922/01994.html>).

34. Pope Francis, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

trusting that the whole of human life, inclusive of our bodies, is part of a greater mystery about which we are still profoundly ignorant, still wondering, still learning. This yields in both Merton and Pope Francis a deep-seated *pilgrim spirituality*. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, a favorite text of Merton's, both call us to a way of proceeding that is ever "on the move," marked by openness and intellectual humility more than dogmatic certainty, induction from broad human experience more than deduction from abstract principles, and a positive expectation that new understanding and wisdom will emerge at the axis of encounter with others in freedom and grace. "The pilgrim," of course, is the name Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Society of Jesus, uses to refer to himself in his *Autobiography*.³⁵ But it also functions as a broad metaphor for Ignatius's vision of the drama of freedom and grace in the life journey of all Christians.

During a homily at a Mass celebrating the installation of new cardinals, Pope Francis went off-text to linger on three words from the gospel that day: "Jesus was walking": "This is something striking about the Gospels: Jesus is often walking and he teaches his disciples along the way. This is important. Jesus did not come to teach a philosophy, an ideology . . . but rather 'a way,' a journey to be undertaken with him, and we learn the way as we go, by walking. Yes . . . this is our joy: to walk with Jesus."³⁶ To be a pilgrim requires a radically *open* imagination. While you have an idea of the destination, you don't have it all figured out ahead of time. A pilgrim, to borrow a term from the arts, works with *found materials*. You receive and create with the gifts you are given, not only your own gifts and talents – many of which you discover along the way – but also the gifts and needs of those you meet along the road. "And this is not easy, or comfortable," says Francis, "because the way that Jesus chooses is the way of the Cross."³⁷ Indeed the pilgrim church, as Francis describes it, is "a field hospital after battle" (Spadaro 24). In the pattern of Jesus, both Merton and Pope Francis call us to pay special attention to the gifts and needs of those brothers and sisters who are suffering the deepest wounds of loneliness and isolation, a great many hidden among us.

To open ourselves to the stranger; to move *toward* them and not to run

35. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Autobiography*, trans. Parmananda R. Divarkar, SJ, in Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George Ganss, SJ (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) 65-111.

36. Homily of Pope Francis, Mass for the creation of new cardinals (22 Feb. 2014) (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140222_omelia-concistoro-nuovi-cardinali.html).

37. Homily of Pope Francis, February 22, 2014.

away or hold “them” categorically at a distance; to strive to truly build in both word and deed a culture of encounter; this is not to bend to the winds of political correctness or the “gay agenda” or any other number of urgent political human rights movements. For Christians, it is to seek no less than our salvation, our greater joy and happiness in the social body through the encounter with Christ in the other. “No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual,” Francis writes, “but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships.” And wherever the web is straining to the breaking point, we must break free of our certitudes long enough to listen deeply and think again “with the heart of the people” (Spadaro 20-22).³⁸ As for Merton, so for Francis: “No one ever got born / All by himself: It takes more than one. / Every birthday / Has its own theology” (*IDD* 194).

“We must be bold enough,” writes Pope Francis, “to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty.”³⁹ I don’t think Francis sees the future any more than we do. I do think he means for us to be the kind of church that discerns the way forward together, with trust and a certain fearlessness. In the meantime, we are called to accompany one another with patience and loving kindness, because that is how we have come to believe that God nurtures the whole creation over deep time into the freedom of love. Love does not impose uniformity or create carbon copies of itself by fiat. Love nurtures freedom in the beloved. And because love is free, love lets go and allows others to share in the delight and struggle of their own discovery. Surely that delight and struggle includes the mystery of our lives as sexual persons. As James Finley put it so beautifully in his 2015 ITMS plenary address, let us have faith enough in the Lord to embrace in ourselves and in one another the “anarchy of the ineffable,” that we may cherish in one another, inclusive of our sexuality, that “*which is too beautiful to die.*”⁴⁰

38. See also Margaret A. Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,” in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James Walter et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002) 55-75. “The voice of the church is muted,” writes Farley, “when it does not represent the wisdom of a genuine discerning church.”

39. *The Joy of the Gospel* n. 167 (<http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/>).

40. James Finley, “Thomas Merton: Mystic Teacher for Our Age” later in this volume (194, 186).

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