

## Merton's "Absurd Enterprise": A Brief Foray into Script-Writing

By Christine M. Bochen

"One of the worst things I have ever done – the absurd enterprise of writing that text for the Vatican Pavilion. Nothing whatever to do with a movie. I must learn to refuse these baits. Yet how marvelous to really and competently do a movie!" [February 2, 1964].<sup>1</sup>

When it was over, Thomas Merton would describe his brief foray into script-writing as "an absurd enterprise." It had begun a little more than a month earlier, in December 1963, when Msgr. William J. McCormack, associate director for the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, visited the Abbey of Gethsemani and invited Merton to write a short script for the film to be shown in the Vatican Pavilion at the New York 1964-65 World's Fair. According to Brother Patrick Hart, the abbot's secretary at the time, Merton took on the project at the direct request of Dom James Fox, "the only instance I'm aware of when Dom James asked Merton to take on a particular writing assignment outside the monastery."<sup>2</sup> Merton first mentions the project in his journal entry of January 13, 1964 after learning that the script he submitted was not well-received. Noting that his script "was mostly about charity, peace, racial justice, etc.," Merton writes:

Now he [Msgr. McCormack] calls and evidently the script has been to [Francis Cardinal] Spellman and back in the meantime. The indications are that all this must be replaced by an apologetic text-book piece on the Church as the one true Church, "what we have that is different from the Protestants and the Orthodox" to dispel any confusion that may have been created "by all this ecumenical business." I suppose this was to have been expected. I asked him to send down notes of what he wants and I will try to do something. I am a bit doubtful of getting anything worth while out of this – perhaps a few lines that will have meaning for someone outside the Church. The rest? Will it even support Catholics in their convictions – or just be another four minutes of familiar jargon? (*DWL* 60-61)<sup>3</sup>

Looking back on the matter, it is clear that Merton was right: "this was to be have been expected." So why did he agree to the project? In addition to Dom James' request and to Merton's inclination to say "yes" to projects and/or his difficulty in saying "no," a number of other factors may have been at play. The prospect of writing a script for a movie would have appealed to the writer whose work spanned

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virtually every genre, including a drama, *The Tower of Babel*, which was performed and televised in a “condensed and adapted” version on the *Catholic Hour*.<sup>4</sup> That the movie would be shown at a World’s Fair may have been appealing in its own right, though Merton’s reactions to the Fairs he had attended were somewhat mixed. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton mentions visiting the 1933-34 International Exposition in Chicago where he picked up pamphlets on the Mormons in the Hall of Religion but “was not converted,” worked for a few days as a barker in front of sideshow on the “Streets of Paris,” and was struck by the “absolutely open and undisguised and non-committal frankness of the paganism of Chicago and of this Fair and this particular part of the Fair” where he worked.<sup>5</sup> A few years later, Merton confessed that he liked fairs and wrote in his journal at some length of visits to the 1939 New York World’s Fair, where he and his friends took particular pleasure in the art exhibits.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, Merton’s reading was also at play in accepting the invitation to write the script. In December and January Merton was reading Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In February, Merton observed that the French philosopher’s essay on film had “important implications for the new liturgy.” “Liturgy,” Merton mused, “is to be experienced, and it is a film” (*DWL* 69-70). In January, Merton was also reading Walker Percy’s novel *The Moviegoer*, noting that it was “full of emblems and patterns of life” and observing that “the awareness” that Merleau-Ponty describes is “alive in Walker Percy’s book” (*DWL* 64). Script-writing, modest as the project was, may have appeared to Merton as a new and congenial way to express himself, his view of the world and his vision of Church.

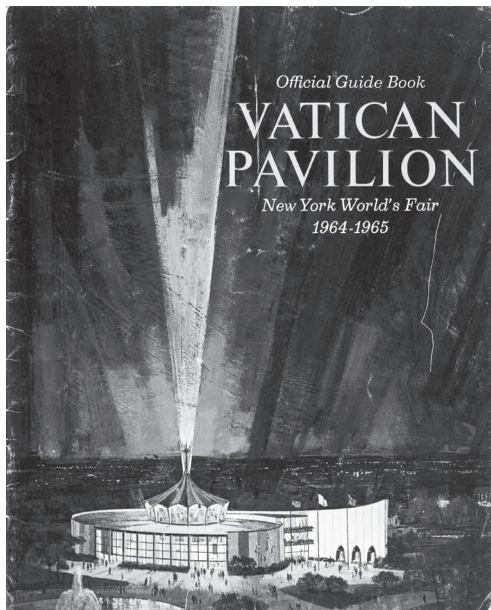
It is easier to imagine why Merton would have accepted the commission to write the script than it is to imagine why he was asked to do so in the first place. Yes, Merton was very likely the best-known American Catholic writer of the day but he was also a controversial figure. In the early sixties, the monk whose autobiography became a best-seller and whose books on contemplation, prayer and monasticism had earned him recognition as one of, if not *the* most prominent American spiritual writers of the century, spoke out against war. Disturbed by the “awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends,” Merton wrote to Dorothy Day, “I don’t feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic issues either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues.”<sup>7</sup> In the months that followed, Merton published a flurry of articles decrying war and warning of the possibility of nuclear annihilation and he completed the manuscript for a book he entitled “Peace in the Post-Christian Era.”<sup>8</sup> In April 1962, “the ax” fell. “The orders are, no more writing about peace,” he wrote to James Forest; “in substance I am being silenced on the subject of war and peace. . . . The reason given is that this is not the right kind of work for a monk, and that it ‘falsifies the monastic message’” (*HGL* 266-67). Merton obeyed but he also found other ways to get his message out, including distributing mimeographed copies of his “Cold War Letters.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1963, Merton was also speaking out against racism. The non-violent struggle for civil rights was meeting with escalating violence in the south, especially in Birmingham, Alabama. Disturbed by pictures of crowds of peaceful protesters being hosed and attacked by dogs, Merton wrote a poem entitled, “And the Children of Birmingham,”<sup>10</sup> which was published in *The Saturday Review* in August. On September 19, Merton wrote in his journal about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street

Baptist Church: “Last Sunday was a terrible day in the South. A church was bombed in Birmingham and four Negro children were killed, and later two other Negroes were murdered in ‘rioting.’ It now seems that the racists in the deep South are trying to provoke violence” (*DWL* 17). Deeply moved by a photo of Denise McNair, age eleven, one of the four girls killed in the bombing, Merton wrote another poem, “Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll.”<sup>11</sup> In November, the day after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Merton observed that “the whole thing leaves one bewildered and slightly sick. Sick for the madness, ferocity, stupidity, aimless cruelty that is the mark of so great a part of this country. Essentially the same blind, idiot destructiveness and hate that killed Medgar Evers in Jackson, the Negro children in Birmingham” (*DWL* 36-37).<sup>12</sup>

Certainly it was to be expected that, given his deep concern about the urgent social issues facing humanity – the senseless proliferation of nuclear weapons, the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, the insidious sin of racism – Merton would write a script that was, in his words, “mostly about charity, peace, racial justice, etc.” (*DWL* 60). How could Merton speak about the Church in the world without writing about war and racial justice? However, although they shared Merton’s hope for peace, it soon became apparent that the Pavilion planners had very clear and different ideas about the content of the film to be shown at the Vatican Pavilion.

### About the Vatican Pavilion



In their letter of welcome to visitors to the Vatican Pavilion, Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, and Bryan J. McEntegart, Bishop of Brooklyn, described the purpose of the Pavilion in these words: “In keeping with the theme of the Fair – Peace Through Understanding – it is the aim of this Pavilion to promote a deeper understanding of the Church as Christ living in the world, and, through this understanding, to bring men to that peace which He alone can give Who is called the Prince of Peace. The three major areas of the Pavilion, therefore, seek to portray the Church as Christ loving, Christ teaching, and Christ sanctifying.”<sup>13</sup> As some readers may remember, the Vatican Pavilion at the 1964-1965 World’s Fair in New York featured Michelangelo’s *Pieta* as well as illuminated transparencies of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* and the Sistine Vault, a reconstruction of the Tomb of St. Peter, and a chapel dedicated to the Good Shepherd. Exhibits, designed to present the

history and teachings of Christianity, told the story of salvation history from creation to Christ and celebrated twenty centuries of Christianity. Other exhibits offered a glimpse of the contemporary Church, highlighting the Second Vatican Council, the social teachings of Pope John XXIII with quotations from his encyclicals calling for social progress for all and affirming the dignity and

worth of every human being, images of the Church and of the saints in contemporary Christian art, and photo-prints of press releases and current activities of the Catholic Church. It was in this area focusing on the contemporary Church that the film, entitled “The Church in the World,” was “projected at frequent intervals on the wall screen.” The program noted that the film was “based upon a script by Thomas Merton and presents audio-visually the theme of the Vatican Pavilion and its Exhibit” (*Guide Book 25*).

### **About the Commission**

As noted above, we learn from Merton’s journal that Msgr. McCormack invited Merton to write the script during a visit to Gethsemani. We do not know what details or materials McCormack shared with Merton at that time. But a folder related to the project is among the Merton materials archived at the University of Kentucky in Lexington.<sup>14</sup> In addition to a draft of a script written by Merton, the folder includes what appear to be press releases on Vatican Pavilion letterhead: “The Vatican Pavilion” – a three-page description of the Pavilion and its contents and a listing of Sponsoring Commission Members appointed by the Holy See, Jo Mielziner’s four-page description of the setting he designed for the *Pieta*, a five-page “Biography of Jo Mielziner,” and a three-page description of the replica of “The Tomb of St. Peter.” The longest document in the folder is an eleven-page statement (not typed on letterhead) on the Vatican Pavilion, which discusses, in considerable detail, its cost; expected attendance; theme; design of the building; the placement of various exhibits, including the setting of the *Pieta*; and a description of what a visitor will see from entering the Pavilion to viewing its final exhibit. The statement asserts that the Vatican Pavilion “will be one of the major points of interest in the Fair for Catholics as well as for non-Catholics” and announces that a travel office will assist in arranging for group visits. A handwritten note on the last page identifies the document as written for “The Catholic Market, November 1963.” Two statements in this eleven-page document are especially pertinent to Merton’s film project. First, the “overall theme of the exhibit is that the Church is Christ living in the world, and this theme is carried out in three major areas – the church as Christ loving, as Christ teaching and as Christ sanctifying.” Second, the “portrayal of the Church as Christ loving in the world contains a six and a half minute film presentation of the Church’s works of mercy, its social mission to the world at large.” The content of the film had been determined even before Merton was invited to write the script.

The most significant and intriguing piece in the “World’s Fair Vatican Pavilion Materials” folder – other than the script written by Merton – is a three-page typed document with several handwritten corrections and one deleted word, entitled “The Catholic Church in the Modern World – Suggestions for a 5 minute film.” When I first read the two versions of Merton’s scripts archived at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University,<sup>15</sup> I imagined that Merton had set about the task of imagining the film – with images and text – from scratch. Given the “Suggestions for a 5 minute film,” such a scenario is unlikely.

The suggestions are quite specific. Although some statements are cast in tentative terms (“One approach might be to divide the presentation into 10 segments of 30 seconds each . . . The 10 segments might be divided . . .”), other statements are prescriptive: “Each half minute should convey a distinct and compelling idea, so that if a passerby saw no more than one segment, he would be impressed with the fact that the Church is deeply interested in both the temporal and eternal welfare of mankind.”

Specific ideas for pictorial images and content are offered. For example, in Segment I, visuals “depicting the advantages, perils and contrasts of our technological age . . . contrasts of plenty and poverty” are coupled with the message that man can develop his own “God-given capacity for good” and use the hidden powers of nature “to help him on his pilgrimage to heaven” with “the sure guidance of His divinely established Church.” Suggestions for additional visuals include pictures that portray the diversity – young and old; hierarchy, clergy and laity; scenes from different parts of the world; people at work and at worship; the Pope addressing crowds; the Council; priests, nuns, catechists, Sunday school teachers; sacraments being celebrated; and “the Holy Sacrifice being offered at home and in fields afar.” Suggestions for narrative content underscore the planners’ desire to emphasize such elements of Catholic teaching as these: “the divine worth and importance of every individual,” “the divine guidance” offered by the Church to people seeking answers to ultimate questions of identity and purpose, the necessity of “applying eternal truths to human affairs,” as well as Christ’s work in restoring “the friendship of God, lost through Original Sin.”

While it is very likely that Merton read these suggestions and that they provided a starting point for him, especially as he began imagining what viewers of the film would see, it is apparent that Merton did not feel bound by the “Suggestions.” Instead, he drew on his own deeply held convictions about how such a film should raise awareness of the urgent issues facing humankind as well as of the necessity for a prophetic witness on the part of the Church.

### **From Draft to First Submission**

There are three extant versions of Merton’s script for the Vatican Pavilion: version one is a draft Merton entitled “Today We Live”; version two, entitled “Christ Lives Today,” is the script which Merton initially submitted and which was rejected; and version three, “The Church Is Alive in the World,”<sup>16</sup> is the rewritten script that was accepted and served as the script upon which the “film projected at frequent intervals” was “based” and which presented “audio-visually the theme of the Vatican Pavilion” (*Guide Book 25*).<sup>17</sup>

### **“Today We Live”**

The four-page typescript of “Today We Live” contains more than two dozen strikeouts of words, phrases and two sentences, clearly identifying the text as a draft. It consists of a narrator’s text as well as six suggestions for visual images and music. Merton begins with an anthem to be “sung by a chorus on a Gregorian melody, while the film begins with the swirling of chaotic smoke in semi darkness over and around blast furnaces which gradually appear in a kind of dawn light.” Day is dawning “over a busy manufacturing center.”

The night is far gone

The day draws near

Make no mistake about the day we live in

It is time for us to awaken out of our sleep

The night is far gone

The day draws near.

Following this clarion call, Merton insists that the “Catholic Church is not the Church of those

who sleep in the past. . . . The Church's day is *now*." The Church that once built splendid Gothic cathedrals now builds "a cathedral of men, united in happiness, in truth, in justice and in peace. Men of all nations, races, classes, languages. The living Church is not an organization, it is MAN, united in Christ." Christ is born anew each day and "is constantly coming into His world" and so is present in the stranger, in one's child, and in one's self. In man's freedom, joy, kindness and care, God's glory is made manifest. Humanity is called to build "a world of justice and of peace."

Merton strikes a somber chord as he suggests that "shots of brutal, tyrannical scenes of totalitarian power, military might, concentration camps, Nazis etc." be shown. But the shift in subject and mood is not reflected in the text. The Church of which Merton speaks is not "the Church of those who 'must not' and 'may not' and 'ought not.'" It is not "the Church of limitations, imprisoning man's heart and mind in double talk, and false promises. We are not the Church of 'No' and 'Maybe.' We say 'Yes' to all man's deepest hopes and joys." Clearly, Merton was anticipating the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* – The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965.<sup>18</sup>

Strengthened by Christ – present in the world today – persons are called to decision, to "choose life or death, truth or falsity . . . love or hate, to build or to destroy." It is Christ who gives strength to Christians to "do all things" – the Christ "who is *Present* in the living reality of this day, this hour and this moment." The "strength of Christ is not brute power" for Christ "renounced the use of force in order to deliver all men from the tyranny of power." The Cross is the sign that "when force seems to triumph . . . it is defeated." Merton issues a heartfelt plea for peace and justice which he directs toward each individual.

Listen, O man: know who you are. You are the child of God. You are his partner  
and his brother.

Peace is possible if you will choose it.

Justice is possible if you will decide to be just.

Truth is not only possible, but there is nothing else. [O]pen your eyes and receive it.

Finally, Merton suggests repeating the opening anthem.

Merton's draft is just that – a draft. His emphasis is on text and suggestions for visual images are few and, as noted above, out of sync with the narrative.

### **"Christ Lives Today"**

Merton titled this version – the one he actually submitted to Msgr. McCormack – "Christ Lives Today." Although Merton retained portions of the draft, he deleted some lines, inserted others, and completely rewrote the last page and a half. Merton's four-page script includes more than twenty suggestions for visual images and music. He begins with the six-line anthem, as he had in the draft, striking a chord of prophetic urgency as the chorus chants:

The night is far gone

The day draws near

Make no mistake about the day we live in

It is time for us to wake out of our sleep

The night is far gone



The day draws near.

Against the backdrop of “swirling of chaotic smoke in semi-darkness over and around blast furnaces which gradually appear in dawn light” and the sun rising over “a busy manufacturing center,” the narrator announces (as in the draft): “The Catholic Church is not the Church of those who sleep in the past. Her past indeed is glorious, but only because it was once present. Yesterday is not enough. The Church’s day is *now*. She knows no other.”

In this version, Merton chose visual images to complement, illustrate and advance the narrative. The images fall into three clusters. The first cluster portrays scenes of modern life: pictures of men working, machines, jet planes, a space flight blasting off, a laboratory – all commonplace images to be sure. The second cluster consists of familiar and predictable Church scenes: people gathering in St. Peter’s Square, bishops entering or leaving St. Peter’s, a close-up of the Pope (Paul VI), a young couple presenting their child for baptism, nursing sisters serving the sick and poor. While these images are similar to those in the “Suggestions,” Merton tweaks them to serve his purpose: the Pope should appear “preferably *not* in tiara” and be shown “at work . . . like other men”; close-ups of bishops should feature African and Asian prelates; communion should be given to an “*interracial* group.” The final cluster includes iconic twentieth-century images of the violence, destruction and death human beings have inflicted and continue to inflict on each other: emaciated prisoners staring through the barbed wire of concentration camps; Negroes being scattered by fire hoses and cattle prods and bitten by police dogs; smoke rising over bombarded cities; street-fighting in Europe or Asia; a tank firing into a crowd or smashing a building; police dispersing civilians, and, of course, the huge mushroom cloud of the H-Bomb. This last set of images, a clear departure from those suggested by the planners, vividly portrays the life-and-death issues facing the world and the Church.

The narrator’s script expresses several key elements of Merton’s vision of the Catholic Church, reiterating and expanding ideas he introduced in the draft. The Catholic Church is a “living Church”: it “is not an organization, it is MAN, united in Christ.” Merton’s view of the Church as a dynamic organism and a community of people is very much in sync with the image of Church as People of God, which is central to *Lumen Gentium* – the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in November 1964. The Church, Merton writes, is the “Church of Man because she believes God lives in man. She takes man as he is, in all his human limitation. She knows God’s love breaks through man’s limitation.” Christ lives today in the human family, the whole of the human family across the globe. “Each day Christ is born . . . He is present in the guise of every man. . . . He is next to you even within yourself, for He is your life.” Humans give glory to God by their very being and in their freedom, joy and work. The Church celebrates human beings. “We are the church of those who accept man, not of those who reject him. We do not say some men are good by nature, others by nature evil. . . . We say ‘YES’ to all man’s deepest hopes and joys” (again anticipating the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*). Most importantly, “The Church says ‘No’ to those who destroy man.” Merton says very little on this point – allowing the images of the camps, the brutality, the bomb to speak for him.

Merton imagines that as the film comes to an end with the “Gloria in Excelsis” being chanted during a solemn mass (quite a traditional scene), the narrator calls for a decision: “We can choose the city of light or a city of ashes. The Church has already chosen. What is your decision?”

### Response to Merton's Script

On January 13, 1964, Merton received a letter from Msgr. McCormack reiterating the main points of concern that he had discussed with Merton on the phone.<sup>19</sup> Merton summarized the gist of the conversation in his journal: "evidently the script has been to Spellman and back . . . . The indications are that all this must be replaced by an apologetic text-book piece on the Church as the one true Church, 'what we have that is different from the Protestant and the Orthodox' to dispel any confusion that may have been created 'by all this ecumenical business.' I suppose this was to have been expected. I asked him to send down notes of what he wants and I will try to do something" (*DWL* 60).

Although there were some positive comments embedded in his letter, Msgr. McCormack expressed three points of concern very clearly. He wrote:

Since this will be the exhibit of the Catholic Church (Roman) and there will be incidentally, exhibits of other Christian denominations all claiming to represent Christ, my objective was to try to dramatize the theme of the Pavilion which is, "*The Church* is Christ living in the World," rather than the theme which I believe our present narrative dramatizes, namely, that "*Christ Lives Today*." I am afraid I could not presume to suggest how or where this change of emphasis could be introduced. I can say however, that everyone who has read it agrees that the beginning is tremendous. Ed Rice suggested that rather than ending with the question and asking for a decision it might be more effective to end on the same note we begin on; e.g. "The Catholic Church is not the Church of those who sleep in the past . . . . The Church's day is *now*," or some similar idea. This suggestion appeals to me. What do you think?

In the section on the Holy Father, would it be possible to convey the idea that Christ did indeed establish a visible institution and invested Peter and the Apostles and their successors with authority? This would, of course, necessitate extending this section at the expense of some other part but this will be, after all, the Holy Father's exhibit.

Even before he received Msgr. McCormack's letter, it is clear from his journal entry that Merton's enthusiasm for the project and its possibilities had waned. "I am a bit doubtful of getting anything worth while out of this – perhaps a few lines that will have meaning for someone outside the Church. The rest? Will it even support Catholics in their convictions – or just be another four minutes of familiar jargon?" A few lines later in the same journal entry, Merton asked himself: "If in my Vatican pavilion script I give the impression of openness and ecumenism will this not be a deception? The temptation is deliberately to write a closed, impassive, inattentive series of declarations and let the heathen draw their own conclusions!" (*DWL* 60-61).

### "The Church Is Christ Alive in the World"

Four days later, Merton "settled down" to changing his typewriter ribbon and rewriting the script to specifications. He made several important changes. The title of the rewritten script (short of three pages) bears the title of the Pavilion theme: "The Church Is Christ Alive in the World." In



his cover letter, Merton states that he is leaving the sound and visual choices to the producers: “This time I have not bothered to put anything about pictures of jet planes and space flights. I leave you to select the pictures according to the choice you will have . . . I have tried to bring in the main ideas you mentioned, and I think they are there. If you want to tighten it up, feel free to do so. In fact I leave it to you to edit this according to your own needs.”<sup>20</sup>

In this final version, Merton introduced subtitles: 1. “Past and Present”; 2. “Works of Mercy”; 3. “Sacramental Life”; 4. “Shepherd and Flock”; and 5. “Conclusion” and “The Church Shows the Way to All Who Seek It.” One gets the feeling that the subtitles were a ploy meant to reassure Msgr. McCormack and other planners that he had covered all the required bases. Nevertheless, Merton manages to retain some key points stressed in earlier versions. He retains the opening lines of the first two versions. He continues to describe the Church as “a living organism” rather than “an organization” but also writes that the “Catholic Church is Christ, made visible through His members, those for whom He died, to whom He gives His Spirit, so that He lives in them today.” In the section on “Works of Mercy,” he speaks of Christ living in the world and states that in healing the sick and feeding the hungry, “the good that is done by members of Christ is done by Christ Himself in them.” God’s love is redemptive and his mercy “endures forever.” In a short section on “Sacramental Life” Merton emphasizes Christ’s gift of himself in Baptism and Eucharist.

It is in what is the longest section, on the “Shepherd and Flock,” that Merton resorts to a “series of declarations” that respond directly to Msgr. McCormack’s requests to stress what is unique about the Catholic Church: “The Pope and the College of Bishops have inherited the mission and authority of Peter and the Apostles. They are in the world as signs of Christ, signs of unity. They are Shepherds because Christ Himself has called them and appointed them. They are in the world to feed the flock of Christ. There is one who is the Father and Shepherd of all. He is the successor of Peter” and so on. But, as Merton turns his attention to Shepherd’s “flock,” he expresses the prophetic message that he is most intent on conveying: Christ “came to bring peace to all men. He does not will that man should destroy himself, but that man should live, and grow, to build a world of justice and of peace. The Church says ‘No’ to those who kill, and torment, and persecute. She says ‘No’ to those who would destroy man. To destroy man is to destroy Christ.” That is the core of Merton’s prophetic message and his hope for the Church and the world and he found a way to include it in the final version of the script.

Finally, in the conclusion Merton underscores the urgency with these words: “NOW is the moment of the possible, the moment of freedom, the moment of decision.” And he adds a subtitle which asserts: “The Church Shows His Way to All Who Seek It,” clearly written with the folks in New York in mind. He writes:

We can choose a world of light or a world of ashes.

Christ’s way is the way of light.

It is Christ Who speaks in His Church: a message of peace, of mercy, of justice to His Family, which is the Family of Man.

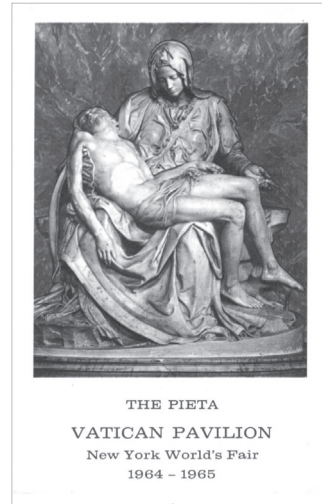
Christ is seen today. He is heard today. He is known today.

He is present and living in the world, not as a memory, not as a figure of history, but as the Son of the Living God.

The Catholic Church is Christ living in the world today.

The last line reiterates the theme Merton was asked to incorporate. This time he did what he was asked to do.

Once he sent in the rewrite, Merton was finished. As noted above, he gave Msgr. McCormack and the other planners permission to edit the text as they wished. Merton's rewritten script met with approval and gratitude. Msgr. McCormack wrote thanking Merton for his "gracious help" and pronouncing the script was "on the target" and that Merton's Columbia classmate and friend Ed Rice "had agreed to help" putting it together with the pictures and musical score.<sup>21</sup> In May, Merton received a letter from Cardinal Spellman, thanking Merton for writing the prayer which was printed on a card bearing the image of the Pieta.<sup>22</sup> Cardinal Spellman went on to say: "Everyone is delighted with the film sketch that you wrote for the picture, *The Church is Christ Living in the World Today*. More than one million persons have already seen it. In their name, I thank you for your wonderful work."<sup>23</sup> Merton responded with a letter of his own, written in a tone that Michael Mott has characterized as "border[ing] on servility" (Mott 402). Merton wrote: "I am happy to learn that the result was found not unfit for use, and that by the grace of God large numbers of people have been to see it . . . May God grant that some good may come as a result . . . For my part it was a pleasure and an honor to contribute in some small way to this work."<sup>24</sup> Surely, Merton was stretching the truth about the project being a "pleasure." Perhaps it had started out as a "pleasure" but it had not ended that way. Still when "the absurd enterprise of writing a script for a film to be shown in the Vatican Pavilion of the World's Fair" was over, Merton could still muse: "One of the worst things I have ever done was that absurd enterprise of writing a text for the Vatican Pavilion film. It has nothing whatever to do with the reality of the 'movies.' I have done nothing to 'make a (real) movie.' I must learn to refuse these baits – and yet, how marvelous it would be to really and competently do a true movie" (*VC* 21).<sup>25</sup>



### Postscript

In addition to shedding some light on Merton's writing process as he tries his hand at a genre new to him, the scripts Merton wrote offer a glimpse of Merton's vision of a prophetic Church. Merton certainly had more to say about the Catholic Church than he could express in a three- or four-page script. For a more revealing and more candid expression of Merton's view of the Catholic Church in the sixties, we can turn to his correspondence. For example, in June 1964, he wrote to Pablo Antonio Cuadra to say: "one has to face the fact that the Church is and remains in severe crisis. . . . I personally think that we are paralyzed by institutionalism, formalism, rigidity and regression. The real life of the Church is not in her hierarchy, it is dormant somewhere. . . . I think we need a deep enlightenment and liberation from cultural and intellectual habits, from spiritualities, from pious attitudes, from social prejudices, and perhaps the liberation must reach the proportions of an explosion before it will be genuine."<sup>26</sup> This was not a message the organizers of the Vatican Pavilion would have wanted to hear.

1. 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) 69; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text. For a slightly edited version of the entry, see Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 11; subsequent references will be cited as “VC” parenthetically in the text.
2. Patrick Hart, OCSO (personal communication [3/14/2013]).
3. In *Dancing in the Water of Life*, editor Robert Daggy mistakenly identifies the title of the script Merton initially submitted as “The Church Is Christ Alive in the World,” which is actually the title of the revised version. Merton’s original submission is entitled “Christ Lives Today.”
4. See Patrick F. O’Connell, “*The Tower of Babel: A Morality*” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 490.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 116-17.
6. See Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 52-57.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 140 [8/23/1961]; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
8. The book that Merton was forbidden to publish did not appear until four decades later. See Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
9. See Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 335-37; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text. For a discussion of this poem, see Patrick F. O’Connell, “The Civil Rights Poetry of Thomas Merton.” *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Vision*, ed. Angus Stuart (Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Radstock: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005) 89-96; subsequent references will be cited as “O’Connell, ‘Civil Rights’” parenthetically in the text.
11. CP 626-27; for a discussion, see O’Connell, “Civil Rights” 96-101. Michael Mott notes that “Merton kept the tear-out [of the photo by Chris McNair] in the front of his typescript of ‘A Vow of Conversation’” (Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984] 625, n. 281; subsequent references will be cited as “Mott” parenthetically in the text).
12. In November and December 1963, Merton’s “Letters to a White Liberal” appeared in *New Blackfriars*; see Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.
13. *Official Guide Book –Vatican Pavilion –New York World’s Fair 1964-1965* (New York: Vatican Pavilion [New York World’s Fair] Inc., 1964) 1; subsequent references will be cited as “Guide Book” in the text.
14. The folder is identified as “World’s Fair Vatican Pavilion Materials” and is housed at the University of Kentucky Library, Lexington.
15. Thomas Merton, “Today We Live” and “Christ Lives Today.”
16. As noted above, “Today We Live” is part of a folder of materials, identified as “World’s Fair Vatican Pavilion Materials,” and housed at the University of Kentucky Library, Lexington. The typescripts of “Christ Lives Today” and “The Church Is Alive in the World” are housed in the Thomas Merton Center [TMC] at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
17. To date, I have been unable to locate a copy of the film that was shown. Nor, I must admit, do I have any memory of seeing the film at the Vatican Pavilion which my parents and I visited. I do have a very vivid memory of our viewing Michelangelo’s *Pieta* which was, for me, the highlight of the Pavilion’s exhibit.
18. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ [New York: America Press, 1966] 199-200).
19. William J. McCormack to Thomas Merton. The letter is printed on letterhead of The Society for the Propagation of the Faith (TMC archives).
20. Thomas Merton to William J. McCormack, January 18, 1964 (TMC archives). Merton mentions that he “would be glad to have some copies of the prayer once it is printed.” The “Prayer by Thomas Merton,” identified as written for “New York – Vatican Pavilion 1964,” was printed on the back of a card with a color image of *The Pieta*.
21. William J. McCormack to Thomas Merton, January 28, 1964 (TMC archives).

22. The text of the prayer is as follows: “O God of mercy and of truth, look down we beg You upon this troubled world, and grant the light of Your grace to all who are kept by ignorance or scandal from coming to the knowledge of Your truth. Grant all men light to see You, by faith, in Your holy Church, the Mystical Body of Your divine Son. Grant us, members of that Mystical Body, to live worthily and gratefully, and grant us a better understanding of our supernatural vocation, and of the responsibilities it entails. If by our infidelities we are concealing Your Truth instead of revealing it to other men, grant that we too may receive light and strength to be completely renewed in the love of Christ and of His Church. Hear, we beg You, the earnest prayer of Your Church, and grant that all men may come to unity in faith, worship and obedience, to Your holy will, that our world may receive the gift of peace and salvation. Through the same Christ, Our Lord. Amen.” (The prayer came with 500 days indulgence and an “Imprimatur” from Cardinal Spellman.)
23. Francis Cardinal Spellman to Father Louis, May 18, 1964 (TMC archives).
24. Thomas Merton to Francis Cardinal Spellman, July 1, 1964 (TMC archives).
25. When Naomi Burton, Merton’s literary agent, learned that Merton had written a script, she asked: “What’s this thing for the Vatican Pavilion?” (Naomi Burton Stone to Thomas Merton, February 11, 1964 [TMC archives]). Merton reassured her: “It is a sort of script, at first for a movie, now I think just to accompany a glorified lanternslide show saying in four minutes that the Church is very interesting” (Thomas Merton to Naomi Burton Stone, February 17, 1964 [TMC archives]).
26. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 192.