

“PLAYING BEFORE GOD”: WISDOM, FREEDOM, AND THOMAS MERTON

by **Robert E. Daggy**

In 1959, while visiting Victor and Carolyn Hammer at their home in Lexington, Kentucky, Thomas Merton saw and was deeply impressed by one of Hammer’s renditions of Hagia Sophia (Divine Wisdom) crowning the child Jesus. On 14 May he wrote, in part, to Hammer: “[T]he wisdom of God, ‘reaching from end to end mightily,’ is also the Tao, the nameless pivot of all being and nature, the center and meaning of all, that which is the smallest and poorest and most humble in all: the ‘feminine child’ playing before God the Creator in His Universe, ‘playing before Him at all times, playing in the world.’”

As William H. Shannon, General Editor of The Merton Letters, prepared the fifth and final volume for publication, he chose to begin with Merton’s letters to Hammer. Thus, this letter of 14 May 1959 about Hagia Sophia, about “Wisdom,” is the first letter in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*. Shannon included as a sort of frontispiece to the Hammer section the line cut of Hagia Sophia which appears on the cover of this issue. Certainly this letter about wisdom with its crowded images of children, the “feminine,” playing before God in His creation — a letter which anticipates Merton’s masterful prose poem “Hagia Sophia” (first published by the Hammers) — is an ideal way to lead the reader into this fifth volume with its theme of “freedom.”

Witness to Freedom joins the other four volumes — *The Hidden Ground of Love* (also edited by Shannon), *The Road to Joy* (Robert E. Daggy), *The School of Charity* (Brother Patrick Hart), and *The Courage for Truth* (Christine M. Bochen) — and completes this series of The Merton Letters. Shannon says in his Introduction: “There is a sense of joy and relief in bringing to a close the publication of the five volumes of the Letters of Thomas Merton.” Though this series is now completed, activity will continue with Merton’s letters, those already published and the large number still unpublished. There are several projects for volumes which offer both sides of the correspondence, not just Merton’s letters: Merton and Rosemary Ruether (due from Orbis under the title *At Home in the World*), Merton and James Laughlin, Merton and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Merton and John C. H. Wu. *Witness to Freedom* is reviewed in this issue by Gloria Kitto Lewis and Patrick F. Guyton.

The theme of “wisdom” leads off this issue. Bonnie B. Thurston returns to the pages of *The Merton Seasonal* with her discussion of wisdom in Merton’s mature thought, explaining how Merton develops this theme in “Hagia Sophia.” Merton uses Adam and Eve in “Hagia Sophia,” viewing Eve as a representation of the “feminine principle.” Brent Short develops this theme in his discussion of Genesis, pointing out, among other things, that much of Merton’s later reading was in the world’s “wisdom literatures.”

William H. Shannon examines a Merton text, *No Man is an Island* (published on 24 March 1955), the very title of which meshes with Merton’s opening lines in “Hagia Sophia.” J. T. Ledbetter, Richard E. Getty, and Francis J. Welsh contribute poems. The one by Welsh of reminds us in this “season” that Merton, had he lived, would have celebrated his eightieth birthday on 31 January 1995.

In its “collective wisdom,” the Executive Board of The International Thomas Merton Society has seen fit to ask for a revision of the Bylaws. The text of the proposed revision is printed here for the consideration of the membership.

Last, but certainly not least, I ask you to note the “Call for Papers” from the ITMS national affiliate, The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. They will hold their first “General Meeting” from 17 to 19 May 1996 in Southampton.