

## Foreword

### Guard the human image for it is the image of God

We gathered from several European nations, as many of us had gathered four years previously at Münsterschwarzach, when the community so generously hosted our conference celebrating the centenary of Thomas Merton's birth. This time we were marking fifty years since his death on 10 December 1968.

Speculation about the circumstances surrounding that death, at a conference of Catholic religious leaders meeting in Bangkok, continues to this day, fuelled by recollections of the tensions which marked a heady era. In the Spring of 1968, Merton was reflecting on a year already marked by brutal war in Vietnam, an escalating nuclear arms race, fierce racial conflict, the assassination of Robert Kennedy and then of Martin Luther King. On April 6, 1968, he wrote in his journal:

*So the murder of M. L. King – it lay on the top of the traveling car like an animal, a beast of the apocalypse. And it finally confirmed all the apprehensions – the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year. That the things are finally, inexorably, spelling themselves out. Why? Are things happening because people in desperation want them to happen? Or do they have to happen? Is the human race self-destructive? Is the Christian message of love a pitiful delusion? Or must one just “love” in an impossible situation? And what sense can possibly be made by an authoritarian Church that comes out 100 years late with its official pronouncements?*

Eight months later, Merton was dead. Fifty years on, we gathered under his call to “guard the human image for it is the image of God”. With particular attention to his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*, we celebrated Merton’s life and work, whilst facing with him some global crises and trends, including re-emerging patterns of nationalism, xenophobia, populism and confrontational rhetoric.

The following began as presentations – some in German, some in English, one a playful blend of both – at an occasion marked by companionship and mutuality, conversation and laughter, prayer and feasting. We offer them in gratitude for our hosts and all who travelled to make the event, and in hope that they contribute to continuing conversation.

We are indebted to all who have helped to make the conference and this booklet happen, especially to Br. Jakobus Geiger OSB, Br. Patrick Karch OSB and the staff of the abbey guesthouse, to Br. Dr. Ansgar Stüfe OSB and Dr. Matthias E. Gahr from Vier-Türme-Verlag and our translators P. Otto Betler OSB, Irmgard Deifel and Herta Sieber.

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*Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz*

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