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He is the Image of the Invisible God: Cistercian Spirituality Focused on Christ as the Source and Background of Images

I. Introduction

The presence of images and the imaginary in the Cistercian spiritual area seems to be a crucial problem. Many authors took this problem into consideration. Georges Duby dedicated his important work to the influence of Saint Bernard's thought in the artistic creation of the Cistercians (Duby, 2002: 187–442). Alicja Karłowska-Kamzowa presented the results of research on the Cistercian book painting in Polish areas (Karłowska-Kamzowa, 1987: 368–370). Conrad Rudolph, in his large monography, analyzed the prescriptions of two chapters of *Apologia ad Gulielmum* and searched for their real inspiration in Cistercian creation (Rudolph, 1990: *passim*). Elisabeth Melczer studied the relationship between Cistercian monasticism and its aesthetics (Melczer, Soldwedel, 1982: 31–44). Yolanda Zaluska, author of a famous monograph on Cistercian book painting in Cîteaux of the 12th century, has confronted her findings with the prescriptions and attitudes of the Cistercians towards art (Zaluska, 1989: *passim*). Annegret Laabs published the large study on the Cistercian painting and sculpture in the 13th and 14th centuries (Laab, 2000, *passim*). She discovered the meaning and functions of representations in Cistercian churches. Diane J. Reilly confronted the realities

of Cistercian art with the considerations of “Apologia”. She analyzed several forms of art – book painting, pavements, and stained glass windows (Reilly, 2013: 125–139). Emilia Jamroziak, in her book about the Cistercian culture, studied the iconographical types of grey monks (Jamroziak, 2013: 156–182). The speaker and author of this paper also contributed to studies on Cistercian book painting and Cistercian imagery (Tabor, 2004: *passim*).

The object of this paper is the particular relationship between Cistercian pictures and Cistercian spirituality. The author tries to answer the question: Could Cistercian spirituality, as expressed in the writings of Cistercian spiritual masters, have been the source and background of images that emerged in the Cistercian milieu?

II. Cistercian Images

It could be very useful to review and analyze some painted and carved representations, which came from the Cistercian abbeys. These images were created for different Cistercian communities and were collocated in liturgical spaces.

Cruc Ligne

The wooden and painted crucifix from the abbey church in Loccum, created c.1250, displays a symbolic vision. In fact, Christ, nailed to the cross with three nails, reveals his monumental and triumphal character (Lutze, 1958/1959: 35–44; Nowiński, 2016: 263–265). He appears as a strong and majestic person, because there are no traces of suffering on his body. His figure is frontal, and his arms are stretched horizontally.

The ends of the cross are adorned with medallions with four apocalyptic animals and, at the bottom, an extended floral motive.

This crucifixion has been placed on the top of the lectorium, dividing the choir and nave. In fact, this screen, which separated the space of the monks and the space of converses, was the trouble spot in the Cistercian church. By this screen, there was an Altar of the Holy Cross. Members of the community, who participated in the convent liturgy, had the opportunity to look at the crucifix, because the image of Jesus was painted on both sides of the cross.

The monumentality of the figure and the strength of his posture were enhanced by the symbolic representation of four apocalyptic animals in the medallions. The apocalyptic context, given by the allusion to the animals, opens the understanding and identifies him as the Lamb, introduced to the throne and slain by the living. Evidently, the Lamb is a principal protagonist

of the heavenly liturgy from chapters 4 and 5 of the Apocalypse. Besides, the floral composition at the bottom of the cross suggests the meaning of *lignum vitae* – tree of life.

The elevated position of this cross, placed above the Holy Cross Altar at the central point of the church, among the celebrating and praying congregation, inspires all people present to adoration and contemplation. The Holy Cross Altar was a principal equipment in the Benedictine church from the 11th century. Its connection with the Eucharist is evident. Therefore, the highest position of the Crucifix, with Christ depicted on both sides, gives it a particular function. This is the contemplation of the crucified and elevated Lord, because the depicted figures on both sides draw attention. This contemplation, which includes visual engagement, seems to have been an integral part of the Cistercian ethos.

Sedes Sapientiae

The abbey of Cistercian nuns in Ołobok (Poland) has a sculpture of the Madonna with Child. This figure, created circa 1200, is very archaic but not primitive (Migdał, 2011: 39–40; Nowiński, 2016: 287–291). It represents Mary, Mother of God, sitting on the throne. Her frontal position and majestic posture reflect her character and role. In fact, she holds Jesus, who sits on her lap. Her Son is a miniaturized adult rather than a child. Mary is the dominant figure in this composition; however, she shows Jesus to the faithful, revealing him before their eyes.

Madonna from Bardo, a Cistercian priory on the border between Silesia and the Glatz district, shares similar characteristics. The Mother of God, sitting frontally on the throne, holds Jesus – a miniaturized adult – who makes a rhetorical gesture. Mary wears a splendid cloak, and her monarchic posture reveals her principal task: the presentation of Jesus. His rhetorical gesture and the book held in his left hand indicate his nature and mission.

Concluding this analysis, we can claim that the figure of Mary creates a frame and place for the revelation of her Son. In fact, she shows Jesus as the Lord of Heaven and Earth.

Planctus Mariae

The theological and mystical sources of the Pietà have been studied by scholars for more than 80 years. Evidently, this particular image, which appeared at the beginning of the 14th century, is due to the experience of Passion and sorrow. It is a very widespread iconographical theme in the Christian world; however, it was assimilated by the Cistercian world and Cistercian communities. Therefore, the Pietà of Lubiąż (c. 1360–1370), now in the National

Museum in Warsaw, found its position in the atmosphere of prayer and contemplation in the church of the Silesian Cistercian abbey (Kaczmarek, 2008: 43–60; Nowiński, 2016: 311).

The drama of Christ's Passion and the sorrow of Mary has been displayed by the system of lines which assume particular directions. So they make these profound emotions visible. Mary is sitting frontally, and the dead body of her Son lies on her lap. This body is divided into some parts, because the directional lines give them particular postures and positions. His chest takes a diagonal position, which changes into the vertical position of the belly. His legs are bent perpendicularly. The right hand of Christ is posed in a vertical position, whereas his left hand is stretched horizontally. The whole body is bent and flexed. Consequently, it seems to express some emotions and make visible the drama of sorrow and suffering.

All parts of the body, which make an extraordinary system of directive lines, create an original visual structure which helps and inspires the spectator to contemplation. What is more, this structure is marked by points that are the most valuable elements of this representation. These are three wounds – two on the hands and one in his side. They are put forward in the structure and attract the gaze of the contemplator.

This exposition of the dead body of Christ in the arms of his Mother, with the accentuation of the wounds, became an excellent instrument of contemplation. In fact, the meditation on the Passion of Christ was carried out through the visualization of the wounds.

The Pietà from the Cistercian abbey in Wągrowiec (Western Poland), c. 1420, was created in another manner. Mary, who is sitting frontally and wearing the softly and mildly draped robes of international style, reveals melancholic and calm emotions (Wyrwa, 1998: 104). These emotions create a particular atmosphere in which Mary, holding the dead body of Christ and taking his left hand, can stay in contact with her Son. These emotions and gestures shape the visual structure. However, the most striking gesture of this structure is the turn of her head and the gaze of her eyes, because she directs them to the wounded side of Jesus. Consequently, Mary, through her attitude and gesture, shows the body of Christ to the viewer and contemplator and points to the central spot of the visual structure – the side of Christ marked by his wound.

This wound seems to be a key that opens the understanding of the image. In fact, this point is focused and brought before the eyes of the spectator. So it attracts the attention of praying and contemplating people. The visual communication seems to help them to notice the crucial reality and concentrate on their spiritual efforts.

Mostra Nobis

At the beginning of the 15th century, an image of the Mother of God with Child was procured for the Cistercian abbey of Vyšší Brod (Hohenfuhrt) in Bohemia (Laabs, 2000: 90; Klipa, 2008: 285–302; Nowiński, 2016, 331–335). The presence of the image of Mary with Child in the Cistercian area invites questions about the sense and function of this image. A detailed analysis could bring us the answer. Mary, who wears the delicately, mildly draped cloak and *maforium*, turns her face to the observer. However, she does not attract his attention because she turns her eyes to Jesus. In fact, she is holding the little Jesus in her left hand and supporting his hip with her right hand. Consequently, the Child Jesus, lying in the hands of his Mother and stretching his hand to her face, is getting ahead.

Mary turns her face to him and looks at her Son with pity and tenderness. This relationship between Mother and Son has particular importance. In fact, his position and pose make him the most emphasized element of the whole visual structure. Likewise, the tender look of the Mother guides the gaze of the observer not to her face but to the body of the Child Jesus.

It could be very useful and fruitful to take into consideration two other pictures that were the objects of worship and veneration in Cistercian abbeys. These are the Mother of God from Koprzywnica, a Cistercian abbey founded in 1183, and the Mother of God with Child from the abbey in Rudy (Rauden), founded in 1258 (Koprzywnica: Małkiewiczówna, 2015: 198–205; Nowiński, 2016: 335–341; Rudy: Będziński, 1999: *passim*; Nowiński, 2016: 341–343). Both pictures are very similar, because they represent the same iconographical schema.

Mary is presented in a half-length figure, on a gold field. Her head and shoulders are covered by a marvelous cloak, fastened by a fibula. She holds Jesus in her left hand. The Child, who is a miniaturized adult, wears a marvelous tunic. The attitude and gestures of Jesus are very significant because he raises his right hand in the rhetorical gesture of speaking and holds the book in his left hand. His position and gesture reveal him as a person who is in power and who carries out teaching.

The attitude and gesture of Mary remain in service to the gestures and attitude of Jesus. In fact, his mother points to him with her right hand. Mary maintains contact with the observer as she looks at him. However, her most striking gesture is the pointing hand. This is a key gesture that lets us understand the whole image. In fact, Mary – Hodegetria – leads us to Jesus.

In conclusion to this analysis, we can assert that all of Mary's images created in the Cistercian milieu are of a unique function and of a particular sense. Mary adoring the little Jesus and Mary pointing out her Son appear as figures who show Jesus and guide observers to him.

III. Cistercian Masters

The presence of pictures and sculptures in the Cistercian space of liturgy and common prayer seems to be something strange. On the one hand, even the regulations of the General Chapter do not give an adequate explanation of the images. So the statutes of the General Chapter from 1134 accept the wooden depicted cross above the choir barriers. On the other hand, we can affirm, after analyzing the works, that there existed among Cistercians a need for images, which were created with great effort and a great deal of financial resources.

What is the background of this need? Where is the source of the images that arose in the milieu of Cistercians? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine Cistercian spirituality and analyze some Cistercian texts.

Bernard of Clairvaux

When we take into consideration the famous work of Bernard – *De diligendo Deo* – we discover many remarks on the Passion of Christ (Bernardus sanctus, 1839: 3–56). In the 7th paragraph, he invites the believer to love the crucified Christ (*De diligendo Deo* 7). Consequently, the author, using the language derived from the Song of Songs, recognizes the Church as the bride. She looks at the crowned King Solomon, who looks at the Son, holding the cross, whipped, insulted, nailed to the cross, and pierced by a spear. Her heart is penetrated by profound emotion as she gazes at the bridegroom offering his soul for his friends. Moved by this emotion, she shouts: “Fulcite me floribus stipate me malis quia amore langueo” (SoS 2, 5). The bride tastes the red apple, representing the wounds of Christ, and smells the flowers – symbols of resurrection. The tasting of fruits and the smelling of flowers is an image of contemplation. In fact, the bride – the Church or the soul – contemplates and considers the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The bridegroom recognizes his bride contemplating him and decides to come to her and to be with her (*De diligendo Deo* 8). This is inspired by the verse from the Song of Songs, which Bernard cites in his work: “Ecce tu pulcher es dilecte mihi et decorus lectulus noster floridus tigna domorum nostrorum cedrina laquearia nostra cypressina” (SoS 1, 15–16).

Some statements from Sermon 61 (taken from *Sermones in cantica canticorum*) are also very significant and inspiring (Bernard de Clairvaux, 2003: 240–259). Bernard emphasizes the wounds of Christ because these wounds open for the believer the intimate interior of his heart. In fact, his heart suffers. This internal suffering is called the sacrament of piety (*sacramentum pietatis*) and the intestines of mercy (*viscera misericordiae*). Both present the fundamental attitude of Christ and his relationship with mankind. This

intimate suffering is opened by the nails which pierced his legs and his hands. Therefore, in the wounds of Christ, his plan of salvation is revealed. The opened wounds of Christ allow us to taste the sweetness of the Lord.

Sermon 62 of *Sermones in Cantica canticorum* brings other statements concerning the relationship between the bride and bridegroom (Bernard de Clairvaux, 2003, 260–272). Columba, the dove, is the symbolic representation of the bride. She is recognized as the Church or as the soul. She stays on the rock, because rock is the Word of God. The dove resting on the rock does not contemplate the majesty of God but considers His will and His desire. However, she is not able to contemplate the face of the Bride, because her own face is not nice and she is not clean. Therefore, she needs to return to the clefts of the rock in order to purify herself. She finds purification in the cleft of the rock (*Foramina Petrae*, SoS 2, 14). This cleft symbolizes the wounds of Christ. Therefore, the Bride – the Soul – is to be plunged in the wounds of Christ, because she must be healed from her spiritual injuries and her conscience must be purified.

Bernard asserts that only a soul perfectly purified could look at the face of the Bridegroom and hear his voice. The citations from the Song of Songs seem to confirm this statement: “Ostende mihi faciem tuam sonnet vox tua in auribus meis” (SoS 2, 14). Consequently, the meditation on the wounded Bridegroom is to mean that the suffering and crucified Christ is the fundamental attitude of the Dove – the soul or the Church.

Guillaume de Saint-Thierry

Preces meditative of Guillaume show us just another perspective of the relationship with God (Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, 1986: *passim*). The author starts from the desire. It is the desire of God, the desire to stay in touch with heaven. In fact, the person remains in permanent waiting and expectation for the opening of the Ark of the Covenant. This desire was fulfilled when the spear of a soldier pierced the side of Christ. At this moment, the Ark of the Covenant and heaven are opened. In the spiritual experience of Guillaume, the wound of Christ is the gate. From this gate flows the glory of God and his sweetness.

Guillaume transforms this statement in a series of ardent prayers. He asks the Lord to open his side, because those who desire to look at the secrets of the Son could receive the sacraments of salvation.

In his work *De contemplando Deo*, dedicated to the relationship with God, Guillaume starts from the point of departure, which is the rock of faith (Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, 1977: *passim*). On this rock, Guillaume, protected by the hand of God, begins to look at God. He makes an effort to see God and he finally finds a solution. He quotes Saint Thomas the Apostle as a model

of spiritual striving, because he desired to look upon and touch Jesus. Consequently, Guillaume approaches the wound of Christ's side. He does not touch his wound with his finger, but he wants to enter into the profoundness of the Son of God. He is aware that he could achieve the heart of Jesus, which is the ark of testimony, a golden urn, and the soul of our humanity.

The wound of Christ was for him the most important object of contemplation. Truly, this is the primary object of consideration. Then another object appears. This is the face of Christ. He experiences another desire, namely the desire to see the face, according to the psalm verse: *Tibi dixit cor meum exquisivit te facies mea, faciem tuam domine requiram* (Ps 27,8). He waits for the day when God will take away his hand which covers his eyes and give him the grace of illumination. He looks at the face of Jesus, and this face is for him the object of admiration and high regard. From this moment, he begins to contemplate his face with all the faculties of his own conscience. His contemplation is permeated by the desire to see God's face. The desire for illumination is one of the most impressive markers of Guillaume's contemplation. However, the vision of God is the indispensable condition for the love of God.

Guerric of Igny

Guerric of Igny meditated on the Event of Nativity and the Mystery of the Incarnation (Guerric of Igny, 1972: *passim*).

In his 1st Nativity Sermon, Guerric asks God for mercy because he and his companions are unable to look at His glory and His splendor. He asks God to manifest the goodness and humanity of the Savior. Only through the manifestation of Christ in his human nature could mankind be worthy and able to see the majesty and divinity of God, who is the Creator of all beings. The revelation of God's mercy is a necessary condition for the relationship between God and mankind. This mercy is the object of desire and supplication. It could only be revealed through human misery. This misery means the human nature assumed by God's Son.

In his 2nd Nativity Sermon, Guerric asks the question: Do you want to see God with your own eyes, but God deprived of His glory and His divinity? He finds the answer: look at the Child in Bethlehem's crèche. He is your God, who emptied himself. He took on human misery because he decided to restore human nature.

In Guerric's thought, the vision of God is only possible through the vision of the incarnated God, who appeared as the Child Jesus. Only through the experience of human nature assumed by God is it possible to receive God's mercy.

IV. Conclusion: Spirituality and Images

After the analysis of spiritual experiences, we can identify the most significant and crucial values of Cistercian spirituality. The review of the texts convinces us that the basic point of spiritual experience is desire. In fact, desire pervades the thoughts of all three masters. What is more, desire shapes the whole universe of internal life and inspires the whole spiritual activity of the Cistercian monk.

This is the desire of the bride, who languishes for the Bridegroom in the writings of Bernard. This is the desire characteristic of a person waiting for God and His mercy in the texts of Guillaume. This is the desire for the mercy and humanity of God, expressed by Gueric. Consequently, a person who desires and makes efforts stays in front of the object of desire. Bernard shows us the Bridegroom – Christ; Guillaume reveals the suffering Christ; and Gueric leads us to the Child lying in the crèche. This discovery of Christ in His humanity is the fundamental reality of the spiritual experience of our three Cistercian masters. We can argue that it is the core of Cistercian monasticism. Consequently, the relationship between the monk and Christ is an object of internal care and grand efforts.

However, the relationship between the desiring subject and the desired object (Christ) reveals some particular elements. It is a symbolic reality that can make this communication more concrete and more real. Bernard emphasizes the wound of Christ. Guillaume brings attention to the wound of Christ's side. Gueric invites us to concentrate on the Child in the crèche. This particular reality is significant because it inspires an attitude in the viewer or observer. It leads one to receive a visualization and to start contemplation. This attitude is vision and contemplation. In fact, in order to stay in touch with the person – Christ, who is the object of desire – it is necessary to see and to gaze at him. The Bride is in search of the Bridegroom because she wants to see him. The contemplator of Guillaume tries to see the wounds and the face of Christ. Gueric argues that, in order to experience the mercy of God, it is necessary to gaze at the human misery of the Child in the crèche.

This spiritual atmosphere, created by the grand masters, is the natural milieu in which pictures appear. Therefore, the spiritual practice needs the painted cross, the Pietà that exposes the wounds of Christ, and the figure of the Mother of God, who presents the Child.

In conclusion, we can assert that the presence of images in the Cistercian milieu, in the Cistercian space of celebration, is not simply a result of disobedience or a lack of observance. It is a logical and natural consequence of the practice of spiritual values. The highest value of this spirituality is Christ in his human nature. This is the core and the center of Cistercian monasticism. The contemplation of him creates the image.

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Abstract

This paper examines the image of Christ – understood as the image of God – within Cistercian culture and spirituality. In this milieu, the image of Christ takes multiple forms and is expressed through various iconographic types. The first and most important is the Crucifixion, as it embodies the Cistercian contemplation of the suffering Christ. Depictions of Mary, the Mother of God, likewise mediate the image of Christ, since iconographic types such as the Sedes Sapientiae, the Pietà, and the Hodegetria present the Mother with Jesus. They play a significant role, portraying Mary as the one who offers her Son to the viewer – either as the Child or as the dead Saviour. Cistercian masters of the spiritual life – Bernard of Clairvaux, Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, and Gueric of Igny – also shaped images of Christ in their writings, both in the mystery of the Incarnation and in the mystery of Redemption. The presence of images of Christ in the Cistercian environment inspired monks to contemplation, whose essential component was “desire”.

On jest obrazem Boga niewidzialnego: duchowość cysterska skoncentrowana na Chrystusie jako źródle i podłożu obrazów

Abstrakt

Przedmiotem tego tekstu jest wizerunek Chrystusa pojmowany jako obraz Boga, funkcjonujący w cysterskiej kulturze i w cysterskiej duchowości. Obraz Chrystusa w tym środowisku przyjmuje wielorakie kształty i realizuje się w różnych typach ikonograficznych. Pierwszym i najważniejszym obrazem jest Ukrzyżowanie, ponieważ wyraża ono cysterską kontemplację cierpiącego Chrystusa. Również przedstawienia Matki Boskiej są nośnikami obrazu Chrystusa, ponieważ typy ikonograficzne – Sedes Sapientiae, Pietà, i Hodegetria – ujawniają Matkę z Jezusem. Odgrywają ważną rolę, przedstawiają bowiem Maryję, która trzyma Dzieciątka lub ciało zmarłego Chrystusa. Cysterscy mistrzowie życia duchowego tworzyli w swych pismach obraz Chrystusa zarówno w tajemnicy Wcielenia, jak i w tajemnicy Odkupienia. Obecność obrazu Chrystusa w środowisku cysterskim inspirowała mnichów do jego kontemplacji. Jej istotnym składnikiem było „pragnienie”.

Keywords: Cistercians, Cistercian spirituality, Cistercian images, Christ, Mary Mother of God, Cistercian Art, image of Christ

Słowa kluczowe: Cystersi, cysterska duchowość, cysterskie obrazy, cysterska sztuka, Maria Matka Boża, Chrystus, obraz Chrystusa

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