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Anno Domini

by Ed Block

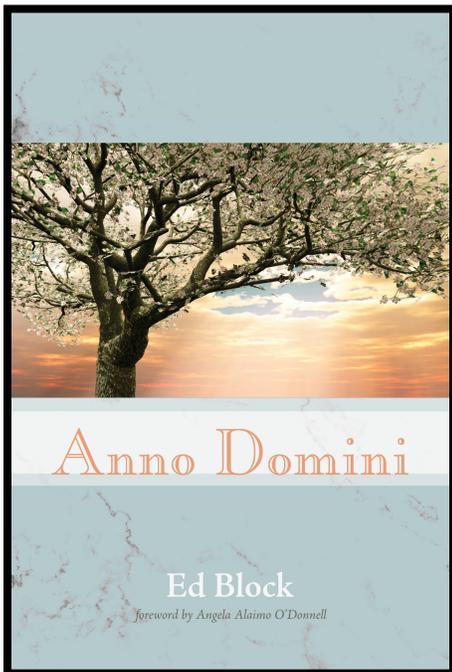
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New Title from Ed Block

Anno Domini



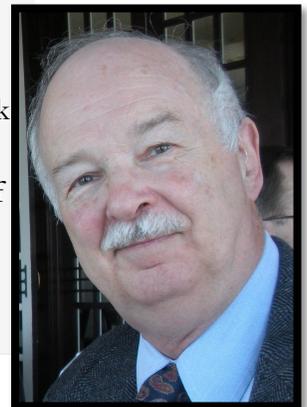
A collection of—often brief—poetic reflections, loosely based on the liturgical year, but interspersed with poems on selected Gospel passages, *Anno Domini* will quickly engage even the beginning reader of religious poetry. It will also appeal to seminarians and college students interested in religious poetry. *Anno Domini* provides a selective take on some key religious themes that will, by turns, move, console, and inspire.

The poems in this collection examine everyday perceptions, experiences, and events under the inspiration of faith. They also look at some familiar Gospel stories in a twenty-first century light. The collection as a whole presents a spirituality of presence, gratitude, and graceful living in the world.

A book of meditative verse, less cerebral than the poetry that Louis Martz examined in *The Poetry of Meditation*, but like Killian McDonnell's *Wrestling with God*, *Anno Domini* is a non-polemical yet thoughtful and serious contribution to Christian poetry. Meant for readers new to religious verse, it will appeal to busy people who need a moment's break for the experience of gratitude and grace as well as Christian poets seeking

inspiration and models for the short religious lyric.

Ed Block, Emeritus Professor of English at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, retired from teaching in 2012. He and his family have lived in Greendale, Wisconsin for twenty-six years. There he tends a garden, does water colors, leads book discussions at the local library, and continues to read and write about literature and compose poems. His interviews and essays on literary topics, and on the spirituality of everyday life, have appeared in *AMERICA*, *IMAGE*, *LOGOS*, *HOMILETIC AND PASTORAL REVIEW*, *U.S. CATHOLIC*, and a variety of other journals. He is currently at work on another book of poems, tentatively titled *Seasons of Change*.



Interview with Ed Block

When did you start writing poetry?

I have been writing poetry since I was in high school, but it was only in the 90s that I began to concentrate greater efforts on my craft. A workshop with poet Carolyn Forché gave me even greater impetus, and a meeting with poet Angela Alaimo O'Donnell in October, 2015, was a further inspiration.

Who are some of your favorite poets?

One of my first favorites was W. H. Auden. His worldly wise but reverent attitude – and some hardnosed religious poems – have been a model. More recently I studied, interviewed, and taught the work of British-born American poet, Denise Levertov. Her religious poems are something I aspire to. In 2010 I co-taught a course on Czesław Miłosz and came to appreciate his poetry and that of his translator, Robert Hass. Carolyn Forché's discipline and insight also continue to inspire me.

Some people don't like poetry because, they say, it's too hard. Or there are too many "hidden meanings."

How would you respond?

Another favorite poet, Ted Kooser, wrote a fascinating "how to book" titled: *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. Early in it he tells aspiring poets to consider the reader. He says not to "scare off" readers with abstractions and arcane symbols. I have taken that advice to heart. I hope my poems are always accessible on first reading, but that they also reward rereading and further reflection.

How do you go about writing a religious poem?

Some of the poems in *Anno Domini* began as prayers. Others were inspired by particularly moving experiences: with individuals, experiences in nature, or just time spent in my garden. I jot down a few lines in a notebook and then return to them during my regular writing time. Other times it is a passage from Scripture, or a line in a favorite spiritual writer that gets me thinking, rhythmically, "imagistically," if you will. I jot down a few lines and add to them until the idea or the image, or the insight seems complete.

One of my poems, "Christ Has Set Us Free," is a combination of both. I still have the hand-written notes that I made on Thomas Merton's Easter essay, "Easter: the New Life," when I was reading it one Easter morning. Folded into the pages of the collection that contains the essay (*Seasons of Celebration*) is my first response to Merton's explication of St. Paul to the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 1: "Christ has set us free." Merton's whole essay is about Easter freeing us from slavery to the Law. It struck me so powerfully that I had to articulate something of that realization. My poem commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Merton's birth in 2015 was inspired by photographs of and by him, at Gethesemani Abbey in Kentucky. The poem brings together images from those photos, and phrases from his writings, as well as some favorite books about him. The title, "In the Forest of God's Mercy," refers to another essay in *Seasons of Celebration* that I reread yearly. About "the Good Samaritan," it stresses the mercy of God, *chesed* in Hebrew, which, Merton says, also means "fidelity" and strength.

Many of the poems in this collection are about transformation. For instance, one of the most recently written, "I Have Called You Each By Name," was inspired by a clerk at the local Barnes and Noble bookstore.

What other inspirations call forth your poems?

I guess two of the most reliable sources of inspiration are the birds in our yard (we have several feeders) and the annual garden I have been putting in for over twenty years.

An Excerpt from Anno Domini

Mid-Winter Matins

The mercury stands at four above.
The twigs I gather break and snap,
the falling sap froze dead within the wood.
The sun just up, the sky is bluish gray,
the promise of a brighter day.
This morning, in the dark, the dog beyond the road
barked once and fell to silence in the gloom.
The pines stood black against the morning sky,
the leafless trees like men and women
raising hands and arms in prayer.
And I remember Merton in his hermitage;
the overalls, the prayers, the everyday routines;
the sacramental fire, kindled,
bringing light and warmth to birth again.

Into Rough Country

I took a wrong way
late in life.
I veered
through thorn-thick
underbrush,
went wrong instead of right.
The path I chose
abandoned company,
ignored the watered valley,
led into rough country.
Now I try
to find a track,
back uphill
toward the light,
avoiding crossroads
of despair,
seeking, instead,
the sudden
poetry of springs,
some unexpected place of joy.

Prairie Hours

No lark at dawn
ascends from sullen ground;
my prayers, a nest
of broken shells.
By day my stubble fields
are whipped by winds of guilt;
my prayers are chaff.
At night my prayers,
like empty bowls,
rattle in the cupboard
of my heart,
as trains of sadness
rumble through the crossings
of my life.

I Have Called You Each By Name (Isaiah 43:1) (for Beckah)

A spark will light the eyes
and suddenly a clerk
becomes a person anyone can love.
Look at the name tag.
Call her Beckah, call him Tran.
In shops and motels, pharmacies,
the cleaner's, deli, fast food chain:
address the workers by the names they wear,
remark the change.
Across a gulf of cold
impersonality, formality, and anonymity,
reach out a glance, extend
a smile. With little risk we lighten
burdens, make the day move
more swiftly for other human beings,
their personhood, called forth,
a fullness, ripe with possibilities.

Praise for *Anno Domini*

“This little volume invites us to look again at the small things which so often stun us with a call to depth of purpose. Ed Block’s gifts as poet, contemplator, educator, and gardener combine in these lines to invite us to greater attentiveness on our daily rounds.”

—**Carol Ann Smith, spiritual director; co-author of *Moment By Moment: A Retreat In Everyday Life***

“In ordinary time we wait...’ for poetry which touches our soul. Anno Domini paints word pictures of the real, and promises of things unseen. Behold, a book for all the seasons of our lives! Personally, I have been enriched by these prayer poems. They elicit prayerful pondering. I look forward to using them in my spiritual ministry to others.”

—**Eugene F. Merz, spiritual/retreat director; co-author of *Moment by Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life***

“At times bringing Gospel stories to life in moving detail, at times seeing extraordinary sacredness in nature and in the cycles of the year, at times unflinchingly confronting dryness and despair, these poems as prayers—prayers as poems—are a tremendous gift. Whether drawing our eyes to the soft grass or the weeds, Block’s poems shine bright light on just how much we’ve been given, but settle for no cheap grace.”

—**Thomas M. Landy, College of the Holy Cross; founder and director, Collegium**

“The directness and faith of a line like this one, from the poem, ‘At Christmas,’ permeate all of Ed Block’s Anno Domini: ‘At every moment / Jesus touches us with gentleness.’ Indeed. Block’s work opens readers up to new opportunities to receive that gentle and life-changing touch.”

—**Zach Czaia, Author of *Saint Paul Lives Here (In Minnesota)***

