



THE INTERNATIONAL THOMAS MERTON SOCIETY

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The Struggle for Racial Justice in the United States
A Statement of Commitment from the International Thomas Merton Society
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Many Christians who have confused “Americanism” with “Christianity,” are in fact contributing to the painful contradictions and even injustices of the racial crisis. . . We are living in a society which misuses Christian clichés to justify its lawlessness and immorality.

~ Thomas Merton, “Religion and Race in the United States” (1964)

A litany of tragic events related to race-relations in the United States and the emergence of the global COVID-19 crisis have exposed in unprecedented ways the scourge of racism and white supremacy in US society and, indeed, around the world. Under the dark light of these signs of the times, the International Thomas Merton Society wishes to clarify what we stand for. In our work, mission, and, above all, in our fellowship as companions and students of Thomas Merton, we strive to represent a Trappist monk who lived a life of solitude alongside utter clarity of human value. In a time of great unrest, Merton spoke peace into war, love into hate, and unity into divisiveness.

We, as the leadership of the ITMS, long to sustain Merton’s witness to these sacred human values across the generations. While we cannot be certain that our precise words would reflect those of Thomas Merton were he alive today, and our conclusions are wholly our own, we recognize the necessity to speak and to act in this moment, to stand for human life more than for a perfected or idealized memory. To live and act “in the spirit of Thomas Merton” is not to be mimics of Merton’s life; it is to be persons and a community of conscience, discerning our way on the path together. In Merton’s words, it is to “be human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the [human image] for it is the image of God.”

Context: Merton’s Witness in the Cause of Racial Justice

In his best-known essay on the race crisis, “Letters to a White Liberal,” written in November 1963, Merton describes the nonviolent movement for racial liberation led by Rev. Martin Luther King in deeply biblical and Christian terms as *kairos*, a “providential hour” of decision, not only for African Americans but also and especially for white Christians in America. Less than a year later, in “Religion and Race in the United States,” Merton worries that the critical moment of *kairos* has passed. The failure of white Christians and Catholics to respond constructively to “one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century,” Merton judges to be one of the clearest and most tragic indicators that the “professedly Christian civilization of the West” was in fact condemning itself “by its own acts and its own fruits.”

By contrast to the nonviolent freedom struggle led by Gandhi in India, where the Hindu masses far outnumbered their British oppressors, nonviolence in the US, Merton observes, turned out to mean “another admission of Negro inferiority and helplessness,” principally because anti-black violence in the US “is much more complex, much more tragic, than people have imagined.” Because racism is built into the very structures of American society, the Black person, Merton laments, “is always the

one who lets his head be bashed in." History would prove him right. Merton saw clearly that the American ideals of democracy and Christianity were "being weighed in the balance." The *kairos* of 1964 would pass. A more destructive ethos, less tethered to a sacred vision of the human person and of the common good, would come to dominate the next phase of the black freedom struggle. The struggle for the sacred dignity and rights of people of color in America "now enters a new and more difficult phase."

Some sixty years later, we still find ourselves in that "more difficult phase," and once again, a critical moment of *kairos*. What Merton observed of "Black Power" in 1964 is no less true of the rallying cry of "Black Lives Matter" today: it "implies not only the intent to use political means in order to gain what is granted the Negro by law and refused him in fact." It also implies "a consciousness of revolutionary solidarity" with peoples of color throughout the world. The guilt of white Christians and Catholics with respect to African Americans, Hispanics, Indians, and other peoples of color, Merton concludes, "is simply another version of the guilt of the European colonizer toward all the other races of the world, whether in Asia, Africa, America, or Polynesia." Yesterday and today, the problem remains, as Merton puts it, "to eradicate this basic violence and injustice from white society. Can it be done? How?"

Drawing both inspiration and prophetic challenge from Gandhi, King, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and many others, including the witness of Native Americans, Merton did not hesitate "to confront Christendom with the principles of Christ." In his prophetic reading of the Nativity Gospel, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room," Merton identifies Christ directly with "all those who do not belong, who are rejected by power." The Great Joy of the Incarnation is announced above all to those whose despairs and hopes are held "down to earth, down to street level." Christ comes as a word of hope for all "who are denied the status of persons." In the prose poem "Hagia Sophia," Merton leaves us with the haunting image of a God who identifies with the refugee, "a homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number." In "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll," written for Denise McNair, one of four children killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the young black girl becomes a portrait of Christ crucified, revealing "how deep the wound and the need / And how far down our hell" – a scathing indictment of anti-black prejudice, internalized even by children of color, in the symbol of a white doll. Her innocence, the poem suggests, is our judgment.

Yet there is more. Arguably, Merton's most significant contributions to racial justice are discovered not in his writings, nor even in the authors he carefully studied and celebrated, but in the relationships he cultivated over the course of a lifetime. As he wrote to a young peace activist in 1966, when the sickness of our society runs bone-deep, when citizens "are fed on myths" by mass media, bombarded by slogans and can no longer think straight, "it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything." Because the diseases of racism and white supremacy are both structural and personal, so must be the conversion that leads to their cure. While much race discourse rightly focuses on the dismantling of unjust power relationships in society, for Merton, much as for Gandhi, Howard Thurman, and King, racism at its root is a profound spiritual affliction, a personal and collective hardening of the heart. What King called Beloved Community flows from *the law of love*, the deepest truth of our being, yet a truth that in action calls for enormous spiritual discipline. Thus, Merton's most prescient comments on race may be those in his journals and letters, where he interrogates not only "white Christianity," but firstly, *himself*. "How, then, do we treat this person, this other Christ, who happens to be black?"

Political activism for social transformation is no less urgent today than it was in the 1960s. Merton understood that the language of mass nonviolent protest is often the only language that can break through the structural violence of racial inequity and economic injustice. Yet for the heart hardened and hard-wired by racism, it is the forging of personal relationships, encounters that awaken our capacity for love, which “saves everything.” In an unprecedented ecumenical gathering of Christian peace activists hosted by Merton at Gethsemani in 1964, the question with which the group chose to frame their conversations—“By what right do we protest?”—was at root a spiritual question, a question of faith, hope, and love. No less important than political strategy, the participants agreed, is the spirit (Spirit) that roots our activism amid the societal storm. And by all accounts, the relationships forged during those three unlikely days were transformative for everyone present, some of the most committed white leaders of the Christian peace movement. A similar spirit of spontaneity, mutuality, deep listening, and grace pervades Merton’s 1967 conferences with women religious, in which the equality and dignity of women in society and church is a central theme. And Merton was scheduled to host Martin Luther King, Jr., at Gethsemani in the spring of 1968, a meeting tragically foreclosed by King’s assassination.

In sum, as Merton saw the struggle for justice through a Christian contemplative lens, “The choice is not interior and secret, but public, political and social. . . The choice is between ‘safety,’ based on negation of the new and the reaffirmation of the familiar, or the creative risk of love and grace in new and untried solutions, which justice nevertheless demands.” Perhaps for us, today, the question becomes, can we recognize our *kairos*? In biblical terms, “the time has come” for a decisive and urgent commitment, to risk the demands of solidarity and love. Can it be done? How?

The Mission and Commitment of the ITMS Today

***Vision:** To encounter the world, our neighbors, and ourselves in the spirit of Thomas Merton.*

***Mission:** To encourage exploration of Thomas Merton's life and thought to build knowledge, cultivate community, foster contemplative awareness, encourage interfaith encounters, and inspire just living.*

1. We believe in the innate connectivity of all humanity. In our work as the ITMS, we are committed to helping one another and accompanying others toward the deeper truth revealed in what Merton described as “liberation from an illusory difference,” following his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut. In consequence of this belief, the ITMS affirms that Black Lives Matter, and commits itself to the necessary work of being an ally in the movement for racial justice, interracial encounter, healing, and reparation.
2. We believe that the Spirit of God is revealed in an especially intensive way in the hopes and aspirations of marginalized peoples. Through our chapters in the United States and around the world, we are committed to listening deeply to the voices of people of color and others, such as LGBTQ persons, who continue to suffer exclusion from public, political, and religious life. We will strive not only to study and perpetuate the work of Thomas Merton, but also to study and elevate the voices of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples, as Merton himself did in the last decade of his life.
3. We are committed to bearing the costs of solidarity as individuals and as a Society, insofar as we recognize that confronting injustice demands a depth of conversion, of moving beyond what is familiar and comfortable, to embrace a new level of vulnerability and risk, which is both personal and

communal. We recognize with humility our past failures to adequately address the scourge of racial injustice or aspire to the level of racial solidarity reflected in Merton's life and work. And we ask forgiveness of any persons or communities of color that we may have offended, by "what we have done" or "what we have failed to do," in our work and fellowship as a Society across the years.

4. In the midst of a global pandemic that has shifted the way we interact with each other, the ITMS Board and its Chapters are committed to finding new ways to connect and build relationships across the distances and absences that threaten to further divide and polarize the human community. While we share Merton's reticence about the ways in which technology can create interior emptiness, we also recognize our fundamental human need for connection. How to utilize the technological resources available to us while striving for the authentic connections that tend to elude technology? We will continue to connect via our print resources (*The Merton Annual* and *Seasonal*), and we are open to discerning and re-imagining what is yet possible for the ITMS as we navigate the present challenges.

5. We are also committed to discerning together whether and how our work as a Society and through our Chapters worldwide might be more boldly positioned as a public voice and ally in the movement for racial justice as well as other crucial issues. We acknowledge certain tensions and a diversity of perspectives within our membership on this question, especially in the present atmosphere of polarization and the proliferation of lies and half-truths and slogans in the public square – a problem not unfamiliar to Merton. Nevertheless, we worry that the risks of silence and inaction are far greater than that of speech and political activism, especially for our most vulnerable sisters and brothers. It is quite possible, as Merton wrote in the 1960s, that "Much of the real germinating action in the world, the real leavening, is among the immobilized, the outsiders . . . Where the good may come from is perhaps where evil is feared. The streets. The ghettos." In other words, as one of our ITMS officers recently said, "To me, church is in the streets right now." We commit ourselves to a spirit of friendship, trust, and deep listening as we discern our way forward as a Society that bears Merton's name.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge and celebrate the extraordinary work that has already been done by scholars, poets, artists, and activists, to engage the witness of Merton and his contemporaries in the struggle for racial justice. (See <http://merton.org/Research/Bibliographies/Merton-Racism.pdf>.) In particular, we gratefully highlight the work of The Merton Center at Bellarmine University as a hub of leading-edge scholarship for advancing Merton's legacy as a contemplative, as a pioneer of interfaith and ecumenical dialogue, and as a prophetic voice and "pastor to the peace movement." And we are especially committed to supporting and elevating the work of the next generation of students and scholars in the mission of the ITMS to "to build knowledge, cultivate community, foster contemplative awareness, encourage interfaith encounters, and inspire just living," especially as these commitments come to bear on interracial equity, empathy, and understanding in our society and world.

Signed,

ITMS Officers, Board of Directors, and International Advisors