

# *De Consideratione*

## A Monastic Form of Nonviolence

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### Introduction

Thomas Merton delivered his monastic conference, 'Some Points from the Birmingham Nonviolence Movement', to the novices at Gethsemani Abbey on June 10, 1964.<sup>1</sup> Thematically, 'Some Points' marks a year of intense violence, national attention, and public scrutiny over unsuccessful efforts to secure racial desegregation in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. What did the conference teach, and how did it instruct its audience? To what extent might it have contributed to monastic formation?

His essay treats the conference as a starting point for theological and ethical reflection. I begin by examining how Merton pushes aside the category of racism in order to frame the Birmingham protestors' nonviolent resistance as a religious act. When Merton roots the protestors' resistance in a love that upholds the dignity of all persons, he encourages the novices to empathize with the protestors, and invites their solidarity against the sin of racial injustice. By locating Merton's expanded construction of Christian community within the wider context of his writings of this period, we can see how he advances a progressive agenda for monastic formation.

### Destabilizing Racism

Merton had been serving as novice master for nearly a decade at the time he delivered the 'Some Points' conference.<sup>2</sup> The position of novice master built on Merton's vocational interest in teaching and strengthened his ongoing commitment to revise monastic education. The conferences were essential in achieving this end. Whereas Merton's conferences typically

functioned didactically to explicate monastic principles and precepts, they did so, as Patrick O'Connell explains, in the broader context of 'a life of Christian discipleship'.<sup>3</sup> His conferences also included topics that seemed beyond the purview of the monastery. As O'Connell writes, 'He [Merton] also commented, on occasion at some length, on current events, about which the novices, having no access to newspapers or other media, would otherwise know little or nothing.'<sup>4</sup> From 1962-1965, a period covering the Second Vatican Council, Merton centered his conferences on the monastic vows.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the 'Some Points' conference is a break from this focus, it is not a diversion. Rather, it extends Merton's aim to formulate and develop a mutual relationship between the monastery and the world.

Merton opens 'Some Points' with an explicit statement of timeliness and purpose. His purpose in attending to the 'interesting stuff' of his subject matter belies his intent 'to get a good sense of perspective' from the Birmingham protestors;<sup>6</sup> he maintains that the novices should 'be unified with people who do this sort of thing ... [and] have in our hearts very much the same kind of ideals and outlook.' By framing the Birmingham protestors' 'ideals and outlook' as 'a real profound Christian activity', Merton invites the novices to suspend undue judgement in order to reflect on his instruction.<sup>7</sup>

With this invitation, Merton then turns the novices' attention to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) 'Commitment Card'. The card had a specific purpose in the context of the nonviolent direct action campaigns in Birmingham in April 1963. With the card, the SCLC secured volunteers' support for a set of principles and practices that framed the campaigns. By signing the card, as Meena Krishnamurthy explains, 'Each volunteer ... pledged, among other things, to always seek justice, to never use violence, and to walk and talk in love.'<sup>8</sup> When Merton uses the card as his primary text for examination in the 'Some Points' conference, he deploys a language of promise and allegiance familiar to his audience. Such language places the particular actions of the Birmingham protestors in a shared Christian context.

Merton begins his analysis of the 'Commitment Card' by drawing direct parallels between the protestors' principles, those 'ten commandments' listed, and Benedictine monastic principles. Turning to the first point on the card, Merton reads: 'Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.' When Merton interprets the protestors' profession, he evinces 'a basically Christian program', 'a kind of monastic program' that

recognizes the potential of the monastic life for social justice.<sup>9</sup> Merton further contends that the protestors, like the monks, strive to serve God, as individuals and as a group, in the performance of His will. This common Christian commitment to the will of God is present in the second point on the card: 'Remembering always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory.'<sup>10</sup> With a reference to Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem en Terris*, Merton highlights the call for 'those who are willing', including the protestors and the novices, to seek these ends. He invites the novices to weigh the implications of their shared commitment with the protestors when he asks them to consider their place: 'What are we in the monastery for? We're here to give up our wishes for the good of others, for the good of all men.' By measuring the sacrifice and freedom of the monks with that of the protestors, Merton identifies a shared Christian orientation, which he refers to as a 'powerful motive', to participate in the operation of God in the world.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, by defining their similarities in terms of identity and commitment, Merton shifts the novices' focus toward their collective intellectual, social and religious affinity with the protestors as fellow Christians whose efforts, much like their own, serve the divine will.

According to Merton, such efforts 'can have meaning for everybody in the world.' The protestors have 'courage' to act in these terms, thereby expressing a conviction central to the monastic life.<sup>12</sup> Merton insists that by realizing and feeling individually that 'what I do has a real meaning for the world,'<sup>13</sup> he and the novices 'can contribute something to this whole business of peace in the world by working very hard to be *nonviolent in our hearts*.'<sup>14</sup> Merton argues, therefore, that nonviolence, based on love and cultivated in empathy, as an active process of realizing and feeling, requires the 'courage' to recognize the self as a *monachos*, a solitary one, in solidarity with others.

### Consideration as a Communal Practice

At the time Merton presented 'Some Points' he was in the midst of a series of monastic conferences on the twelfth century Cistercian forefather, Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>15</sup> Although there is no explicit appeal to Bernard's work, *De Consideratione*, Merton's approach in 'Some Points' resembles that of his predecessor. Chrysogonus Waddell observes that, by 1963, Merton was interpreting Bernard and his works more critically and dispassionately for representing 'the Establishment' of his day.<sup>16</sup> 'Some Points' may be further evidence for this shift in Merton's thought.

Bernard addresses his work on consideration to his former pupil and monastic colleague, Pope Eugenius III. The work has an explicit motive: Bernard expresses his apprehension that the active life of the papacy requires that Eugenius exercise power in temporal matters, thus preventing him from taking time to develop his spiritual life. Bernard emphasizes that Eugenius undertake the individual practice of consideration as a prefatory step to papal action. He defines consideration as 'thought earnestly directed to research, or the application of the mind to the search for truth'.<sup>17</sup> He maintains that consideration 'purifies ... the mind, it governs the affections, directs our actions, corrects excesses, softens the manners, adorns and regulates the life, and, lastly, bestows the knowledge of things divine and human alike'.<sup>18</sup> Bernard contends that since consideration 'allows a man to stand away from his own actions and thoughts and assess them,' the practice can help Eugenius locate a balance between his duties to others and his own spiritual life.<sup>19</sup> Although Bernard envisions that consideration may, on occasion, prompt the soul toward contemplation, his most pressing concern is practical; Bernard's whole tone and the majority of his counsel remain fixed firmly on Eugenius' need for, and cultivation of, consideration, 'to think in a careful and measured way about the changing realities of the world'.<sup>20</sup>

In 'Some Points', Merton approaches 'the changing realities of the world' through the stages of 'reflection, attentiveness and recollection' in the practice of consideration.<sup>21</sup> Merton's appeal to the timeliness and purpose of his words initiates self-reflection. From this start, his close reading and comparative analysis of the SCLC commitment card then envisages a shared orientation with the protestors that extends reflection beyond the self to the protestors. Through empathy, the novices are invited to become attentive to the intellectual, social, and religious values they share with the protestors. By identifying the protestors as fellow Christians seeking to serve the divine will, Merton reminds the novices of their role in a collective Christian effort to live a life of nonviolence. The novices' task is to remember continually how nonviolence, as a Christian imperative, might 'direct the actions' of the monastic community.

By framing consideration as a communal practice, Merton imbues it with a value just as relevant for our modern times. Dumont maintains that consideration was significant to Merton's monastic life and identity.<sup>22</sup> In a study of Bernard's teachings, Merton himself refers to consideration as particularly appropriate 'whenever the spiritual life

must be lived under pressure of unfavorable circumstances,' and emphasizes that 'consideration is not contemplative prayer. It is the meditation which spiritualizes the active life.'<sup>23</sup> In these statements, Merton resonates Bernard's belief that 'consideration plays an important part in cultivating virtue, because it helps us to remember those times when our good habits seemed well facilitated by our surroundings.'<sup>24</sup> Merton's appeals to such habits and surroundings in 'Some Points' suggest a direct application of consideration, given that 'the experience of being novice master ... allowed Merton to become more attuned to the concerns of the world in that he listened to the experiences and aspirations of his own novices who had left the world not too long ago.'<sup>25</sup>

### Constructing Community

When Merton shifts from the first- and third- person singular ('I' and 'he') to the nominal plural ('we' and 'our') in 'Some Points', he constitutes nonviolence as a communal practice serving a common good. To what extent might 'Some Points' have contributed to the monastic formation of its novice audience?

During the period Merton worked on 'Some Points' he was reading a range of works for their more socially conscious stance in challenging the status quo in the Church and in the wider world. In Merton's journal entry from June 2, 1964, the week prior to the 'Some Points' conference, Merton mentions a book about the Bruderhof community. In the personal context of his writing and his status in the monastery, Merton refers to a passage from this book as 'almost a word of God to me', and encloses it at the end of the entry. The passage reads: 'Let us pledge that the only thing that will count among us will be the power and authority of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit; that it will never again be us that count but that God above will rule and govern in Christ and the Holy Spirit.'<sup>26</sup> A Christocentric focus also permeates a letter Merton wrote the day following this journal entry in response to a fellow Benedictine, Sister Felicitas, who asked him about racially integrated monastic communities. In his letter Merton emphasizes that 'the first and best thing we can do is worship and love God together, white and black, in one family, thus being a sign of the Risen Christ in the world torn by prejudice and hate.'<sup>27</sup> A racially integrated monastic community witnesses to the centrality of its Christian focus. In both cases, the Bruderhof and the monastery, Merton asserts the role of a community centered in, and serving as, a Christocentric witness.



With this communal orientation in mind, Merton's emphasis on empathy as a form of Christian solidarity with those seeking justice in 'Some Points' could be read as a monastic response to the problem Merton had raised a year earlier in 'Letters to a White Liberal'. Merton revisited 'Letters' during the week in which he delivered 'Some Points' as he was rewriting a section of *Seeds of Destruction*.<sup>28</sup> The problem Merton addresses in 'Letters' is that 'instead of seeing the Negro revolution as a manifestation of a deep disorder that is eating away the inner substance of our society, *because it is in ourselves*, we look at it only as a threat from outside ourselves.'<sup>29</sup> In 'Letters', Alex Mikulich writes, Merton teaches that 'in order to resist violence, the contemplative must identify with people who are in any way oppressed or demonized by society.'<sup>30</sup> As David Golemboski explains, for Merton, 'non-violence ... is a strategy for social change with great possibility, but which requires certain dispositions on the part of the oppressor in order for it to work.'<sup>31</sup> We might therefore read 'Some Points' as a call to cultivate those 'dispositions' required for 'identify[ing] with people who are in any way oppressed or demonized by society.' Merton's instruction in the practice of consideration is an affirmation that the cloistered Gethsemani novices acknowledge their complicity in racial oppression, and treat the Birmingham protestors without those 'serious qualifications' dictated and demanded by the structural sin of white society.<sup>32</sup> By 'working very hard to be nonviolent in [their] hearts', by recalling empathy and effecting solidarity, in the 'Some Points' conference Merton thereby empowers the novices to encounter the protestors in terms whose absence he lamented in 'Letters', namely, 'as Christ'.

### Communal responsibility

That the monks are called to this collective form of Christian solidarity with those working for justice 'in a world torn by prejudice and hate' is confirmed in 'The Monk in the Diaspora', published in *New Blackfriars* in July 1964, the month following the 'Some Points' conference.<sup>33</sup> Here, Merton attends directly to the need for the monk to engage with the world in terms similar to those in 'Some Points' when he writes that the 'genuine renunciation of the world' required by the monastic life 'paradoxically liberates the monk' to serve his fellow human beings as 'brothers [who] share many of the same concerns ... in the area of world peace, racial justice, and indeed everything that concerns the well-being and development of man.'<sup>34</sup> Recognizing their place in a common

humanity, the novices at the 'Some Points' conference are called upon to bear the communal responsibility to know and love their fellow human beings.

The lessons in 'Some Points' were not restricted to the monastery. Several months later, in 'Religion and Race in the United States', Merton referred to the nonviolent civil rights movement as 'one of the greatest examples of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States'. Here, Merton challenges his readers, and white American Christians in particular, much like he does his audience of novices, to choose 'the creative risk of love and grace ... which justice ... demands' in the creation of a new society that refuses to replicate repackaged systems of racial segregation.<sup>35</sup> Merton strips bare the underlying assumption that the *de jure* legislation under the Civil Rights Law is a necessary and sufficient corrective to the racial crisis, a crisis which he frames as a form of a 'Christian violence'. Merton contends that:

The American racial crisis ... offers the American Christian a chance to face reality about himself and recover his fidelity to Christian truth, not merely in institutional loyalties and doctrinal orthodoxies ... but in recanting a more basic heresy: the loss of that Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ.<sup>36</sup>

As Merton had instructed his novices, so too he instructs his readers to confront the violence within themselves in order to effect the only viable response to racial injustice, to treat one another 'as Christ'.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

Merton acknowledges the value of consideration 'whenever the spiritual life must be lived under pressure of unfavorable circumstances' when he turns in 'Some Points' to events in Birmingham, Alabama. Structured as a guided instruction on the practice of consideration, this monastic conference proposes that a process of communal reflection, attentiveness and recollection might 'direct the actions' of the novices to advocate for the oppressed. He highlights the novices' role in a broader Christian community rooted in the life of Christ, a human community that manifests a love of self and others anchored in a divine presence.

With a rhetoric that moves from explanation to persuasion, in 'Some Points' Merton orients the novices' attention toward service to, and

solidarity with, this community.<sup>38</sup> To this end, Merton replaces the standard knowledge, conventional educational perspectives, and dominant operative narrative about race relations in the United States with a Christian, monastic, Cistercian interpretation. By practicing consideration, as a communal practice centered on the common good, Merton reveals the novices' capacity for a collective expression of compassionate nonviolent 'directed' action in response to the dehumanization of racist ideology.

## Notes

I am grateful for discussions with participants of the forum, '1968-2018. Thomas Merton & Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Conversation Deferred' (University of Memphis; October 19, 2018), and to ITMS audiences and readers for feedback on an earlier version of this essay (Santa Clara University; June 27-30, 2019).

1. Thomas Merton, 'Some Points from the Birmingham Nonviolence Movement', Transcription of the conference is included in *Rhetoric, religion and the civil rights movement, 1954-1965*, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Baylor University Press 2006, pp. 743-752.)
2. Merton served as novice master from 1955 until 1965 when he moved into the hermitage permanently.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), p. xvi.
4. *The Life of Vows*, p. xlvii.
5. *The Life of Vows*, p. xlvi.
6. Thomas Merton, 'Some Points from the Birmingham Nonviolence Movement', in *Rhetoric, religion and the civil rights movement, 1954-1965*, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 744.
7. 'Some Points', p. 745.
8. Meena Krishnamurthy, '(White) Tyranny and the Democratic Value of Distrust', *The Monist* 98 (2015), p. 398. There is a reproduction of an original SCLC 'Commitment Card' on the inside back cover of this journal, and a brief history of the SCLC by James Cronin on pages ?? & ??
9. Thomas Merton, 'Some Points', pp. 745, 747, 746.
10. 'Some Points', p. 748.
11. 'Some Points', p. 749.
12. Thomas Merton, 'Some Points', pp. 750
13. Thomas Merton, 'Some Points', p. 750. Emphasis mine.
14. Ibid., p. 751 Thomas Merton, 'Some Points', p. 751. Note that here Merton hearkens back to the opening: 'We should have in our hearts ...' Emphasis mine.

15. See Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2018), p. 11.
16. Chrysogonus Waddell, 'Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux', *The Merton Annual* Vol. 5 (1992), p. 128. See also Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, 'Thomas Merton's Creative (dis)Obedience', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 46.2 (2011), pp. 189-219, especially pp. 194-197.
17. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration*, trans. George Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1908), Book II, Chapter II, Section 5, p. 39. *De Consideratione* was composed by Bernard during 1149-1152, and gives advice to Pope Eugenius on ecclesiastical government.
18. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration*, Book I, Chapter VII, Section 8, p. 26.
19. G. R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Mahweh, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 147, 146.
20. David Clairmont, 'Medieval Considerations and Moral Pace: Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux on the Temporal Aspects of Virtue', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41.1 (March 2013), p. 82.
21. Charles Dumont, 'The Prophetic Disappearance of Thomas Merton', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 37.4 (2002), p. 376.
22. Dumont, 'The Prophetic Disappearance of Thomas Merton', p. 376.
23. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard*, foreword by Patrick Hart and introduction by Jean Leclercq (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 48, 49.
24. Clairmont, 'Medieval Consideration and Moral Pace', p. 92.
25. Mario I. Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 24.
26. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: seeking peace in the hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (HarperSan Francisco, 1997), p. 108. The book in question was: Eberhard Arnold, *Torches Together: The Beginning and Early Years of the Bruderhof Communities*, 1964.
27. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), p. 218.
28. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 108.
29. Thomas Merton, 'Letters to a White Liberal', *New Blackfriars* 44 (in 2 parts, Nov 63 & Dec 63), part 1, p. 475; emphasis mine. 'Letters' is included in *Seeds of Destruction*.
30. Alex Mikulich, 'Thomas Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal"', *JustSouth Quarterly* (Winter 2012), p. 7.
31. David Golemboski, 'The Familiar Perspectives of American History: Thomas Merton on Black and Indigenous Oppression in the United States', *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018), p. 120. See the discussion on pages 118-121.
32. 'Letters to a White Liberal', p. 466.

33. This essay would expand ideas raised in the conference to the broader audience of those in religious life.
34. Thomas Merton, 'The Monk in the Diaspora', *New Blackfriars* 45 (July-August 1964), p. 301. The essay is included in *Seeds of Destruction and Redeeming the Time*.
35. Thomas Merton, 'Religion and Race in the United States', *New Blackfriars* 46 (January 1965), pp. 218, 222. The essay is included in *Faith and Violence and Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*.
36. 'Religion and Race in the United States', p. 225.
37. See Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 172.
38. *A Fire in the Bones*, pp. 180-181. See also Annice Callahan, 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Thomas Merton as Spiritual Guide', *The Way* 28.2 (April 1988), pp. 164-176.

A brief history of the SCLC by James Cronin may be found on pages 47-48.

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## Editorial Changes

Gary Hall has now stepped down as co-editor of the Journal. He has had a long association with the Journal since its inception in 1994. He has had 9 articles published in the Journal, the first in the Eastertide edition of 1997, vol. 4:1. In Easter 2002 he joined Michael Woodward as co-editor. Since then he has also worked with fellow editors Danny Sullivan, Angus Stuart, Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin & latterly myself. He has been a gentle guiding hand steering the Journal to one that has a wider scope than simply Merton studies, to the exploration how we can do justice to Merton's life, work and witness in our current times. All in the Society owe him a debt of gratitude for his dedication and support.

Stephen Dunhill