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Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., Aug. 1, 2022 (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)



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August 8, 2024

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I recently finished teaching a graduate course titled "Spirituality of Thomas Merton for Today: On Racism, Violence, and Justice" for Boston College's [Clough School of Theology and Ministry](#). It was the fourth time since 2016 that I taught a course that focused on Merton's writings from the last decade of his life, after his often described "turn to the world" in the late 1950s when his attention focused not just on contemplation but what contemplation in action and Christian faith might look like in light of the modern world.

The texts that I assign for this class I have read dozens of times over the years, both for personal spiritual enrichment as well for scholarly interests like research and teaching. Nevertheless, I always appreciate the opportunity to reread these books and articles by Merton on racism and civil rights; on nonviolence, the Cold War and the horrors of the conflict in Vietnam; and on the intersection of Christian faith and social justice.

I especially enjoy the questions, interpretations and insights my students bring to the material, most having previously heard of Merton but few having read these particular books, with provocative titles like [Seeds of Destruction](#), [Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander](#), [Faith and Violence](#), [Raids on the Unspeakable](#) and [Peace in a Post-Christian Era](#), among others.

Engaging in seminar discussions with and reading assignments written by my students always helps illustrate the many ways Merton's prophetic wisdom continues to ring true today. It also reveals, sadly, too many of the injustices and threats of violence that were commonplace during Merton's lifetime (1915-1968) persist in our own.

What is required of us, as the church teaches plainly, is to protect and promote the common good over and against one's personal ideological, political or economic interest.

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One of the pairs of readings I assign during the unit on race and civil rights includes Martin Luther King Jr.'s well-known "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)" and Merton's

"Letters to a White Liberal" (in [Seeds of Destruction](#)). King's 1963 letter in response to southern clergy who were urging restraint and cautioning King not to push too hard or too quickly in his nonviolent movement for civil rights led Merton to engage in some profound reflection.

In turn, he wrote "Letters to a White Liberal" (in part an indictment against himself), wanting to take as seriously as possible the message that King and the broader Black community in the United States was expressing to white people. Merton explains his motivation near the end of the essay when he writes: "I have spelled it out for myself, subject to correction, in order to see whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them."

Although I was again inspired by the insights generated and perspectives shared about Merton's writings during this summer course, allowing me to see these familiar texts anew, what has stayed with me most since the class ended was not one of Merton's texts but King's famous letter.

Rereading King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," I was struck this time by his dire assessment and warning to the Christian community in the paragraphs near the end of his prophetic epistle. Contextualizing within Christian history the calls for caution and preference of other ministers for the status quo, King observes:

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

King is suggesting that Christians are now operating too comfortably in alignment with what St. Paul would call the "wisdom of the world" instead of in alignment with the "wisdom of God" ([1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#)). Christian leaders, thinking and

behaving out of fear or perhaps greed, align themselves to powerful political and economic interests that deflate the radicality of the Gospel and discourage Christians from getting into "good trouble," as the late [Congressman John Lewis](#) would say.

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King writes: "The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are."

As we head into the final months of an already contentious national election season, at a time when political, cultural and ecclesial polarization is high, and when so much is at stake regarding the dignity and value of all life — human and nonhuman alike — King's righteous message beckons all Christians, but especially church leaders, to remember to put the Gospel first.

That means shirking any attempt by political or ecclesial leaders to position a partisan group or political party as "the only Catholic choice" or, more broadly, "the only Christian option." It means risking one's own comfort to take positions that prioritize the most vulnerable over the powerful, even if that perspective is unpopular or upsets your family and friends. What is required of us, as the church teaches plainly, is to protect and promote the common good over and against one's personal ideological, political or economic interest.

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This is admittedly difficult to do, and pressures from partisan interest groups and many religious leaders push Christians away from such an audacious yet holy mission. But, as King put it,

The judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen

to outright disgust.

Indeed, young people and not-so-young people are growing in their disgust with the hypocrisy of the church when it comes to its institutional support for political agendas that mock the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That includes dehumanizing migrants and refugees, promoting disparaging views of women, disregard for systemic racial injustice, scapegoating transgender people and the denial of global climate change.

But there remains hope that Christians will return to the roots of their faith as King exhorts us to do and Pope Francis has often encouraged in his homilies. At this important moment in history, King's question remains: Can the church its members and leaders alike rise to the vocational task we have received to reject the interests of the powerful and comfortable and instead advocate for justice and peace?

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