

Editorial

I am writing this in Holy Week, a few days after the weekend when we would have held our Oakham conference. It is remarkable to think that it was only one month ago that we agonised about whether we should cancel it – a decision that would have been forced on us in any event by the rapidly developing pandemic. The crisis has revealed the unrelenting struggle of the poor, and how, in many cases, these are the very people that we now rely upon for our day to day lives and, indeed, our very survival – the nurses, the care workers, the delivery drivers – the list is endless. It reveals that a society built on the rational self-interest of its members is failing us. And yet it also reveals lives of sacrificial love woven throughout our society, which have been hidden from view and valued as worthless by our obsession with 'economic value' and the autonomy of the individual.

Although for many self-isolation means a radical change in their circumstances, Merton saw that the frenetic pace of our modern society 'isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless.' As he wrote in 'Solitude is not separation' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 'The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility.' Self-isolation gives us all a chance to slow down, to take stock, to examine our motives and values, to rediscover our shared humanity amid all the pain and heartache of this crisis.

It was in the solitude and isolation of his monastic home that Merton wakened from this 'dream of separateness', and in doing so gradually came to embrace the whole world along with its problems. In this journal a common thread running through all the papers are different aspects of Merton's engagement with these problems. In her paper, 'De

Consideratione – A monastic form of nonviolence’, Bernadette McNary-Zak explores how Merton stood alongside the civil rights movement, encouraging his novices to counter dehumanizing racist ideology with a shared understanding of compassionate nonviolent action. James Cronin adds a brief article to put her paper in the context of the civil rights movement at that time. David Golemboski explores how Merton countered the ‘daydream’ of the American myth and its concomitant assumption of superiority with a recognition of a shared humanity amongst all nations. In my own paper, I examine the possibilities for interfaith dialogue as exemplified in the life and witness of the Trappist Christian de Chergé, finding many parallels with Merton’s own approach to engaging with the religions of the world. In his paper, ‘Contemplation as Connection’, Gordon Oyer explores how contemplation can help us to engage with the existential crises of our time, in particular with the growing threat caused by our treatment of the natural world. In addition there is a review by Kenneth Carveley of the latest volume of Merton’s conferences to his novices, and a review by Andrew Walker of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, a volume that has caused not a little controversy amongst Merton scholars, challenging the accepted view of the events around Merton’s death. Finally there is a meditation on hope by Ian Cowley, showing how as a young man in South Africa, struggling against the apartheid regime, ‘through our hope in God we found strength to persevere, to work for justice, and to keep on believing that a new South Africa would one day be born.’

It is such a hope that can sustain us through this time of crisis. As Merton wrote in ‘Message of contemplatives to the modern world’, written in 1967 in response to a request from Pope Paul VI:

The message of hope the contemplative offers you, then, brother, is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God: but that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.

May the joy and peace of the risen Lord fill your hearts this Eastertide.

Stephen Dunhill