

Some Points from the Birmingham Non-Violence Movement

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The transcript of the conference reproduced here has been done with the minimum of editing so as to keep as closely as possible to Merton's spoken word while, however, omitting certain repeated words and phrases which were characteristic of Merton's lecturing style but which would have distracted from his overall message. These conferences involved a certain amount of dialogue with the novices Merton was teaching. As a rule Merton's questions to the novices are audible, but their replies are not. As with many of Merton's lectures at Gethsemani he ends abruptly when the monastery bell rings. Delivered in the sixties, in an all-male environment, Merton observed the linguistic conventions of his day in regard to gender. If Merton were writing today he would, no doubt, be using inclusive language. The inclusivity of his message in this lecture rises above the exclusivity of his language.

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Well, I've got some interesting stuff today, a little unusual, but I think you have to get something unusual once in a while to get a good sense of perspective as to what we're doing in the religious life and to see other people who have a dedicated approach and who get into things that require a great deal of virtue and perfection. Last year this time in Birmingham, they had this terrific series of demonstrations. The Negroes were going out and they were getting attacked by police dogs and getting attacked by hoses. Of course, something like this had to be planned. This wasn't one of these things where everybody just decided they were going to go out and do it. It was planned very carefully beforehand. The people who were in this thing had to be trained. And they had to have a very definite idea of what they were going to do and they had to have very definite motives as to why they were doing it. And very clear ideas, basing their actions on definite principles and oriented in a certain way so that this would really be possible to do, and to do well.

So, anybody who wanted to get into this thing had to sign a pledge promising to carry out the following program. Of course, the idea of the

program is to get them so that they've got this full grasp on what they're doing and so they're really going to be dedicated in this thing. So they promise to do these various things, to live in this way while carrying out these demonstrations. Now, just from the monastic point of view this is very interesting indeed.

What do you suppose they're going to have on this list of things? What kind of things do you expect to find? Take a few guesses. I think you probably aren't going to hit high enough. [*answer: general humanism.*] Well, what do you mean by general humanism? I promise to look at this from the general love of man, or something like this. In other words, there's going to be some love that's going to get in there. That's important. They're going to have to make this a question of love and not politics. That's extremely important. That's the basis, that's the cornerstone of the whole thing. It was not simply political action. It was religious action. It was spiritual and it was based on love.

Well now, supposing you are organizing this, how are you going to form people so that they're going to be able to go into a thing like this without too much fear and they're going to have to have some kind of a religious basis? What would we do? Supposing you're going to go out of here and you're going to walk down to New Haven or go down to the distillery here and protest against the way the distillery is making a mess out of the moral atmosphere of Nelson County or something like that. You know they're going to get you with a hose or something. So how do you steel yourself for this ordeal? In other words, you're bringing God into it and you want to get God into it as close as possible to you, so that you are in this with God and it isn't just a question of you going down there with a political gripe and you're going to start some action. You want to get God into this. That's another thing that they want to get.

Well, let me just read through this. These things are relevant for us. The things that these people did, we should be doing. Not quite in the same way. We're not engaged in this kind of particular social action, but we should be in this with people who are going through this kind of thing. If you stop and think, this time last year we were sitting here giving conferences and talking about spiritual effects, and while we were sitting here talking about this jazz, down South, probably about this time of day these things would be hottest; down South, people were being bitten by police dogs and thrown into jail and bowled over by fire hoses and everybody was saying that they were all criminals and this was very bad and it was undermining the American nation. And they're getting treated badly and they're accepting this treatment for the love of God, which is a big thing. So in other words, a real profound Christian activ-

ity was going on at this time. We're supposed to be united with people who do this sort of thing, so we should have in our hearts very much the same kind of ideals and outlook.

Let me read the thing and then we'll talk about it. So if you were going to go into this now, you would have to sign this: "I hereby pledge myself, my person and body, to the nonviolent movement. Therefore, I will keep the following ten commandments." And here are the things that they have to do:

"1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus." See, so that right away they sign up for a daily meditation.

"2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation not victory." This is putting it on a completely disinterested basis.

"3. To walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.

"4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free." Now, look at that. That's a terrific statement. It isn't just a question of "pray that we may win," or something like that, but pray and that's a very personal thing.

"5. To sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.

"6. To observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.

"7. To seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.

"8. To refrain from the violence of fists, tongue or heart.

"9. To strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health." This is a very important thing, too. Think of all these things in connection with this movement.

"10. To follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration." That's where the obedience part comes in; it comes in at another place there above, too.

"I sign this pledge having seriously considered what I do and with the determination and will to persevere." And then you sign and you put the address of your nearest relative and their phone number so that if you get conked, why, they can come pick you up. And then it says: "Besides demonstrations I could also help the movement by: run errands, drive car, fix food for volunteers, clerical work, make phone calls, answer phones, mimeograph, type, print signs, and distribute leaflets." So, right away, you are in contact with real life. We get so much into the way of sitting around thinking about the spiritual life and occasionally we get up and do

something but most of the time it's all up here. We're thinking about it all the time. We're reading about it and here are these people. This stuff had to be practical. They didn't just promise they were going to think about these points. They said they had to do them.

Well now, it seems to me that this is right up the alley for monks. I mean, this is a monastic program. These people were committed to a kind of monastic program in the civil rights movement. So, comment on that a little bit. What does this have in common with the monastic life here? Think of the different points. While you're thinking about it, think of some of the things we haven't thought of. What's one of the things here that we perhaps neglect? You've got to face the fact that a lot of the monks who have been around for a long time have become, so to speak, ossified as regards to the ordinary rules of courtesy. There is such a thing as some of the senior professed and so forth who just don't see novices. Well, this is a pity but it's not their fault. They've lost interest in novices and I don't see particularly why they should be terribly excited when they see you coming along but still they should. It would be nice, but you've got to face the fact that a lot of them [have] kind of just lost the habit of paying too much attention when you go by. It's true. What's the purpose of this? Think of the context, please – "Observe with friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy." What's the situation where this is going to arise for these people? When they're getting clubbed and they've got to observe ordinary rules of courtesy when they're being hit over the head. This is not too easy. It should be relatively easy. It should be relatively easy around here to observe ordinary rules of courtesy when nobody's hitting you over the head. This is a program of heroism. The people who signed up and followed this out had to act heroically. A person who would sign up on something like this and carry it out for fully Catholic motives and hang on with the thing would be canonized. You're canonizable if you do this. Here you've got people who did it in ordinary everyday life and people also got killed for doing it – not too many but some – and children, six-year-old kids.

So anyway, the first thing is it's based on meditation. We meditate. There's no problem about that, except it has its own problems. They meditate on the teachings and the life of Jesus. That's their first point. Everything starts with that. So that means to say that the thing is a basically Christian program. It's a fundamentally Christian program meditating on Our Lord. We've got only one source of strength and this whole thing is based on the theological principle: you've got no strength except from God and from Our Lord, and you can't do these things without Him. These people are putting themselves into this position because they feel

that Our Lord wants this of them and that He's going to give them the strength to do it, and down here it says: "To pray daily to be used by God." Now look at the ideal of that. That's the ideal of the religious life. A religious is a person who prays to be used by God, who wants to be used by God. Now, what does that imply? What's that got to do with our vow of obedience, for example? Is there any connection between this and religious obedience? Does there seem to be any? If I ask God to use me, how's He going to use me? How's He going to make known the ways in which He uses me? through superiors, through obedience? Of course, in this particular case, they don't have a vow of obedience, but still, if I'm asking God to use me, I'm saying, "Alright, I've put myself in Your hands, now use me." And then, I say this understanding that it's not going to be done through the means of an angel. It isn't going to be an angel [who] is going to appear in the Father Master's room and say, "Now, you've got to give this conference today," or something like that. It comes through superiors. The superior appoints you to this job or the superior gives you this thing to do or you're sent to this work, or circumstances arise and this is demanded. So if we pray God to use us, it means that we're going to remain open when He starts using us and sometimes we forget. We ask God to use us, and then all of the sudden, it's nice in the morning meditation, we've asked God to use us and so forth and all of the sudden someone comes up and says, "Hey, wash the dishes." "But it's not my turn to wash the dishes. I'm off this week," or something like that.

There is such a thing as what they call an examen of prevision which I don't recommend. I don't recommend all these stereotype methods and so forth, but there is such a thing. Look, we're here to be used by God. We've given ourselves to God, therefore He's going to use us for something or other, so it doesn't hurt to look ahead a little bit and say, "Well now, I've asked Him to use me. What's likely to happen today so that I won't miss?" What is coming up today and so forth? What are going to be the possible indications of His will? And then, of course, I'm going to be ready always for indications that I haven't expected because there are always going to be unexpected things. They're going out looking for it. That should be the monastic idea. Of course, actually, in a community, when you've got a well-run community, there isn't exactly an awful lot. If you run a foundation, there would be more. That's one of the things about a foundation. If you're in a community like this it's understood that most of it goes like clockwork. It's kind of automatic because it's a big community and everything is set up but, nevertheless, you're liable to be called upon to be used and if you're living the kind of life [of] a dedicated

person around here, you're going to be used. And you want to look out sometimes that you don't stick your neck into too many things because that can happen, too. But if you're dedicated at all, you're going to be used, in some way or other. If you ask God to use you, He'll use you. There's no question about that. The only thing is, don't start asking if you don't mean it. If you want to be used, ask. If you don't want to be used, well stay out of it until you can get at it really from your own heart.

What about this second point of "remembering always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory"? What's that got to do with the monastic life? Has this got anything to do with our kind of monastic spirituality? [*inaudible*] Not looking for a personal gain, definitely, and of course, especially, the thing I'm emphasizing is this idea of remembering. Remember what you're here for. Remember what you're doing. Now this is a very important psychological and spiritual point that they bring up here, 'cause when you're in a thing like this, you get into something; remember what you're doing. So, remember your aim and you've got to have an aim and keep it in mind and of course the aim [*is*] not a selfish aim. You have to remember that your aim is not for yourself. "We're not in this," they say, "for ourselves." This isn't just to win. This isn't just to defeat these other people. It's to seek justice and reconciliation because this is good for everybody.

Of course, this is the basic principle that you get in Pope John's *Pacem in Terris*. He's saying that the world problems have to be settled by people who are willing to seek justice and seek reconciliation and unity on a higher plane and not just be seeking that our side's going to win. We've got to defend ourselves against evil and all that sort of thing but on the higher plane we have to seek unity and reconciliation and universal justice.

So, well now, we should be in this. We should be in this. Here's an aim that isn't just something for these individuals. It's for everybody. These people are in this for everybody. They want everybody to have what's coming to them – justice. Okay, we should be thinking of that. Are there any other points that have struck anybody here particularly? Well, you've got this idea, for example, "sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free." See, this is kind of a corollary for this business of being used. This is basically monastic. 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. It's sacrificing our way, our desires and so forth, in order that all men might be free. And you see they say all men. This is just Birmingham but they're thinking of everybody, thinking of the

whole world. That, of course, gives you a powerful motive.

What happened in Birmingham? What actually was gained in Birmingham, really? What came of it? [*inaudible*] What did they actually get out of it? They got that agreement that a lot of things were supposed to be integrated. They haven't been. Materially speaking, they got very little out of it. But they got a great deal out of it, from two points of view. First of all, it was a great moral victory because it made the real meaning come out in the open. Hitherto, what had happened would be one Negro would get taken in jail and beat up and nobody [would] ever hear about it, and another one would get beat up and nobody would ever hear about that either. It's all in this, isolated, but nobody said anything about it. Now, these people in the thousands went out and stuck their necks out and for about a week the police tried to be nonviolent about it and finally they got out the police dogs and then it was all over the country. And it was absolutely clear and everybody saw it. Since that, the whole situation is different. And this had a big effect on a lot of white people in the South, too. It couldn't help but.

But the other main thing that it had was that it gave the Negroes this realization that they're important, the realization that they can come out and do something and it means something – that when they get out there and do something it has a meaning and it had a meaning for everybody and this is tremendously important, this having been done. Once this corner's been turned, it's never going to be the same again because now you've got the Negroes in this country [who] are aware of the fact that they mean something and that what they do cuts ice all over the world.

So, that's another thing. So, if a person has the conviction that when he's sacrificing his own wishes, this can have meaning for everybody in the world, this could have meaning for somebody in Africa and for somebody in China, and so forth, well then, he's doing this in a totally different way than if he just believes, "Well I do it because I got to do it." So, therefore, [the] conclusion for us is to renew in ourselves this kind of motive because this can sort of get lost in a monastic life – you know, the kind of a feeling that "well, it's all a very nice thing. Somebody preaches a sermon about it and it sounds great but, really, does it mean anything? Are the sacrifices that I make of my own wishes, are they really meaningful?" Seeking "to perform regular service for others and for the world" – again, you've got this worldwide aspect. These people have the courage to say, "What I am doing, the little act of service that I do, isn't just for these people, it's for the world." Again, this is most important for the monastic life. See, this is monastic spirituality. That's one thing that keeps a monk going, the realization that the service that

he performs isn't just something to make himself look like a good monk in the community. This is a real service. This is my contribution to the human race. And again, we have to feel this.

See, all this is so important just from the ordinary psychological point of view. If you stop and think, when things get bogged down with us, we feel that, what's the meaning of it all? And what am I here for? And I'm wasting my time and that kind of thing. What it usually amounts to is that you've lost the sense that it can mean anything to anybody else. And then, of course, it gets to be individualistic. Finally it gets watered further and further down. You get down to the point of, "What am I getting out of it from the point of view of perfection? And what's the merit that I'm getting out of it?" Then finally, after that, you cease to be interested in the merit and you're looking for what's the immediate, how do I cash in on this here and now?

If I work in the refectory, well maybe I'll be able to get a glass of milk on the side, or something like that. When it gets down that far, it's really gone too far. When it's way down to that level, you're in trouble. You ought to start getting back up because there it's necessary to get this realization that what I do has a real meaning for the world.

Now, get this one too. What does this got to do with us? "To refrain from the violence of fist, tongue or heart." Well, there's not much violence of fist in the monastery but there can be. There has been in the past. It's possible. What strikes you as particularly useful for us? [*inaudible*]. "Violence of the heart." You see, this we don't bother with too much. I think there's a fair amount of it in the monastery. Tongue, well, usually we don't. That can happen. Violence of the tongue can burst out every once in a while, and so forth. Even in choir that has happened. No reference to any recent history, but I know in the past somebody in choir was telling his neighbor a few things about what he was going to do to him if he didn't shut up and so forth. So this can happen. Violence of the tongue can crop up in the monastic life; but especially violence of the heart, and this is very important; it's a real obligation for us. If we're looking for perfection and we're thinking about these things and we're thinking about these people who have to face this sort of thing, we can contribute something to this whole business of peace in the world by working very hard to be nonviolent in our hearts, and that is to say, not having aggressive thoughts about people. Now, that calls for really a whole conference actually. Because what does it mean? It means to say you've got to give this a little thought. How are we aggressive towards people? What is the violence that we have in our hearts? It isn't just necessarily cussing him up and down or anything like that. What are some

of the standard forms of violence that we don't recognize as violence and that are violence of the heart, really? [*inaudible*] Well, it's rejecting. See, rejection is a form of violence. I mean to simply out-of-hand reject the person or even reject it before he says it, before he proposes it – "no." The answer's going to be "no" because it comes from this fellow. Or, especially, taking him apart – really, just systematically, everything he does: "That's wrong. That's wrong. Look, he did it that way, and so forth." See, this is a form of violence. This is a form of aggression on the person – in a certain sense, destroying his works. You can destroy what he does mentally. He gets up to sing. You say, "Ah, he's flat." He goes to do something. "He always does it the wrong way. Why does he do it that way? That's not the way it's supposed to be done," and so forth. You take him apart. So, in your mind, what has happened is that if your mind were the whole world and if you were God, by the time that poor guy got through there wouldn't be anything left. You would have completely destroyed the man. You have mentally destroyed the person. So, I would say this is a tremendously important thing: to learn not to be destroying people in our hearts; not to be taking them apart so that when we're though with them there's just nothing left. And this is something as monks, we should know. You don't expect people outside to think about this too much, although they probably think about this more than we do. But as monks this should be part of the program.

And then, finally, "strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health." Now, what's that got to do with anything? Is that important for the monastery? Why would you say that's important in the monastic life? What's the good of that? Has this got any reference; is it just a counsel for yourself, or what? [*inaudible*] You owe it to other people. You owe it to other people to be functioning properly if you can. If you're not functioning properly, somebody else is going to have to carry you. It's a question of both spiritual and bodily. They go together. It doesn't mean to say, you've got to be constantly worrying about your health or anything like that, but you've got to keep yourself in trim because you've got your job to do and if you don't do it somebody else is going to have to do it. Now, we're getting to the point where you begin to realize that. During the old days if somebody didn't show up for the dishwashing it didn't make too much difference. But now, if somebody's missing, nobody eats. So, it's getting to the point where we have to be able to handle the thing. You've got to be there and we've got to be in good spiritual health. That means, especially, I think we've got an obligation to the community to keep ourselves in trim from the point of view of morale – from the point of view of keeping up our spirits a little bit. We don't have to be corny about

it, but there is such a thing as keeping ourselves a little bit on a more-or-less happy level. We have to keep ourselves a bit happy. You can't keep yourself totally happy; it's impossible. But if a person's morale is down and he's dragging around in the community, what happens? Again, he's got to be carried. Other people are going to have to put up with this. If a person is constantly down and constantly griping and constantly with a long face and so forth, if a person is constantly down like that, it's going to be a drag on everybody and everybody has to bear up with it and it's a weight on everybody. So, you see that something can be learned from these wicked people out in the world after all.