

Letters to a Black Catholic Priest: Thomas Merton, Fr. August Thompson and the Civil Rights Movement

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Introduction¹

I first learned about Fr. August Thompson one year ago when I was in Alexandria, Louisiana to teach a group of candidates for the permanent diaconate. I was leading the group in a discussion about the Catholic Church's teaching on racism, and it was then that the students told me about Fr. Thompson, a retired black priest in the Diocese of Alexandria. While he is known to many in Merton circles, this was the first time I had heard of him. I learned from the students that Fr. Thompson was an important figure in the civil rights movement in Louisiana, that he himself experienced oppression even from white Catholics, and that he spoke out against this oppression in a published interview with the civil rights leader John Howard Griffin. Moreover, I learned from one of the students that Fr. Thompson was friends with Thomas Merton, though he could not tell me much more about their relationship beyond that.

When I returned to the office the following Monday, I went up to the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, where I teach. Sure enough, from out of the many files containing Merton's correspondence, the director pulled a file containing letters exchanged between Merton and Thompson between 1963 and 1968. From these letters, I learned that the two met in October 1963, and that Thompson turned to Merton for advice about a number of issues over a five-year period until Merton's untimely death at the end of 1968.

In this article, I am going to delve into Fr. August Thompson's relationship with Thomas Merton. In essence, I want to address this question: why was it that an oppressed black Catholic priest in the deep south turned to a white monk living in a contemplative monastery in Kentucky for guidance? To address this question it will be necessary to explore one of the facets of Merton's thought that is perhaps least well-known, his writing on racism. Sadly, as the director of the Thomas Merton Center, Paul Pearson, once wrote, "Merton's writings on racism are all too frequently

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture at the University of Kentucky on 27 March 2019. The author is grateful to David Hunter for the invitation to present this research. The talk was subsequently presented at the ITMS Sixteenth General Meeting at Santa Clara University in June 2019.

skirted over if not completely ignored.”² This essay is a small attempt to correct this oversight, to bring to light Merton’s engagement with the issue of civil rights. I will do this first by examining what I consider to be Merton’s best essay on the problem of racism, and then by looking at the letters he and Fr. Thompson exchanged over a five-year period during the height of the civil rights movement. And in the process, we will learn more about Fr. Thompson and about the problem of racism within the Catholic Church itself.

Merton and Civil Rights

Prior to the 1960s, Merton wrote little about the problem of racism in the United States. There is a brief but important section about racial inequality in his 1948 bestselling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*,³ that garnered the favorable attention of the black civil rights leader Eldridge Cleaver, who quoted the passage at length in his 1968 book, *Soul on Ice*.⁴ However, between 1948 and 1961, Merton’s references to racism were limited.⁵ This started to change in 1961 and 1962,⁶ but it was his expo-

2. Paul M. Pearson, “A Voice for Racial Justice,” *The Merton Seasonal* 40.1 (2015) 46.

3. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 337-60; on this period see Michael N. McGregor, “The Persistence of Harlem in the Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 29 (2016) 90-98.

4. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968) 44-45. Cleaver writes that he liked the passage so much that he copied it out longhand and read it frequently: “Whenever I felt myself softening, relaxing, I had only to read that passage to become once more a rigid flame of indignation. It had precisely the same effect on me that Elijah Muhammad’s writings used to have, or the words of Malcolm X, or the words of any spokesman of the oppressed in any land.”

5. There is one brief reference to racial problems in a 1959 letter to Dorothy Day, but apart from this his journals and correspondence are largely silent on the topic. See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 136: “I came upon a copy of *CW* [*The Catholic Worker*]. The one with the piece about the Hopis in it. Again, same reaction. You people are the only ones left awake, or among the few that still have an eye open. I am more and more convinced that the real people in this country are the Indians – and Negroes, etc.” (subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text).

6. For example, see his journal entry for March 11, 1961: “The Negroes and their struggle for integration into American society: not only do they have to face the enormity of the whites who are completely unsettled by their irrational fears, but they have to face fear, guilt and passivity in themselves: one of the most difficult things is for them to admit completely in their hearts what they know intellectually: that they are in the right. It is fine that they have a leader who can direct them in the way of non-violence [Martin Luther King, Jr.]. But the situation is so ambivalent that there remains danger of violence – as the less rational whites seem to sense intuitively. Great admiration and compassion for the

sure in 1963 to the writings of noted writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin that propelled him to engage the issue of racism more directly.⁷ Shortly after reading Baldwin, Merton sent a letter of appreciation to him and wrote an essay on Baldwin for the June 1963 issue of *Liberation*, a magazine associated with the New Left.⁸ This would be his first foray into the issue of racism, but it would only be the starting point.

Many more references to racism occur in his private journals and letters in 1963. Moreover, his contacts with those involved in the civil rights movement increased. One of these contacts was John Howard Griffin, a white journalist who wrote *Black Like Me*,⁹ a book about Griffin's experiences in the deep south when he chemically altered his appearance so as to look like a black man. Merton read *Black Like Me* in 1962, noting this briefly in a journal entry on March 24 of that year (see *TTW* 213). Soon after Merton read James Baldwin in 1963, Griffin came to visit Merton at Gethsemani and shared with Merton stories of racial oppression and violence (see *TTW* 300 [3/4/1963]). So began a regular correspondence between the two that continued for the next five years until the end of Merton's life.¹⁰ While their exchanges involved discussion on a variety of topics, their earliest letters are focused on racial inequality.¹¹

Merton became increasingly disturbed the more he learned about the problem of racism. In the spring of 1963, Edward Keating, the publisher

Negroes" (Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 99; subsequent references will be cited as "*TTW*" parenthetically in the text).

7. In a February 23, 1963 journal entry, he writes that Baldwin helped him to understand that the civil rights movement was not simply about the attainment of necessary rights for African Americans, but about the conversion and transformation of whites: "The liberation of the Negroes," Merton writes in summary of Baldwin's thesis, "is necessary for the liberation of the whites and for their recovery of a minimum of self-respect, and reality" (*TTW* 297).

8. Thomas Merton, "Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom," *Liberation* 8 (June 1963) 20-22; this is a brief commentary on "Let's Along and Do the Murder First," Wallace Hamilton's review of David Lytton, *The Goddamn White Man*, published in the same issue.

9. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: New American Library, 1961).

10. For Merton's letters to Griffin see Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 131-41.

11. For example, Griffin sent to Merton a photo he took of a black woman fearful for her son that Merton found deeply moving (unpublished May 9, 1963 letter of John Howard Griffin to Thomas Merton, archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY) and Merton sent to Griffin his poem "And the Children of Birmingham" after reading Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (unpublished May 28, 1963 letter of Thomas Merton to John Howard Griffin [TMC archives]).

of *Ramparts*, a new Catholic literary and political magazine, approached Merton to ask him to write something on racial inequality. At first he suggested that Merton do an exchange of letters with Baldwin that would be published.¹² Merton was initially enthusiastic about the idea, and Baldwin expressed interest through his agent,¹³ but Merton soon had second thoughts about such an exchange, particularly questioning the value of it from Baldwin's perspective.¹⁴ He instead suggested writing something on the race question from his own vantage point as a white monk in a cloistered monastery. The publisher said yes, and Merton spent the next two months writing. "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal" was published in the Christmas 1963 issue of *Ramparts*,¹⁵ and later published with a new introduction in his 1964 book of essays, *Seeds of Destruction*.¹⁶ It is his most extensive essay on racial injustice, and his most important.¹⁷ His later essays on race are worthwhile in their own right, but they can also be read as addenda to this foray into the civil rights battle.

A detailed analysis of the arguments of Merton's article lies outside the scope of this essay, so I will simply hit the highlights, as it were. As the title of the essay indicates, Merton writes as a white person to fellow whites, directing his argument particularly toward those who identify as "liberals." Overarching the entire essay is Merton's conviction that the oppression of African Americans is systemic and that white liberals (a) do not do enough to fight against the racism baked into American society; and (b) are, in fact, guilty of propping up this racist system for their own well-being.

Merton begins the essay on a theological note, focusing his attention

12. See unpublished April 30, 1963 letter of Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin (box 11, fol. 386, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

13. See unpublished June 3, 1963 letter of Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin (box 11, fol. 386, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

14. See unpublished May 28 letter of Thomas Merton to John Howard Griffin (TMC archives); see also unpublished June 17, 1963 letter of Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin (box 11, fol. 386, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

15. Thomas Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal," *Ramparts* 2 (Christmas 1963) 4-23; the article also appeared in the British journal *New Blackfriars* 2 (November 1963) 467-77; (December 1963) 503-16.

16. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71; subsequent references will be cited as "*SD*" parenthetically in the text.

17. After receiving the essay, Keating raved about the piece to Griffin, saying that he doubted that "anyone has ever written more brilliantly, more passionately, more perceptively on the subject than has Merton in this instance" (unpublished August 1, 1963 letter of Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin [box 11, fol. 386, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University]); see also unpublished August 7, 1963 letter of John Howard Griffin to Thomas Merton (TMC archives).

first on white Christians in the south. Merton writes that Catholics in the south “have explicitly and formally identified themselves with racial segregation,” and he lists a number of examples of white Catholic racism, noting that in Louisiana Catholics set fire to a parochial school rather than allow it to be integrated and, in another instance, a white Catholic priest was beaten by his white parishioners for allowing both black and white children to receive first communion together (*SD* 12). Merton brings up Christian racism here because, as he notes, the emphasis in the United States on “freedom” is rooted in a recognition of dignity and rights of the person, and although the United States is not officially Christian, “this democratic respect for the person can be traced to the Christian concept that every man is to be regarded as Christ, and treated as Christ” (*SD* 13). In other words, the United States justifies its international and national policies on the supposed idea “that we are supremely concerned with the human person and his rights,” and we “do this because our ancestors regarded every man as Christ, wished to treat him as Christ, or at least believed this to be the right way to act, even though they did not always follow this belief” (*SD* 13-14). This leads Merton to ask a pointed question: “How, then, do we treat this other Christ, this person, who happens to be black?” (*SD* 17).

Merton’s answer is blunt. In the south, where most whites consider themselves Christian, “we discover that belief in the Negro as a person is accepted only with serious qualifications, while the notion that he is to be treated as Christ has been overlooked” (*SD* 17). Southerners have expressed unwillingness even to ride in the same buses with or eat alongside of African Americans. Worse still are those professed Christians who refuse to worship with their black sisters and brothers, and some Catholics have even gone so far as to refuse to receive the Eucharist with them.

But what about white Americans, including white Christians, who support civil rights, advocate for civil rights legislation and join African Americans in protests? Merton is unrelenting in his criticism of these “white liberals.” Although they have a “generous, but vague, love of mankind in the abstract” (*SD* 33), white liberals have little interest in the actual equality of African Americans. White liberals were at the 1963 March on Washington because they felt good about being there. It was a balm to the liberal conscience. But while white liberals perhaps thought that black folk needed them to participate in the march, African Americans had mixed feelings. It was pleasant to see and experience the good will of white liberals, but black civil rights leaders knew that such good will comes with a caveat. The white liberal wants equality, but he wants it on his terms. He is used to a certain standard of living, and Merton argues

that the white liberal unconsciously privileges his “material comforts” and “security” over his idealism (*SD* 33). So when he confronts the concrete reality of what actual equality looks like, when he sees that genuine equality will mean sacrifices on his part, he is “going to be a very frightened mortal” (*SD* 36).

Merton is convinced that the greatest threat to the civil rights movement, the greatest threat to racial equality, does not come from vocal southern racists. We know at least where these racists stand. No, the greatest threat comes from white liberals who say all the right things, but who cannot be relied upon to remain proponents of racial equality when they see precisely what this might entail for them. When they see that racial equality will mean that society will cease being dominated and governed by whites, when they see that “whiteness” will no longer be the standard by which society is measured, white liberals will slam on the breaks.

Even today, many identify racism primarily in terms of interpersonal, individual actions or behaviors against someone from another race. As Bryan Massingale writes in his book on racial inequality in the Catholic Church, “the commonsense understanding discusses racism as personal acts of rudeness, hostility, or discrimination.”¹⁸ By these standards, the white liberal is not a racist. However, in a way that shows how far ahead of his time he was, Merton describes a society that is beset with systemic racism. Legislation and good will simply are not going to cut it to bring about racial equality, for African Americans find themselves “in the presence of a social structure which [they have] reason to consider inherently unjust” (*SD* 31). White liberals are wholly unprepared to give up the privilege they have as white people in a society dominated by whites. So, Merton argues, when they see that their power, influence and wealth must erode in order for there to be racial equality, white liberals will turn on the civil rights movement and on African Americans in general. They will no longer support the civil rights movement as a means to preserve their identity as liberals.

Merton predicts that white liberals will ultimately “decide that it is better for the establishment to be maintained by the exercise of the power which is entirely in white hands, and which ought to remain in white hands because they are white” (*SD* 41). And in that vein, whites will conclude that the civil rights movement is proposing an approach to racial injustice that is far too revolutionary, and that it will need to be squelched. Merton’s words about where the white liberal will end up are harsh and bleak. The passage begins by looking at the logic that will end up governing white

18. Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 14.

liberal oppression of the civil rights movement:

Conclusion: revolution must be prevented at all costs; but demonstrations are already revolutionary; *ergo*, fire on the demonstrators; *ergo*. . . . At the end of this chain of thought I visualize you, my liberal friend, goose-stepping down Massachusetts Avenue in the uniform of an American Totalitarian Party in a mass rally where nothing but the most uproarious approval is manifest, except, by implication, on the part of silent and strangely scented clouds of smoke drifting over from the new “camps” where the “Negroes are living in retirement.” (SD 41-42)

Whatever white liberals may say to signal allegiance with the civil rights movement, white obsession with power is so pervasive that, faced with loss of it, even the white liberals will subscribe to a white supremacy akin to Nazism for the cause of supposed “peace.”

It is at this point that Merton draws on his reading of James Baldwin. Black civil rights leaders are well aware of the white liberal’s subconscious hold on power, and as such, the civil rights movement’s focus is not just to achieve black liberation from racial inequality, but to achieve the redemption of the white person.¹⁹ African Americans are “seeking by Christian love and sacrifice to redeem him, to enlighten him” (SD 45). For white Americans are, Merton writes, “blinded” by the “endemic sin of racial injustice” (SD 43) and they require conversion. This conversion can only take place through the kind of non-violent protest that leads whites toward self-examination:

19. To see how this point is influenced by Merton’s reading of James Baldwin, see “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom” 21, where Merton writes that, while some condemned Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* for fomenting violence, the “book is one of the most beautiful acts of charity to the white race.” For in this book, Baldwin doesn’t simply focus on the justifiable anger that African Americans should have in the face of systemic oppression, but explains that white oppression of blacks is rooted in the white person’s “incapacity to love.” Baldwin doesn’t say this to condemn whites outright, but to explain to his black and white readers that white America is caught in a state of unreality from which it is difficult to escape. Whites have lost the ability to understand their black fellow citizens, and have instead turned to hate and fear that which they don’t understand. But Baldwin also insists that white ignorance means that whites become less real, less than who they are supposed to be. Whites need to see the African American “as a human and personal reality,” and when they can do this, they will not only cease fearing and hating their black neighbors, but they will become more fully human, more complete. Baldwin doesn’t condemn whites in his book. According to Merton, he does them a service. As Merton puts it: “If a man thinks another man is crazy and, instead of locking him up, he patiently and lovingly does things which he thinks can help to cure him, I think we ought to find a better way of thanking him than by comparing him with a stupid and bloodthirsty monster.”

The purpose of non-violent protest, in its deepest and most spiritual dimensions, is then to awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice and of his sin, so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *White* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, *is rooted in the heart of the white man himself.* (SD 45-46)

Merton's critique of white liberals and white society is unrelenting, and it provoked offense. In particular, Martin Marty, prominent Lutheran Church historian from the University of Chicago, took exception. In his review of *Seeds of Destruction*, the book that contains Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal," Marty characterizes Merton's approach to the white liberal as filled with little more than "judgmental earnestness" not rooted in the reality of things on the ground.²⁰ Marty criticizes Merton for falling into well-worn patterns of critique that bear little resemblance to the situation as it actually exists. Instead, Merton provides what Marty argues is nothing more than a bellicose critique that lacks precision and nuance. It amounts not to prophecy but to what Marty called "propheticism, a cultic kind of judgment pronounced on relative innocents."

Interestingly, three years after writing this critical review of Merton's essay, Marty wrote an open letter to Thomas Merton for the *National Catholic Reporter*, in which he expressed regret for so quickly dismissing Merton's argument. Having recently reread Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal," Marty acknowledged that "what bothers me now is the degree of accuracy in your predictions and prophecies in general."²¹ What changed Marty's mind was witnessing the racial tension on display during the summer of 1967 as well as watching Congress in action. With regard to the latter, Marty notes that he has now seen that the majority of politicians do "not want to get at the causes of unrest but only at false and arbitrary cures." They are interested in alleviating their own consciences, not in making systematic changes, changes that Marty agrees must occur for racial equality to become a reality. Moreover, Marty notes that a refusal to make systematic societal changes is not the only failure of white society, for his observations since writing his critique of Merton's original essay confirmed that built into American society is the possibility of the kind of state-sanctioned violence that Merton warned about: "Not only is [the white person] failing to come through with an alternate social system,"

20. Martin E. Marty, "Sowing Thorns in the Flesh," *Book Week* 2 (17 January 1965) 4.

21. Martin E. Marty, "TO: Thomas Merton. RE: Your Prophecy," *National Catholic Reporter* 3.43 (30 July 1967) 6.

Marty writes, “the system we have is undergoing a transition toward brutalization of the type which makes the American Auschwitz at least remotely conceivable.”²²

Merton also found allies among those in the civil rights movement. Representative John Lewis, a civil rights icon and congressman who was among the marchers brutally beaten in 1965 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, is on record as saying that “Thomas Merton was a monk whose words I studied during non-violence training in the Civil Rights Movement” and that he was carrying a Merton book in his backpack when he crossed the bridge.²³ Christopher Pramuk wrote in an essay about an elderly African American at his parish who mentioned that, when she felt alienated by her church and religious community for her civil rights work in the 1960s, Merton was the white exception: “‘Merton got it,’ she said, ‘when few others did.’”²⁴ And when I had the opportunity last year to speak with Bishop Edward Braxton, one of the few black Catholic bishops in the United States, I asked him what he made of Merton’s writings on race, such as “Letters to a White Liberal.” He responded with one word – “Prophetic”²⁵ – and this assessment is shared by others.²⁶

Fr. August Thompson and Thomas Merton

The entire Christmas 1963 issue of *Ramparts*, in which “Letters to a White Liberal” appeared, was devoted to the problem of racism, and Merton was not the only Catholic featured prominently in it. Also included in the issue was an extended interview by John Howard Griffin with none other than Fr. August Thompson; indeed, Fr. Thompson was on the cover. The

22. To learn more about Marty’s initial reaction to Merton’s “Letters to a White Liberal,” as well as his later retraction, see “An Interview about Thomas Merton with Dr. Martin E. Marty,” conducted by Vaughn Fayle, OFM and edited by Joseph Quinn Raab, *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 23-29.

23. See John Lewis, “Rep. John Lewis on Pope Francis’ Address to Congress – September 25, 2015”; available at: <https://johnlewis.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-john-lewis-pope-francis-address-congress>.

24. Christopher Pramuk, “Thomas Merton and the Future of Faith,” *Marginalia* (23 April 2016); available at: <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/thomas-merton-future-faith-christopher-pramuk>.

25. Personal communication with Bishop Edward Braxton in Belleville, Illinois on September 8, 2017.

26. See also Christopher Pramuk, “‘The Street Is for Celebration’: Racial Consciousness and the Eclipse of Childhood in America’s Cities,” *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 95-96 and Alex Mikulich, “Merton’s Letters a Call for White Atonement,” *National Catholic Reporter* (21 January 2013); available at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/mertons-letters-call-white-atonement>.

interview proved to be scandalous, and in the fallout Thompson reached out to Merton for guidance. Before looking at the letters Merton and Thompson exchanged, I shall look briefly at the interview itself.

Fr. Thompson holds nothing back in his description of what life is like for black Catholics and for himself as a black priest. Unlike their white Catholic counterparts, black Catholics cannot attend retreats or days of recollection, both important aspects of Catholic devotional life. Moreover, black Catholics can only attend a white parish if the distance to the closest black parish is considered “inordinate,” and in one town where there was only one black Catholic and no black parishes, the white parish went so far as to pay someone to drive the black Catholic to a black parish in another town. And even if a white parish allows black Catholics to join them because the distance to “their” parish is too far, there is a protocol in place whereby they sit in a section segregated from the white parishioners and are allowed to receive the Eucharist only after the white Catholics have received.²⁷

Despite being a priest, Fr. Thompson recounts that he is frequently treated as a second-class citizen within his own Church. Some white Catholics refuse to call him “Father,” and he is often prohibited from attending certain churches even for first communions or confirmations. He is not even allowed to say Mass at many white parishes. And as the only black priest in the diocese, Fr. Thompson says that he is rarely invited to events with his fellow priests. He sums up his own status as a black Catholic priest in the deep south by saying that he is considered by white Catholics as “a Negro first, a Negro second and finally a priest” (Griffin, “Dialogue” 30).

When asked by Griffin about whether he has spoken to other priests and to the hierarchy about the treatment of black Catholics as well as his treatment as an black priest, Thompson simply replies that he has “done [his] share of speaking frankly” (Griffin, “Dialogue” 30). Unfortunately, Thompson tells Griffin, the hierarchy has met his concerns with indifference. “It is suggested,” Thompson says, “that I do not appreciate the complexities of the problem” (Griffin, “Dialogue” 30). And while some bishops have spoken out, Thompson complains that the response of the Church to racial prejudice in society at large and within the Church herself has been silence: “I fear that the silence in some areas is quite loud. Many people think that this silence is a sign that those in authority agree with the situation as it exists” (Griffin, “Dialogue” 31). For his

27. John Howard Griffin, “Dialogue: Father August Thompson,” *Ramparts* (December 1963) 24-33; subsequent references will be cited as “Griffin, ‘Dialogue’” parenthetically in the text.

part, Thompson declares that he refuses to remain silent in the face of such grievous prejudice. Black Catholics are unwilling to put up with prejudice in the Church any longer. They will either speak out or leave. Thompson's concluding comments are stark:

There are many Catholics who do not go to Church because the pain of this kind of humiliation is simply unbearable. Think of going to Church, going to Communion, and in order to receive Christ you must wait until every white Catholic has gone to the Communion Table and returned to his seat – knowing that you might well be skipped if you approach the altar while some white person was still there. Think of that encouraging people to receive Communion. Many do, of course, but with a deep sense of sickness, and then resentment that even this great Sacrament should be clouded in indignity for them. . . . Each day we see more Negroes disillusioned with what they call “the white man’s Christianity.” And each day we see more whites disillusioned by the same scandal; let’s not forget that. Men are talking about the failure of Christianity and turning away – not because Christianity is a failure, God knows – but because it appears so through the bad actions of Christians. (Griffin, “Dialogue” 30)

Bishop Charles Pasquale Greco was bishop of the Diocese of Alexandria from 1946 to 1973. He continues to be a much beloved figure among Catholics in the diocese, though his record on civil rights was somewhat mixed. While he personally favored integration of schools and parishes, he was reluctant to push for integration, instead arguing that the Church in Alexandria needed to move slowly towards integration so as not to scandalize white parishioners.²⁸ So it did not go over well with the bishop to have one of his own priests speak so openly about racism within the Church itself. Before the interview was published, Greco tried to stop the publication of the interview by legal means, and when that proved impossible, he turned to canon law.²⁹ By the fall, he believed that he had succeeded in convincing the publisher not to run the interview, and was angered to learn that this was not the case.³⁰

On November 21, shortly after the interview was published, Bishop

28. See Mark Newman, “The Catholic Diocese of Alexandria and Desegregation,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 52.3 (2011) 282-83, and Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995) 176.

29. See unpublished August 17, 1963 letter of August Thompson to John Howard Griffin (box 11, fol. 380, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

30. See unpublished October 7, 1963 letter of August Thompson to John Howard Griffin (box 11, fol. 380, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

Greco wrote a scathing letter to Fr. Thompson. His anger is palpable from beginning to end. It begins as follows:

It is with keenest disappointment and displeasure that the current issue of “Ramparts” comes to my attention. I am sincerely and totally convinced that your appraisal of the Church – her Bishops, Priests, Religious and Laity – in her relation to the racial problem in the South is exaggerated, distorted and misleading, and constitutes a defamation of the Church.³¹

Bishop Greco goes on to express his anger not only about the content of the interview itself, but also about what he considers to be the duplicitous way in which it was published. He states that he granted permission to Thompson for the interview with Griffin only under the condition that it would not be published without Greco’s approval. But while the supposed deception bothers him, he is clear that it is the content of the interview itself that he finds most offensive, particularly since “unjustified slander” against the Church was expressed by a priest “consecrated to protect her interest.” He ends the letter as follows: “The Church had done much for you as a Catholic and as a priest, and you owe her all that you are today. But the image of Your Mother the Church which you, her son, have projected to the world is unfair, is a disservice to her and has inflicted a deep wound upon her. We pary [*sic*] God we may be able to heal it.”

The letter came as a shock to Fr. Thompson, and he immediately turned to Thomas Merton for guidance about how he should respond. This is why we have a copy of the letter; Thompson sent it to Merton to get direction. It is interesting that he turned to Merton, a white monk in a contemplative monastery. The two had met a month previously when Thompson was at the Abbey of Gethsemani for a visit, and Thompson expressed gratitude for Merton’s guidance in a letter to Merton shortly after that visit.³² It is unclear whether Thompson read Merton’s “Letters to a White Liberal” before their meeting, or indeed if he read it before writing to Merton for advice. Nevertheless, whether he read the essay or not, Thompson evidently understood Merton to be someone who could provide guidance to an oppressed black priest, this despite the fact that Merton was white. In other words, Thompson turned to Merton because he understood that Merton “got it” in a way many other white Catholics did not.

31. Unpublished November 21, 1963 letter of Bishop Charles Greco to August Thompson (TMC archives).

32. Unpublished October 16, 1963 letter of August Thompson to Thomas Merton (TMC archives).

Thompson tells Merton that he is not quite sure how to react to Bishop Greco's letter.³³ It is the bishop's accusation of defamation that most bothers Thompson. He did not intend to defame the Church but simply spoke honestly about the experience of black Catholics and of his experience as the only black Catholic priest in a diocese in the deep south. How can one be guilty of defamation when one is simply speaking the truth, particularly when he has spoken directly to the bishop himself about these matters? Thompson believes that he needs to answer Bishop Greco's letter, but he wants to do so in a way that will not inflame the already elevated tension between himself and his bishop. He therefore asks Merton for advice about whether and how he should respond.

Merton responded immediately to Thompson's letter and he did so in detail. Merton affirms Thompson for speaking out the way he did. He found the interview "to be very frank and fair," not at all "extreme."³⁴ It is, in fact, "historic," "something really first rate and it was very badly needed." He continues: "Far from dishonoring the Church, I think you have borne witness to the fact that Catholics can think and speak out for the truth in these matters." I can imagine that these words from Merton were great comfort to Thompson. While he was being attacked by his bishop and by other white southern Catholics – including his fellow priests – for "stepping out of line,"³⁵ here was a prominent American Catholic figure, arguably *the* most prominent American Catholic figure at the time, telling him that his voice was an important one, that he needed to speak the truth, and that he was justified in doing so.

In addition to offering his assurances, Merton takes seriously the concerns Thompson raises and provides as much guidance as he can from his vantage point. Merton talks to Thompson about how to navigate the complicated waters of conflict with a superior so that he can acknowledge love for and fidelity to the bishop without betraying his convictions. That is, he instructs Thompson on how to do what he has been doing throughout his monastic life – remain obedient to his superiors without relinquishing the calling he feels he has to speak forthrightly and prophetically. Moreover, and even more importantly, Merton's advice centers around

33. Unpublished November 26, 1963 letter of August Thompson to Thomas Merton (TMC archives).

34. Unpublished November 30, 1963 letter of Thomas Merton to August Thompson (TMC archives).

35. August Thompson as quoted in John Howard Griffin, *The Church and the Black Man* (Dayton, OH: Pflaum Press, 1969) 11: "As Father August Thompson, a black priest, remarked recently when he was chided by white religious colleagues for 'stepping out of line' by telling it too bluntly and by black men for telling it too mildly, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will catch it from all sides.'"

how Thompson can respond to his bishop in such a way as to lead him to the kind of conversion about which Merton writes in “Letters to a White Liberal.” In that vein, he cautions Thompson against responding angrily to the bishop by appealing to the bishop’s limitations as a white southerner. He writes:

You have to take into account the absolute blindness and absolute self-righteousness of people who have been schooled [*sic*] by centuries of prejudice and injustice to see things their way and no other. I would say that now your job is to have, if you can, some compassion for the Bishop, and if you refrain from goading him, refrain for his sake even more than for your own. He can’t handle it rightly. In so far as obedience can at the moment help him to calm down, it can be of some help to you and to the cause of the Negro. At least I hope so.

On the one hand, if read in a certain way, Merton could be seen to be making excuses for Greco’s intransigence. Even worse, this advice could be interpreted as Merton advising Thompson to go easy on his bishop, to do what so many white authorities, including white bishops and priests, had been telling black people to do – be patient. However, given the vehemence of Merton’s “Letters to a White Liberal” and his criticism there of precisely this white exhortation to patience, we can be fairly certain that this was not what Merton was trying to do here, nor was he trying to make excuses for Greco. Rather, he is calling Thompson to work for his bishop’s conversion. Merton was a great proponent of dialogue, which he understood to be central to the task of nonviolence.³⁶ He saw dialogue, whereby we endeavor to understand the perspective of another, even of those who are our enemies, as the primary way to express love for one another. But such dialogue rooted in love is demanding. It requires that we actually listen to our interlocutor for, as Merton writes in an important 1967 essay on nonviolence, “If [our interlocutor] sees that we are completely incapable of listening to him with an open mind, our non-violence will have nothing to say to him except that we distrust him and seek to outwit him.”³⁷ Moreover, it requires an unwillingness to view

36. See Gregory K. Hillis, “A ‘Fully Human Solution’ to War: Thomas Merton on Christian Nonviolence,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation: Religion and Ethics* (22 May 2017): available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/a-fully-human-solution-to-war-thomas-merton-on-christian-nonviol/10095766>; see also Gregory K. Hillis, “Is ‘Dialogue’ Just an Empty Buzzword for Christians?” *America* (2 April 2018); available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/04/02/dialogue-just-empty-buzzword-christians>.

37. “Blessed Are the Meek,” in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 23; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.

our interlocutor as beyond hope. Dialogue requires that we go forward in hope, recognizing that each person is capable of conversion, “that there is in man a potentiality for peace and order which can be realized provided the right conditions are there” (*FV* 25).

In his advice to Thompson to recognize Greco’s limitations and so have compassion for him, Merton is not telling his friend to be silent and acquiescent in the face of oppression. Rather, he exhorts Thompson to understand his engagement with his bishop in terms of the purposes of nonviolence. The possibility of conversion, of transformation, remains open only if Thompson engages his bishop in love without antagonizing him. Thompson’s reply to Merton indicates that he appreciated the advice. Along with his own letter, he includes the letter he wrote to Bishop Greco in which he declares his unwavering love for him and the Church. He apologizes that he offended the bishop, while still maintaining that he did little but speak the truth: “I said what I said because I was honestly convinced I was giving an honest answer to the questions asked not only for the good of the Negro but for the good of the whole Church.”³⁸ He ends the letter by again professing his love for the bishop.

A little over two months after he sent this letter to Bishop Greco, Fr. Thompson wrote Merton to update him on how things were going with his bishop as well as to let him know how things were going more generally. According to Thompson, the bishop never responded directly to his letter. They conversed in person, and Thompson writes that the bishop “has been most gracious never once mentioning Ramparts.”³⁹ Bishop Greco has instead directed his attention to a center for catechesis and recreation he wants Thompson to open, presumably for black Catholics in the diocese. And while he is glad to have support for this, Thompson admits to Merton that he is still disappointed with the bishop’s reaction, especially given that other members of the hierarchy have expressed support: “As the Bishop of the Houston Galveston Diocese told me he might have been glad that someone said something. Well, you would not have been able to tell he was glad from his letter to the press and to me.”

At the same time, Thompson writes that reaction from other Catholics has been very positive, both locally and nationally. Locally, not only had he not experienced any ill will from anyone, but “it seems most of the people are becoming more friendly towards me.” And nationally, Thompson received an invite from another priest in the Catholic Interracial

38. Unpublished December 7, 1963 letter of August Thompson to Bishop Charles Greco (TMC archives).

39. Unpublished February 20, 1964 letter of August Thompson to Thomas Merton (TMC archives).

Council to participate in a workshop with Jewish and Protestant clergy in protesting for civil rights. The workshop is secret, and Thompson writes that he does not plan on telling Bishop Greco about participating in it. He tells Merton that he knows he needs to tread lightly right now given the bishop's displeasure, but also that he feels the need to follow his own conscience. He asks again for any guidance Merton can give him.

Merton again responds immediately to Thompson's letter. While he does not have any specific guidance to give Thompson regarding his participation in the workshop, about which Merton is enthusiastic, he takes the opportunity to lament the state of the Church in the United States regarding the race issue and to advise Thompson again regarding his relationship with Bishop Greco. His words are worth quoting at length:

Looking at the broad perspective of the whole problem, from the point of view of the priest, I think we have to face the very serious fact that in the Church today "obedience" is invoked constantly to frustrate the real work that ought to be done for genuine issues (war, race, etc). The principles remain perfectly true: a subject does lack information, perhaps cannot judge sufficiently well, etc but when the decision is constantly pushed back higher up and when no decision comes from higher up except to play safe and do nothing, there is a real problem.⁴⁰

One of Merton's big frustrations as a monk and as a writer was the problem of obedience to his superiors when they made what he understood to be unreasonable demands. Merton was prohibited from writing about war by the abbot general who considered the issue of nuclear war to be an inappropriate topic for a contemplative monk to tackle.⁴¹ But the problem, as Merton saw it, was that no one else in the Church was writing about nuclear war, so it appeared to him that religious superiors were simply kicking the can further down the street without actually addressing the issues and using "obedience" as a handy excuse to stay silent. Merton sees the same thing happening with Thompson and civil rights. Thompson has been asked, under obedience, to refrain from speaking out on civil rights, yet there are few in the Church who are actually confronting the problem of racial injustice. Indeed, as Thompson's interview clearly showed, the Church, particularly in the south, was implicated in the continuance of

40. Unpublished February 27, 1964 letter of Thomas Merton to August Thompson (TMC archives).

41. See Merton's April 29, 1962 letter to Jim Forest (*HGL* 266-68) and Christine M. Bochen, "Censorship," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 47-49.

racial prejudice, and as a black priest in the south, Thompson was in a unique position to speak to racial injustice within his own Church. Unfortunately, he was also in the unique position as a priest under obedience to his bishop. If he goes too far, he will be silenced. Merton knows from his own experience that Thompson will get nowhere if his superior simply views him as a troublemaker; this will lead to the bishop being unwilling to listen to anything Thompson has to say, no matter that what he has to say is something the bishop may actually need to hear. Merton writes that the key for Thompson will be to refrain from all violence – physical or verbal – in the face of the violence being committed against African Americans:

All I can say is that I certainly hope God will protect you and your people, and that something can be done to change things. You will need an awful lot of courage and trust, and that is why you must see to it as far as you can that there is as little as possible of the same violence in your own heart. The courage that is without violence is the greatest of all, because it relies completely on God and not on man's strength. The Psalms are surely the real expression of the sufferings and conflicts that you face there. Fill your heart with them and Christ will live and fight in you.

Over three years went by before Merton and Thompson corresponded again. In September 1967, Fr. Thompson contacted Merton to get his feedback on recent correspondence between himself and John Dearden, the Archbishop of Detroit. Thompson took offense at something Archbishop Dearden had said in the 30 August 1967 issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, which Thompson felt showed a lack of understanding of the Church's complicity in racial injustice. In this issue, Dearden is quoted as responding to the problem of recent race riots as follows: "racial riots made it clear that the Catholic Church will have to allocate large amounts of money and personnel to the service of non-Catholics." He added, "If the Church does not do so . . . then it will fail to meet her responsibilities."⁴² Thompson took offense at these statements, and his response to the archbishop runs for almost six single-spaced pages. We do not need to go through the entire letter paragraph by paragraph. It is sufficient to note that Thompson took issue with Dearden's words predominantly because they appeared to show a lack of understanding of what was going on within his own Church in terms of racial injustice. It sounded to Thompson like Dearden wanted to focus the Church's resources on racial injustice for

42. Unpublished September 1, 1967 letter of August Thompson to Archbishop John Dearden (TMC archives).

non-Catholics, and while this at least demonstrated some cognizance of racism, it showed no understanding of the problem of racism within the Catholic Church itself. What business does the Catholic Church have to speak against racism to non-Catholics when racism remains a plague within the Church itself. He writes:

It is the old problem of racism and until we can straighten that out, first [in] our own house, we cannot speak about our helping non-Catholics, financially or personally because our problem is not with the non-Catholic, but first with the full acceptance of the black man, even in the Church, or may I go further and say especially in the Church. Consequently, until we have allocated a large amount of sincere, honest, unequivocal love first in the Catholic Church to Negro Catholics, white Catholics, nor Negro Catholics nor anyone else will understand what we are saying or doing.

To illustrate just how problematic racism is within the Church, Thompson proceeds to list all of the ways he, as a black Catholic priest, as well as his fellow black Catholics are treated as second-class Catholics throughout the United States. The U.S. bishops have spent twenty years making statements about racism that most black Catholics understand to be afterthoughts that the bishops tag on to other statements because they feel like they need to do so. Yet despite these statements on race, black Catholics in his diocese cannot go on retreats at the diocesan retreat house, they cannot attend “white” parishes, and Thompson, despite being a priest, is not permitted to say Mass at “white” parishes. Nor is this racial prejudice isolated to the south. Thompson writes about the time earlier that year when he went up to Minneapolis to give a series of sermons for a parish mission. The priest at this parish called another priest in the diocese to ask if Thompson could speak to his CCD class. The shocking response he received was, “I don’t want any nigger priest talking to my kids.” Given this situation, what right does the Catholic Church have to say anything to non-Catholics about civil rights: “Can we show the non-Catholic that the Negro is integrated in every phase of Catholic life? I fear if we went out now and tried to show the non-Catholic Negro we are interested in him as a person he might refer us back to what is happening in our own Church and say something like this: ‘Baby get your own home straight first.’”

I have not located a response directly from Archbishop Dearden. However, Thompson did receive a letter one month later from a priest in the Archdiocese of Detroit asking him, on behalf of Archbishop Dearden himself, if he would be willing to volunteer some of his time to come up to the archdiocese to help with the inner-city parishes in the city, many

of which have substantial black populations. In this letter we discover the astonishing detail that there was at the time only one black priest in the entire archdiocese.⁴³

Thompson again writes to Merton for advice, attaching both his letter to Dearden and the one from the archdiocese. In two different letters, Merton suggests that Thompson maybe should go to Detroit, but acknowledges that his understanding of the situation is limited.⁴⁴ Either way, he tells Thompson that he will support him no matter what he decides to do, and he praises Thompson for his “extremely powerful” letter to Archbishop Dearden, which clearly made an impression on the bishop.⁴⁵ Indeed, echoing some of what he said in a previous letter, Merton writes that Dearden and other bishops actually want to understand what is going on, but there are so many barriers preventing them, as white men, from truly understanding that they rarely “get more than a quarter of the picture.” Thompson’s letter evidently filled in more of that picture for Dearden.

Four months after this exchange of correspondence about Detroit, Thompson wrote what would be his last letter to Merton. In it he describes a conversation he had recently with Bishop Greco that demonstrated to him that Greco still does not understand the situation of the black Catholic.⁴⁶ Merton responds to Thompson’s letter a month later in what would be his final letter to the priest. He does not respond directly to Thompson’s conversation with Bishop Greco, but instead writes about the tragedy that occurred shortly after Merton received Thompson’s letter, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. While Merton and King never met, the two knew of one another, and in the run-up to Memphis, John and June Yungblut, friends and co-workers of King, encouraged him to make a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani.⁴⁷ This retreat would, of course, never occur. In his letter to Thompson,

43. Unpublished October 23, 1967 letter of Fr. Norman P. Thomas to August Thompson (TMC archives).

44. Unpublished October 30, 1967 letter of Thomas Merton to August Thompson (TMC archives).

45. Unpublished November 9, 1967 letter of Thomas Merton to August Thompson (TMC archives).

46. Unpublished March 20, 1968 letter of August Thompson to Thomas Merton (TMC archives); Thompson includes a transcription he made of the conversation he had with Bishop Greco (“One hour conference with Bishop Charles P. Greco by Father Thompson” [27 February 1968] [TMC archives]).

47. See the April 6, 1968 journal entry in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 79.

Merton expresses some measure of despair about the future of race relations in a post-King America. “There is a great sickness,” he writes, “the sickness of decaying western civilization.”⁴⁸ In this vein, Merton wonders what Christians are to do now in the face of racial injustice. His answer merits full quotation:

The big thing for Christians is to live the truth that *in Christ* there is absolutely no distinction between Black and White, but the Adversary has made sure that a very real distinction exists (due to the sins of history). Neither can be ignored. We have to learn the reality of the difference, and emphasize Black and White identities and qualities and rights: and see beyond to the inner unity: that unity is in Christ, not in the affluent society.

We have already seen how, in “Letters to a White Liberal,” Merton highlights the scandal of Catholic bigotry by pointing to the Incarnation and what God-becoming-flesh tells us about the value and dignity of all people, regardless of race. In this, his last letter to Thompson, Merton again focuses on the theological, arguing that Christians need to take seriously the implications of the Incarnation for race relations. It is not enough for Christians merely to affirm the reality of God-becoming-flesh; Christians must actually live this truth out. And for Merton this means recognizing the fundamental unity of humankind that the Incarnation reveals. In becoming human, God demonstrated that all humanity has a value and dignity that transcends and encompasses all races. In his letter to Thompson, Merton says that Christians need to live out this truth, that they need to understand that Christ has given to us an identity that transcends and encompasses all the ways in which we divide ourselves from one another, including along racial lines. In Christ, therefore, “there is absolutely no distinction between Black and White.” He does not mean that there are no differences between white and black Americans. Differences exist, and they matter. They are what make each individual and each culture distinct. But beyond the differences is, Merton argues, an “inner unity” rooted in Christ himself, and it is up to Christians to live this unity out.

Conclusion

Thompson and Merton never corresponded again after this letter. In September 1968, Merton departed the Abbey of Gethsemani for a trip first to New Mexico, Alaska and California before finally departing to

48. Unpublished April 26, 1968 letter of Thomas Merton to August Thompson (TMC archives).

Asia. On December 10, 1968, Merton died suddenly in Thailand after giving a talk at a conference he was attending. Twenty-four years later, in an interview with the local Alexandria paper, *The Alexandria Town Talk*, Fr. Thompson reflected on his relationship with Thomas Merton. Noting that Merton “was very much concerned about race,” Thompson says that Merton’s letters “gave me courage to keep going.”⁴⁹ He also tells his interviewer that, after Merton’s death, Thompson visited Merton’s hermitage and said Mass, using Merton’s chalice.

In the years following Merton’s death, Fr. Thompson continued to fight for racial justice in the Catholic Church. In a 1972 interview, he continues to lament the state of things in the Church. He is criticized by white Catholics for being too outspoken and criticized by black Catholics for not doing more. And while he acknowledges that progress has been made, he laments that the progress is slow and always forced. “White people ask, ‘What do we need to do for you?’” he says, “The question should be, ‘What can we do to make the Church more Christian?’”⁵⁰ In a 1982 interview about the Silver Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood, Thompson again acknowledges progress, but notes that black Catholics are still not fully included in the life of the Catholic Church. “All we want,” he says, “is a chance to be truly Catholic.”⁵¹ And in a 1997 conversation with the distinguished Vatican reporter John Allen about his interview with John Howard Griffin thirty-five years earlier, Thompson continues to criticize the Church, both for its history of racial prejudice and its continued reluctance to be countercultural when it comes to race relations. “I really feel for the most part that the church has been a follower instead of a leader,” he laments.⁵²

In examining the correspondence between Merton and Thompson, I have only scratched the surface in telling about the kind of oppression Fr. Thompson experienced throughout his life. In an unpublished 1964-66 journal he kept about Fr. Thompson, John Howard Griffin describes in detail the violence Thompson continually faced. Confronted with threats, bombings and daily expressions of hatred, Thompson reassured Griffin that he was willing to die if God willed it. “Don’t worry so

49. Sidney Williams, “Local Priest Will Be Watching Merton Special with Interest,” *The Alexandria Town Talk* (20 September 1992) 32.

50. Helen Derr, “Father August Thompson: One Man with Courage,” *The Alexandria Town Talk* (8 January 1972) 7.

51. Tom Haywood, “25 Years in ‘Integrated-Segregated’ Church,” *The Alexandria Town Talk* (5 June 1982) 14.

52. John L. Allen, Jr., “Black Priest Lives with Hope, Resignation,” *National Catholic Reporter* (21 November 1997) 16.

much,' he said. 'Think how nice it will be if they get me – I can go to Heaven young.'"⁵³

It is out of this context that Fr. August Thompson turned to Thomas Merton. Faced with a population that regularly referred to him hatefully as the “nigger priest,”⁵⁴ a bishop who seemed unwilling to listen to him, and a Church in which he experienced life as a second-class Catholic simply because he was black, Thompson found in Thomas Merton a fellow priest who understood. They were both priests of the Catholic Church, yet priests in vastly different cultural and racial contexts. While Thompson experienced daily oppression, Merton existed as a contemplative in the woods of Kentucky. And yet, from his vantage point and despite his own identity as a white American, Merton wrote about and responded to the problem of systemic racism in a prophetic way that led civil rights activists like Fr. August Thompson to recognize that Merton understood the plight of African Americans. We would do well to delve more deeply into Merton’s writings on race to understand more thoroughly what is going on in society today. But we would also do well to keep alive the heroic witness of women and men like Fr. August Thompson.

Allow me to end with a brief story. I mentioned at the beginning of this article that I learned about Fr. Thompson a year ago while in Alexandria. A month later, on another trip to Alexandria, I had the great privilege to meet him. He was very old – in his nineties – and he was unfortunately suffering from dementia. When I spoke with him, he could not remember John Howard Griffin nor could he remember his interactions with Thomas Merton. But at the end of our brief conversation, I asked him for a blessing, and it was at that moment that a light went on in his head. Dementia had not robbed him of his liturgical imagination, so when I asked for that blessing, he grabbed my arm tightly but lovingly with his left hand and placed his right hand on my head. And he gave me the most beautiful blessing I have ever received, a blessing whose words were made all the more meaningful by what I knew of what this man had suffered:

Heavenly Father, this is your son, in Jesus he is our brother. Fill him with the grace and blessings he needs to do your work; for there is

53. “Journal notes re: his interview with Father Thompson and its aftermath, December 1964-January 1966” (box 8, fol. 266, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

54. See “Journal notes re: his interview with Father Thompson and its aftermath, December 1964-January 1966” (box 8, fol. 266, John Howard Griffin Papers, Columbia University).

much work he needs and must do. Allow him to feel your love and let him know that I love him too. May Almighty God bless you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵

Fr. August Thompson died on August 10, 2019 at the age of 93.

55. Personal communication with Fr. August Thompson in Alexandria, Louisiana, May 19, 2018.