

Merton Discussion Group: Overarching Framework: From Division to Communion

Central Question for the Entire Study: *How do Lumen Gentium (LG), Gaudium et Spes (GS), and Merton's prophetic witness help us navigate a Church and world marked by polarization, while remaining contemplative, compassionate, and committed to truth?*

I have formatted this into eight sessions. We can do one a month or two a month, or whatever. I am very flexible. I think learning from each other will be inspiring and challenging.

Below I drafted a suggestion for format and reading, everyone should add, and change as we go, and adjust and adapt. Let the spirit move us. Start thinking of questions you want to add. What each of us want to add to each of the SEE-JUDGE-ACT sections.

The questions I have created are just a starting point; I am sure we all have many to add, and this will enhance our discussions and learning experience.

I have included the See-Judge-Act method, as it is baked into the documents and encyclicals of Catholic Social Teaching, and in the ACT sections I made some suggestions for us to consider as takeaways from our experiences in the group discussion.

I will provide the Zoom link once we all reach a consensus. I am very much into the "Quaker Method," but that is a long story.

SESSION 1: Introduction - The Crisis We're In

Theme: Naming Our Reality Without Despair

Readings:

- **Lumen Gentium**, (LG) Chapter 1 (The Mystery of the Church)
- **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander**: Introduction + "A Member of the Human Race" (Fourth and Walnut)
- Selected passages on the contemplative as witness with supplemental readings

Contemporary Connections:

On "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander": This book is essential because it's Merton at his most engaged and vulnerable—wrestling with being both monk and citizen. Written based on his experiences 1956-1965 (published 1966), it captures his "passionate, if critical, dialogue with the world" in real time. The journal format shows his mind moving between prayer, social observation, and prophetic anger. For our group today:

- **The "Guilty Bystander" theme** speaks to our complicity in systems of violence, racism, and injustice—even when we think we're "above politics" or "just spiritual"
- **Fourth and Walnut experience** (Louisville, 1958) is the pivot: "I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate"—this is the theological foundation for engaging the world
- **His observations on technology, mass society, and propaganda** are eerily prescient for our social media age

Key Merton insights from "Conjectures" relevant today:

- The danger of "collective thinking" and tribalism (he writes about Cold War mentality; we see it in political/ecclesial camps)
- The contemplative's role is not to escape the world but to see it clearly, without illusion
- "The rush and pressure of modern life are a form... of violence"—applies to our accelerated news cycles and outrage culture

Opening Questions:

- Where do you experience the Church as divided—not just politically, but spiritually and theologically?
- What local conflicts (in your parish, diocese, or community) feel impossible to bridge?
- How does Merton's "guilty bystander" description sit with you? Are we bystanders to anything specific?

See-Judge-Act:

SEE:

- Name specific divisions: liturgical preferences, political affiliations bleeding into church life, generational tensions, responses to Pope Francis, attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals, immigration, and racial justice
- In your local community: economic inequality, political polarization, and environmental degradation
- Do we see new trends emerging from Pope Leo XIV that we can relate to LG and Merton?

JUDGE:

- LG insists the Church is a *mystery* before institution—how does that challenge our tendency to reduce faith to political positions?
- Merton's Fourth and Walnut: If we are “shining like the sun” at the deepest level, how do we see those we disagree with?

ACT:

- Commit to contemplative listening before speaking in contentious conversations (*think Quaker Method here*)

- Identify one person without identifying the person or group you're tempted to write off—how might you engage them with Merton's "hidden wholeness" in mind?

SESSION 2: The People of God vs. Partisan Tribalism

Theme: One Baptism, Many Politics—Can We Hold Together?

Readings:

- **Lumen Gentium**, Chapter 2 ("The People of God")
- Contemplation in a World of Action: Essays on the Church post-Vatican II
- **Conjectures:** Sections on the Church, authority, and unity

Deepening "Conjectures" for This Session:

Merton writes prophetically about the danger of the Church becoming "just another power structure" or aligning too closely with political ideologies. Key passages to discuss:

- His critique of "religious nationalism"—the fusion of faith and patriotism that distorts both
- Reflections on the Church's moral authority: it's rooted in vulnerability and truth-telling, not power
- "The peculiar sterility of the Church comes from the fact that she is so often venerated by those who have no intention of listening to her."—Are we guilty of this selective listening? How and Why/
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Contemporary Relevance:

What We See:

- Catholics and Christians are divided over immigration policy, climate change, racial justice, and economic systems
- "Cafeteria Catholics/Christians" accusations from all sides
- Social media is amplifying the worst of these divisions
- Local parishes where people from different political tribes can barely speak to each other
- Bishops' conferences struggling with internal disagreement

Merton's Corrective: The Church is the *People of God*—a communion of diverse members, not a political party. LG Chapter 2 emphasizes:

- Baptismal dignity transcends all human categories
- Unity doesn't mean uniformity
- The *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) means listening to the whole People, not just those who agree with us

Discussion Questions:

SEE:

- In your parish, what political or cultural issues create the most tension?
- Who's missing from the conversation? Whose voices are silenced or marginalized?
- How does partisanship show up in homilies, parish meetings, and social events?

JUDGE:

- How does Merton's critique of clericalism (authority as power vs. service) relate to political divisions? Do we want church leaders who agree with us or who challenge us?
- LG teaches all the baptized share one dignity—how does this relativize our political certainties?
- What's the difference between *unity* and *uniformity*? Can we genuinely hold space for those with different political convictions?

ACT:

- Practice "contemplative disagreement": Choose one issue where you have strong feelings. Read one thoughtful piece from a Catholic with the opposite view. Pray for them before responding.
- Organize a parish dialogue on a contentious local issue (zoning for affordable housing, school funding, police relations) using See-Judge-Act, with ground rules Merton would appreciate: silence first, listen deeply, speak truth without rancor.

SESSION 3: Universal Call to Holiness in a Distracted Age

Theme: Contemplation as Resistance

Readings:

- **Lumen Gentium**, Chapter 5 ("Universal Call to Holiness")
- **New Seeds of Contemplation**: Selected chapters
- **Conjectures**: Sections on solitude, silence, and the contemplative life in the modern world

Why This Matters Now:

From "Conjectures": Merton increasingly sees contemplation not as escapism but as *resistance* to mass culture's dehumanization. Key themes:

- "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands... is to succumb to violence."
- Solitude and silence are political acts in an age of noise and distraction
- The contemplative sees through propaganda, whether from state, market, or even Church

Contemporary Application:

What We See:

- 24/7 news cycles and social media are creating constant anxiety
- "Doomscrolling" and outrage addiction
- Burnout among activists and church volunteers
- Spirituality reduced to self-help or political ideology
- In your local community: people exhausted, fragmented, seeking but not finding

The Holiness LG + Merton Envision:

- Not reserved for monks or nuns, but for everyone
- Rooted in *seeing clearly*—contemplation as cutting through illusion
- Expressed in ordinary life: work, family, citizenship
- Requires discipline: silence, prayer, detachment from collective madness

Discussion Questions:

SEE:

- How distracted are you? What consumes our attention—and is it life-giving or depleting?
- In your parish/community, what passes for “spirituality” vs. genuine contemplative depth?
- Where do you see people hungry for silence, solitude, and authenticity?

JUDGE:

- How does Merton’s call to contemplation critique our addiction to constant engagement (political, digital, even ecclesial)?
- LG says *all* are called to holiness—what would that look like in your workplace, neighborhood, family?
- Is contemplation a luxury or a necessity for faithful engagement with the world’s pain?

ACT:

- Personal: Establish one "contemplative practice" this week—even 10 minutes of silence, a walk without phone, lectio divina
- Communal: Offer a centering prayer or contemplative Eucharist service in your parish
- Prophetic: Fast from news/social media for 24 hours; notice what you see more clearly

SESSION 4: The Laity—Unleashed or Ignored?

Theme: Baptismal Mission in a Clericalizing Church

Readings:

- **Lumen Gentium**, Chapter 4 ("The Laity")
- **Contemplation in a World of Action:** Essays on lay spirituality and "new styles of worship."
- **Letters from The Hidden Ground of Love** on authority and renewal

Contemporary Tensions:

What We See:

- Lay people doing most parish ministry but with little decision-making power
- Clericalism persisting despite Vatican II's reforms (bishops' authority vs. synodality)
- Young adults leaving because they don't see a place for their gifts
- Women's voices often sidelined in parish and diocesan structures
- In local community: talented, committed laypeople feeling underutilized or patronized

Merton's Vision (Aligned with LG):

- Monastics as "lay" before God—not part of clerical power structure
- Authority rooted in baptism and love, not ordination alone
- The whole Church as contemplative community, not just hierarchy issuing directives

Discussion Questions:

SEE:

- Who makes real decisions in your parish? Who's consulted? Who's ignored?
- What gifts and charisms in your community are invisible or underused?
- How does clericalism show up—even subtly—in language, liturgy, meetings?

JUDGE:

- How does Merton's understanding of monks as "laypersons in the desert" challenge our clergy/lay divide?
- What would LG's vision of shared baptismal dignity actually require in terms of parish governance, decision-making, and leadership?
- Is your parish/diocese living Vatican II's ecclesiology or just paying lip service?

ACT:

- Advocate for lay involvement in one specific area (finance council, liturgy planning, social justice committee)

- Form a "baptismal reflection group" to discern each other's charisms and how to activate them
- Challenge clericalism when you see it—gently but clearly

SESSION 5: Signs of the Times We'd Rather Not See

Theme: Confronting the World's Pain and Our Complicity

Readings:

- **Gaudium et Spes**, Introduction and Chapter 1 ("The Dignity of the Human Person")
- **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander**: Sections on race, violence, technology, and urban alienation
- **Faith and Violence**: Introduction + 1-2 key essays

Deep Dive into "Faith and Violence":

This collection (1968) is Merton at his most prophetic and unsettling. Written during the Vietnam War and civil rights movement, it directly addresses Christian complicity in systemic violence. The book's power lies in Merton's insistence that *passivity is participation*—if we remain silent, we're guilty.

Key Essays to Focus On:

- **"Faith and Violence"**: The title essay argues that Christian faith, when divorced from justice, becomes a form of violence itself—blessing the status quo
- **"The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven"**: On racism and urban uprisings—Merton refuses to condemn violence without addressing its causes in white supremacy
- **"War and the Crisis of Language"**: How propaganda and euphemism mask atrocity (highly relevant to today's political speech)
- **Essays on Vietnam and nuclear weapons**: Merton's insistence that Christians cannot simply "obey orders" when those orders involve mass killing

Why "Faith and Violence" Matters for our Group Today:

1. **On Racism and White Complicity**: Merton writes from a place of deep reckoning—he, a white monk, must confront his own participation in racist structures. He doesn't soft-pedal: "The time has come for us to admit that we are more interested in perpetuating an unjust political and economic system than we are in obeying the truth of God."

Contemporary parallels:

- Ongoing racial tensions in the Church and society (*how parishes respond to Black Lives Matter, anti-racism education, and reparations discussions*)
 - In your local community: segregated neighborhoods, disparities in schools/policing, resistance to acknowledging systemic racism
2. **On Violence and "Just War"**: Merton increasingly questions whether modern warfare can ever be just, given nuclear weapons and total war. He challenges comfortable Catholic support for military interventions.

Contemporary parallels:

- Catholics divided over US foreign policy, Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine
- Domestic gun violence and Catholic responses (or lack thereof)
- Economic violence: poverty, homelessness, lack of healthcare
- 3. **On Language and Truth:** "War and the Crisis of Language" is absolutely essential for our post-truth era. Merton shows how bureaucratic, sanitized language hides evil: "body counts," "collateral damage," "pacification."

Contemporary parallels:

- Political spin, fake news, and tribal epistemologies (we can't even agree on facts)
- Church language that obscures abuse (calling assault "boundary violations")
- In your local community: how politicians and institutions use language to avoid accountability

Discussion Questions for "Faith and Violence":

SEE:

- What forms of violence (physical, structural, cultural, spiritual) do you see in the world today? In your community?
- Where do you see "the unspeakable" — forms of dehumanization or systemic violence that people prefer not to name?
- How does language mask violence in political discourse, church communications, or local institutions?
- What conflicts in the world today (Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, climate disasters) evoke the strongest reactions in your parish? Why those and not others?

JUDGE:

- How do GS's principles — human dignity, common good, solidarity — help interpret Merton's anger and grief over modern violence?
- Merton asks: Can Christians remain passive before structural injustice and call it "peace"? How do you answer?
- In what ways does Merton's contemplative gaze deepen GS's call not merely to analyze but to *discern in the light of Christ*?
- What does it mean to be "guilty bystanders" to violence in our time? Where are we complicit, even unintentionally?

ACT:

- Choose one form of violence (racism, economic inequality, militarism, environmental destruction) and commit to learning about it from those most affected
- What specific, small-scale acts of nonviolence, reconciliation, or structural change would respond to both GS and Merton's diagnoses in your context?
- How might your parish or study group use See-Judge-Act to address one concrete local issue (policing reform, housing justice, immigrant welcome, gun violence prevention)?

SESSION 6: War, Peace, and the Nuclear Question (Still Urgent)

Theme: Peacemaking in a World Armed to the Teeth

Readings:

- **Gaudium et Spes**, Chapter 5 ("*Fostering Peace and Promoting a Community of Nations*") - especially paragraphs 77-82 on war and weapons
- **Faith and Violence**: Essays on nuclear weapons, Vietnam, and conscience
- **Conjectures**: Reflections on the Cold War and the arms race

Merton's Nuclear Conscience:

In the early 1960s, Merton was *censored* by his Trappist superiors for his anti-nuclear writings, deemed too controversial. He was forbidden to publish on war and peace. This silencing itself became prophetic: when the Church muzzles truth-tellers, it loses moral authority.

Key Merton Arguments from "Faith and Violence":

- Nuclear weapons are intrinsically immoral—they target civilian populations and risk annihilating humanity
- "Just war" theory collapses in the face of modern weapons technology
- Christian obedience to state authority has limits—conscience must resist orders to commit mass murder
- The "deterrence" argument is a moral fiction; building arsenals to avoid using them is self-deception

Contemporary Relevance (2026):

What We See:

- Nuclear threats from Russia over Ukraine
- US-China tensions over Taiwan; North Korea's weapons program
- Israel's nuclear arsenal (unacknowledged but real)
- Renewed arms race: hypersonic missiles, AI-controlled weapons, cyber warfare
- Climate change is a "threat multiplier" leading to resource wars
- In your local community: military contractors, veterans' experiences, debates over defense spending

GS's Teaching (Often Ignored):

- "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities... is a crime against God and man himself" (GS 80)
- The arms race is "an utterly treacherous trap" and "an injury to the poor" (GS 81)
- Catholics must work for disarmament and peace, not just accept militarism

Discussion Questions:

SEE:

- How often does your parish pray for peace in specific conflicts? Which conflicts get mentioned, and which are ignored?
- Do you know anyone impacted by war—veterans, refugees, families in conflict zones?
- How does your local economy depend on military spending or arms manufacturing?
- What's the temperature in your community on US military involvement abroad?

JUDGE:

- Merton was censored for his writings on peace. Do we still silence prophetic voices in the Church today? Who and why?
- GS condemns indiscriminate warfare. How does this apply to drone strikes, siege warfare (Gaza, Yemen), or nuclear deterrence?
- Can Catholics in good conscience serve in the military, work for defense contractors, or pay taxes that fund wars? (Merton wrestled with this.)
- How does contemplative nonviolence (Merton's ideal) relate to just defense or protecting the vulnerable?

ACT:

- Learn about Pax Christi or Catholic Peacebuilding Network—consider joining
- Write to your representatives about one peace-related issue (arms sales, nuclear treaty, humanitarian aid)
- In your parish: Start a “Peace and Justice” committee if none exists, or reinvigorate one that's dormant
- Pray—not abstractly, but naming specific conflicts and leaders

SESSION 7: The Modern World—Technology, Loneliness, and the Search for Meaning

Theme: Being Human in an Inhuman Age

Readings:

- **Gaudium et Spes**, Chapters 2-3 ("The Community of Humankind" and "Human Activity Throughout the World")
- **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:** Observations on technology, urbanism, mass society, and alienation

- **Faith and Violence:** "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven" (urban crisis) and essays on technology

Merton on Technology and Mass Society:

From "Conjectures" and other writings, Merton develops a prophetic critique of what he calls "mass man"—the loss of individual personhood in technological, bureaucratic society. Key insights:

- **Technology as ideology:** We assume whatever *can* be done *should* be done, without asking *why* or *for whom*
- **The illusion of communication:** More media, less genuine communion (Merton would be horrified by social media)
- **Urban alienation:** Cities designed for efficiency, not human flourishing; people as interchangeable units
- **Consumerism as spiritual death:** Advertising creates false needs; we become what we consume

He writes: "The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence... It destroys the fruitfulness of [one's] own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

Contemporary Issues (Hitting Home for Your Group):

What We See in 2026:

- **AI and automation:** Job displacement, algorithmic decision-making, deepfakes eroding trust
- **Social media toxicity:** Polarization, mental health crisis (especially teens), addiction to outrage
- **Loneliness epidemic:** Despite "connectivity," people are more isolated—especially affecting your age group as families scatter
- **Environmental crisis:** Technology promising solutions while driving destruction; climate anxiety
- **Meaning crisis:** Young adults (your kids/grandkids?) leaving Church because it seems irrelevant to these real concerns

In Your Local Community:

- Dying main streets as Amazon dominates
- Nursing homes and elder isolation (deeply relevant for 50+ group)
- Screen addiction even in families who attend Mass together
- Loss of "third places"—where do people gather besides work and home?

GS's Vision: Chapter 3 teaches that human activity should serve genuine human development, not profit or efficiency alone. Technology and progress must be subordinate to human dignity and the common good.

Discussion Questions:

SEE:

- How has technology changed your relationships, prayer life, and sense of community?
- Where do you see loneliness or alienation—in your own life or those around you?
- What "progress" in your community has actually diminished human flourishing? (E.g., highway projects that divided neighborhoods, chain stores replacing local businesses)
- How do your grandchildren's lives differ from yours at their age, and what's been lost?

JUDGE:

- Merton critiques "mass society." Are we living as individuals with unique vocations, or as consumers following trends?
- GS calls for technology in service of humanity. Where do we see the reverse—humans serving technology?
- What elements of monastic spirituality (silence, discernment, community, simplicity) could help the Church live GS's call to be present in the modern world without being absorbed by it?
- How do contemplatives resist becoming "mass men and women"?

ACT:

- **Personal practice:** Fast from one technology (social media, news, streaming) for a week; journal what you notice
- **Communal:** Organize a "tech-free" parish gathering—a meal, game night, or prayer service without phones
- **Prophetic witness:** In your local community, support one "human-scale" initiative: farmers market, tool library, neighborhood association, local bookstore, face-to-face activism
- **Intergenerational:** Invite younger people (20s-30s) to a conversation about technology, loneliness, and faith—listen more than you speak

SESSION 8: Church Divided, World in Crisis—Where Do We Go From Here?

Theme: Integration and Commitment—Living as Contemplative Prophets

Readings:

- Review key passages from LG, GS, and both Merton books
- Each participant brings one quote or passage that most challenged or inspired them
- Optional: Recent Church document on synodality or contemporary issue

Synthesis and Action Planning:

This final session should be raw and real. Your group has sat with deep tensions: a Church divided, a world in crisis, and Merton's uncompromising call to contemplative engagement. Now what?

Guiding Questions for Integration:

1. The Divided Church:

- After these weeks of study, how do you hold together unity and diversity in the Church?

- Can you stay in a Church where some members hold political/theological views you find deeply wrong? Why or why not?
- What would Merton say to us about remaining faithful when the institutional Church disappoints?
- LG and GS imagine a Church in dialogue with the world—do you see that happening, or a Church in retreat?

2. The World's Pain:

- Which contemporary crisis weighs most heavily on you: war, racism, climate change, economic injustice, technology's dark side, other?
- Where do you feel complicit, as Merton's "guilty bystander"?
- How do you avoid despair when the problems feel overwhelming?
- What does "reading the signs of the times" require of you personally?

3. Contemplation and Action:

- How have you experienced the relationship between prayer and justice work in your own life?
- What spiritual practices sustain you for long-haul engagement (because this isn't getting easier)?
- How do you cultivate Merton's "contemplative gaze" in daily life—seeing the world clearly without becoming cynical?

4. Local Community and Parish:

- What's one concrete change your parish could make to better embody LG's "People of God" ecclesiology?
- What's one local issue (in your town/city) where your group could practice See-Judge-Act together?
- How might you form or join a "base community" for ongoing discernment and action?

See-Judge-Act for the Future:

SEE: Go around the circle:

- Name one hope you have for the Church
- Name one fear you have for the Church
- Name one place in your local community where you see Gospel possibility

JUDGE:

- Given everything we've read—LG's vision of communion, GS's call to engagement, Merton's prophetic contemplation—what is God asking of *this* group, in *this* place, at *this* time?
- What would faithfulness look like for you in the next year?

ACT:

- **Personal commitments:** Each person names one spiritual practice and one concrete action they'll take
- **Communal discernment:** Does this group continue meeting? For what purpose?

- Options: Continue studying (other Vatican II documents, more Merton, contemporary theology)
- Form a parish action group focused on one issue
- Start a contemplative prayer group
- Organize a public event (lecture, film series, dialogue) to share what you've learned
- **Prophetic witness:** Identify one specific local issue and commit to 3-6 months of See-Judge-Act engagement

Potential Local Issues to Consider (Based on Your Context):

- **Affordable housing:** Zoning, homelessness, gentrification
- **Racial justice:** School integration, policing, reparations conversations
- **Immigration:** Sanctuary policies, ESL programs, advocacy
- **Environment:** Local pollution, land use, creation care liturgies
- **Economic justice:** Living wage campaigns, worker co-ops, credit unions
- **Elder care:** Addressing isolation, assisted living costs, death with dignity
- **Veterans:** Supporting those with PTSD, questioning militarism while honoring service

Closing Ritual:

End with something contemplative and communal:

- Extended silence (10-15 minutes)—unusual in book clubs, very Merton
- Each person lights a candle and names one person or cause they'll carry forward
- Pray Compline together or another liturgy from the hours
- Read the Fourth and Walnut passage aloud one more time—letting Merton's vision of shared humanity bless your discernment

Additional Resources for our Group

Merton Biographies and Context:

- Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (definitive biography)
- Jim Forest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (accessible, warm)
- Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (if your group wants to go deeper on ecology)

Vatican II Context:

- John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (essential historical background)
- If your group doesn't know the Council's story, spend 20 minutes in Session 1 on this

Connecting Merton to Contemporary Issues:

- Daniel Horan, *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Franciscan voice, Merton-inflected)
- Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (urgent)
- For the divided Church: Look into synodality resources from recent Synod on Synodality

Contemplative Practice Resources:

- If your group wants to go deeper in prayer: Centering Prayer, Christian meditation, Ignatian Examen
- Consider a retreat day at a local monastery or retreat center mid-way through

Films/Documentaries:

- *Merton: A Film Biography* (good 90-minute overview)
- Any documentary on Vatican II
- For Session 6: *The Day After* or recent nuclear threat films

A Final Word on Tone and Approach

Given our group's experience with Merton and the reality of deep divisions (ecclesial and political), a few pastoral suggestions:

- 1. Hold Space for Disagreement:** Our group likely includes people across the political spectrum. Merton and Vatican II don't offer easy answers—they offer a *posture* of contemplative engagement. Don't force false consensus, but model listening and humility.
- 2. Avoid Despair, Resist Cynicism:** Merton could be bracingly critical, but he never gave up on the Church or the world. When discussion gets heavy (and it will), return to practices that ground and renew: silence, Scripture, humor.
- 3. Intergenerational Invitation:** Your group is 50+. Consider inviting a few younger adults (30s-40s) for Sessions 5-6. They're living with different pressures (student debt, climate anxiety, digital overload) and need Merton's wisdom—but they also have insights your generation needs.
- 4. From Study to Witness:** The goal isn't just to understand Merton and Vatican II, but to *embody* them. The "Act" steps are not nice things to consider—they're the whole point. Don't let this become an intellectual exercise disconnected from real people and real suffering.
- 5. The Long Haul:** You're all old enough to know: this work doesn't have quick victories. Merton's contemplative activism is about sustained presence, not heroic interventions. Whatever you commit to in Session 8, make it sustainable for the long term.

Detailed Reading Guide with Page Numbers

For "Faith and Violence" and "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander"

FAITH AND VIOLENCE (1968)

Note: Page numbers are from the University of Notre Dame Press edition (1968). If you're using a different edition, chapter titles will help you locate passages. Yeah that is the copy I have LOL

SESSION 1: Introduction to the Crisis

Pages to Read: 3-25

- **Introduction (pp. 3-7):** Merton's framing of the book's purpose
- **"Faith and Violence" (pp. 8-25):** The title essay
 - **Key passage (p. 12):** "The Christian is obligated... to find some way to overcome evil with good"
 - **Key passage (p. 20):** On "non-violent resistance" vs. passive acceptance

Discussion Focus: How does Merton define "faith" vs. "religious faith"? What's the difference, and why does it matter?

SESSION 5: Signs of the Times - Race and Violence

Pages to Read: 115-145

- **"The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven" (pp. 115-133)**
 - **Key passage (pp. 117-118):** On white complicity: "We have to face the fact that our innocence is a myth"
 - **Key passage (p. 125):** Analysis of why riots happen—not condoning, but understanding root causes
 - **Key passage (p. 131):** "The problem is not fundamentally racial but economic and social"
- **"From Non-Violence to Black Power" (pp. 134-145)**
 - **Key passage (p. 138):** On the failure of white Christianity to deliver justice
 - **Key passage (pp. 142-143):** Merton's wrestling with violence as response to oppression

Discussion Focus: How does Merton challenge white readers without excusing violence? What's his "third way"?

Contemporary Connection Questions:

- Where do you see the dynamics Merton describes in 1967 playing out today?
- How does your parish/community discuss racism? Is it honest conversation or polite avoidance?
- What does "white complicity" mean practically, not just theoretically?

SESSION 6: War, Peace, and Nuclear Weapons

Pages to Read: 26-82 (selections)

Part A: Vietnam and Conscience (pp. 26-50)

- **"Vietnam: An Overwhelming Atrocity" (pp. 26-37)**
 - **Key passage (p. 28):** "This is a war of self-determination—but not for Vietnam"
 - **Key passage (p. 35):** On language and propaganda—how euphemisms hide atrocity
- **"Ishi: A Meditation" (pp. 38-50) (*Optional but powerful*)**
 - Merton uses the story of the last Yahi Indian to reflect on genocide and "progress"
 - **Key passage (p. 45):** Parallels between Native American genocide and modern warfare

Part B: Nuclear Weapons and Just War (pp. 65-82)

- **"War and the Crisis of Language" (pp. 65-82)**
 - **Key passage (pp. 68-70):** How bureaucratic language masks murder ("body count," "collateral damage")
 - **Key passage (p. 75):** "We can no longer assume that... military policy serves a just cause"
 - **Key passage (p. 80):** On the collapse of just war theory in the nuclear age

Discussion Focus:

- Is just war theory still viable? Where's the line for you?
- How do we recognize propaganda in our own political discourse today?

Contemporary Connection Questions:

- What current conflicts divide your parish or community? (Ukraine, Gaza, others?)
- How do we evaluate US military actions—by intentions, consequences, or something else?
- What euphemisms do we use today to avoid naming violence? ("Enhanced interrogation," "border security," "police-involved shooting")

SESSION 7: Technology and Culture

Pages to Read: 83-114

- **"The Answer of Minerva: Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil" (pp. 83-114)**
 - Though focused on Simone Weil, Merton's commentary reveals his own thinking on technology and modern war

- **Key passage (p. 91):** On technology as ideology—we worship efficiency and power
- **Key passage (p. 104):** "The great temptation of modern man... is to cease to be human"

Alternative/Additional Reading from Faith and Violence:

- **"Blessed Are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence" (pp. 146-162)**
 - More directly pastoral/theological
 - **Key passage (p. 152):** Biblical foundations for nonviolence
 - **Key passage (p. 158):** "The meekness of Christ is not passive submission"

Discussion Focus: How does Christian nonviolence avoid being passive or naive? What's its power?

CONJECTURES OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER (1966)

Note: Page numbers from Image Books/Doubleday edition (most common paperback). Original hardcover pagination may differ.

Structure of the Book:

Merton organized "Conjectures" thematically, not chronologically, into five sections:

1. **Barth's Dream** (theology and ecumenism)
2. **The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air** (monastic life and prayer)
3. **The Lion and the Man** (Merton's core social/theological reflections)
4. **The Madman Runs to the East** (existentialism, literature, culture)
5. **Gelassenheit** (German term for "letting go"—contemplation and freedom)

For your purposes, focus on Sections 1 and 3 primarily, with selections from 5.

SESSION 1: Introduction - Who Am I? A Guilty Bystander

Pages to Read: 1-29, 81-86

From Section 1: "Barth's Dream" (pp. 1-29)

- **Pages 1-5:** Opening reflections on being a "guilty bystander"—Merton's self-description
 - **Key passage (p. 2):** "It is possible to doubt whether I have become anything"
- **Pages 11-17:** On the Church's relationship to the world—not above it, but in it
 - **Key passage (p. 13):** "The Church is not a citadel of the pure"
- **Pages 21-24:** The danger of religious nationalism
 - **Key passage (p. 23):** "One of the great temptations... is to identify the Kingdom of God with one's own nation"

From Section 2: "Fourth and Walnut" Experience (pp. 81-86)

- **Pages 81-82:** The setup—Merton rarely leaves the monastery, but has to go to Louisville for an appointment
- **Pages 83-84: THE MOMENT**—"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people"
 - **Key passage (p. 83):** "It was like waking from a dream of separateness"
 - **Key passage (p. 84):** "Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others"
- **Pages 85-86:** Theological reflection—we are already "shining like the sun" if we could see it

Discussion Focus:

- What does "guilty bystander" mean to you? Where are you a bystander?
- Fourth and Walnut: Have you had a moment of realizing your deep connection to "ordinary" humanity?

SESSION 2: Church as People of God vs. Institution

Pages to Read: 34-62 (selections)

From Section 1 (continued):

- **Pages 34-39:** On authority in the Church
 - **Key passage (p. 36):** "The Church is not identical with the hierarchy"
 - **Key passage (p. 38):** "Love, not power, is the mark of the Christian"
- **Pages 46-52:** Clericalism and renewal
 - **Key passage (p. 48):** "The peculiar sterility of the Church comes from the fact that she is so often venerated by those who have no intention of listening to her"
 - **Key passage (p. 51):** Critique of rigid obedience that stifles the Spirit
- **Pages 56-62:** Unity and dialogue
 - **Key passage (p. 58):** On ecumenism and recognizing truth in other traditions
 - **Key passage (p. 61):** "Unity is not uniformity"

Contemporary Connection Questions:

- Where do you see the Church functioning as "institution" vs. "communion"?
- How is authority exercised in your parish? With love or with power?

SESSION 3: Contemplation as Universal Call

Pages to Read: 87-136 (selections from Section 2: "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air")

This section is rich with Merton's reflections on prayer, solitude, and contemplative life.

Key Passages to Read:

- **Pages 87-92:** On solitude and community

- **Key passage (p. 89):** "We are not meant to resolve all contradictions but to live with them"
- **Pages 102-109:** Contemplation in the modern world
 - **Key passage (p. 105):** "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns... is to succumb to violence"
 - **Key passage (p. 107):** "The rush and pressure of modern life are a form... of its innate violence"
- **Pages 117-124:** Silence and presence
 - **Key passage (p. 119):** "Silence is not just absence of words"
 - **Key passage (p. 122):** On being present to the moment, not consumed by past/future
- **Pages 128-136:** Contemplation as seeing
 - **Key passage (p. 131):** "The contemplative... sees things as they are"
 - **Key passage (p. 135):** "The monk is not defined by his asceticism but by his contemplation"

Discussion Focus:

- How does Merton's understanding of contemplation challenge the idea that it's only for monks/nuns?
- What would contemplative living look like in your daily life?

SESSION 5: Reading the Signs of the Times

Pages to Read: 137-241 (selections from Section 3: "The Lion and the Man")

This is the heart of the book for social engagement.

Part A: Race and Justice (pp. 137-159)

- **Pages 137-145:** Reflections on racism in America
 - **Key passage (p. 140):** "The problem is that the white man has never really seen the Negro as a person"
 - **Key passage (p. 144):** On the failure of white moderates—echoes MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
- **Pages 150-159:** Urban crisis and alienation
 - **Key passage (p. 153):** "The city is not just buildings but relationships—and those relationships are broken"
 - **Key passage (p. 157):** On the spiritual poverty of affluent society

Part B: War and Violence (pp. 160-189)

- **Pages 160-167:** Cold War mentality
 - **Key passage (p. 162):** "We live in a time of... collective paranoia"
 - **Key passage (p. 165):** On propaganda and how it shapes perception
- **Pages 171-182:** Vietnam reflections
 - **Key passage (p. 174):** "This is not a war to defend freedom but to preserve American power"

- **Key passage (p. 179):** On the corruption of language in war
- **Pages 183-189:** Nuclear threat
 - **Key passage (p. 185):** "The bomb is not just a weapon; it's a symbol of our spiritual condition"
 - **Key passage (p. 188):** "We have put our trust in annihilation"

Part C: Technology and Mass Society (pp. 190-220)

- **Pages 190-199:** Mass man and individualism
 - **Key passage (p. 193):** "Mass society produces people without identity"
 - **Key passage (p. 196):** On consumerism as spiritual death
- **Pages 205-215:** Technology as ideology
 - **Key passage (p. 208):** "We assume that whatever can be done should be done"
 - **Key passage (p. 212):** On the illusion of communication in mass media
- **Pages 216-220:** The crisis of meaning
 - **Key passage (p. 218):** "Modern man is... without roots, without tradition, without purpose"

Discussion Focus:

- Which of these "signs of the times" resonates most with your experience of 2026?
- Where do you see Merton's critique of mass society confirmed or challenged today?

SESSION 7: Technology, Culture, and Being Human

Pages to Read: 221-268 (rest of Section 3 + selections from Section 4)

Continuing Section 3:

- **Pages 221-235:** Reflections on art, culture, and meaning
 - **Key passage (p. 224):** On the artist's role as truth-teller
 - **Key passage (p. 231):** "Culture is not entertainment; it's the formation of persons"
- **Pages 240-255:** On truth and propaganda
 - **Key passage (p. 244):** "In a society based on lies, truth becomes revolutionary"
 - **Key passage (p. 251):** On how we lose the ability to think critically

From Section 4: "The Madman Runs to the East" (pp. 269-310, selections):

- **Pages 269-278:** Existentialism and authenticity
 - **Key passage (p. 272):** "The question is not 'What should I do?' but 'Who am I?'"
- **Pages 290-305:** Literature as resistance
 - Merton reflects on Camus, Ionesco, and other writers who expose absurdity
 - **Key passage (p. 297):** "The writer's task is to make the invisible visible"

SESSION 8: Gelassenheit - Letting Go and Commitment

Pages to Read: 311-370 (Section 5: "Gelassenheit")

Gelassenheit is a German mystical term (from Meister Eckhart) meaning "letting go," "detachment," or "abandonment to God." For Merton, it's not passivity but active surrender.

Key Passages:

- **Pages 311-320:** Defining *Gelassenheit*
 - **Key passage (p. 314):** "To let go is not to cease to care but to care in a different way"
 - **Key passage (p. 318):** "Detachment is the root of true engagement"
- **Pages 325-338:** Freedom and obedience
 - **Key passage (p. 329):** "True obedience is listening, not just following orders"
 - **Key passage (p. 334):** On institutional authority vs. the authority of truth
- **Pages 345-358:** Contemplation and action reunited
 - **Key passage (p. 349):** "The contemplative is not less engaged but more truly present"
 - **Key passage (p. 354):** "Action without contemplation is violence; contemplation without action is escape"
- **Pages 359-370:** Final reflections—hope without illusion
 - **Key passage (p. 363):** "I do not have clear answers... I have a direction"
 - **Key passage (p. 368):** "The hope of the Christian is not optimism but trust in God's presence in darkness"
 - **Key passage (p. 370, final lines):** "Life is this simple: we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time"

Discussion Focus:

- How do you practice "letting go" without becoming indifferent?
- What's your "direction" (even if you don't have all answers) after these weeks of study?
- Where will contemplation and action meet in your life going forward?