

# Waking Up to What Is:

## Thomas Merton, the See–Judge–Act Method, and the Spiritual Work Still Left to Do

### A Keynote Address for “Seniors on the Go”

Most of us have reached a point in life where we have learned, often the hard way, that being busy is not the same as being present, and that knowing the right answers is not the same as living them. Thomas Merton knew that tension intimately. He spent the first half of his life running toward God and the second half discovering that God had been waiting for him in the very world he was trying to leave behind.

Today I want to offer a framework—ancient in its roots and urgently relevant—that Merton modeled for us: the See–Judge–Act method, developed by Joseph Cardijn and widely used in Christian Social teaching. My suggestion is simple: *this is not a technique but a spiritual discipline for a culture that moves faster than our souls can keep up with. Before we turn to Merton, let me say a word about who he was.*

### Some Background: Who Was Thomas Merton?

*(On the screen is a baby picture of Merton. Let me explain)*

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was a Trappist monk, poet, social critic, and one of the twentieth century’s most widely read Catholic writers. He entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, seeking, as he wrote, to escape “the world.” Yet over the next three decades, his contemplative life did not seal him off from the world—it drove him deeper into it.

Now look at the photo on the screen from Louisville. The turning point came on an ordinary afternoon in 1958. Merton was standing on a street corner in Louisville, Kentucky—the intersection of Fourth Street and Walnut (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard)—when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of love for the crowds of strangers passing by. He wrote:

*"I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... It was as if the sorrow of their condition somehow entered me, and I saw it was great—but this sorrow was not a grief without hope."*

That experience—known as the Fourth and Walnut vision—did not pull Merton out of his monastery. It transformed the purpose of his monastery. From that point on, his contemplation and his concern for justice, peace, racial equality, and the dignity of every human being were

inseparable. He wrote with fierce clarity about racism, the nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, and what he called “the massive sickness of a society drunk on its own power.”

He died in 1968 in Bangkok at a conference on East-West monastic dialogue—a reminder that his reach extended well beyond any single tradition. He remains one of the most compelling guides we have for navigating a world that is both broken and irreducibly sacred.

## The See–Judge–Act Method

See–Judge–Act was developed in the 1930s by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn as a pastoral tool for Young Christian Workers. That became known as YCW, and students called it YCS. It poses three deceptively simple questions: *What is actually happening? What does our faith say about it? What are we going to do? (Let me explain a tad here)*

Merton never used that exact phrase, but his entire body of work embodies it. Reading him alongside this method gives both the framework and the soul. To see how, let us walk through each step.

### Step One: SEE

The first step sounds easy, but it is not.

To truly see means more than reading the news. It means paying honest, sustained attention to lived reality—including your own inner life. Merton's early spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, depicts a young man fleeing a world he found shallow and corrupt. Over the years, he came to understand that he was really fleeing himself—his divisions, his projections, his unnamed fears. Think of how often we do the same?

He called the part of us that constructs a false identity—built on achievement, reputation, and self-protection—the “false self.” The false self does not see clearly because it is too busy defending itself. Merton believed that genuine contemplation begins when we stop performing and start noticing.

### A Mertonian “See” asks us to sit with these questions:

- \* *What is actually happening in this situation—concretely, not just abstractly?*
- \* *Who is being dehumanized, silenced, or rendered invisible?*
- \* *What am I projecting onto others that may really belong to me?*
- \* *Where is God already present and active in this reality?*

For those of us senior citizens, supposedly mature adults, and some beyond, just saying :) This step can feel uncomfortable. We have lived long enough to build up comfortable certainties. We think we know what we are looking at. Merton would gently insist that the certainty itself may be the problem.

### Step Two: JUDGE

The word “judge” can put people off, but Cardijn did not use it in a critical or condemnatory sense. He meant discernment—the careful, faith-formed weighing that asks: In light of the Gospel, what is this situation really about?

Merton judged social reality through several consistent lenses: the dignity of every human person, the destructive power of illusion and self-deception, the scandal of violence and racism, and, above all, the unity of all people in God.

This is where Merton's theology of the true self becomes central. He believed that beneath every person's constructed identity—the roles we play, the titles we hold, the wounds we carry—there is a deeper self, made in the image of God and never entirely lost. When we see each other from that depth, Merton argued, neither tribalism nor dehumanization can survive.

He was equally clear that structures can be sinful. (*Let me clarify that word for a moment.*) For Merton, racism, war-making, and spiritual numbness were not merely personal failures. They were failures of Christian vision—a refusal to see what God sees. His 1963 essay “Letters to a White Liberal,” written during the height of the civil rights movement, challenged comfortable Christians to stop congratulating themselves on good intentions and to start reckoning with the cost of complicity.

### **For our own discernment, this step asks:**

- \* What does the Gospel reveal about this situation that we might prefer not to see?
- \* Where is the false self—in our communities or in us—distorting our response?
- \* What does Merton's insistence on compassion and non-separateness call us to acknowledge?
- \* Are we responding from our deepest values or from fear, habit, and tribalism?

### **Step Three: ACT**

Action is where the rubber meets the road—(*something of a phrase my father would say, and I would just look at him like, What??*)—and where many of us either rush ahead of ourselves or freeze entirely.

Merton's activism looked different from what we typically picture. He rarely marched. He wrote letters. He maintained a voluminous correspondence with leaders across the spectrum—Dorothy Day, Coretta Scott King, Boris Pasternak, the Dalai Lama, Daniel Berrigan, and hundreds of others. He wrote essays and poems that reached across continents. **He prayed.** And he insisted that action arising from a distracted, unreflective spirit would ultimately do more harm than good.

*"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence," he wrote, "and that is activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence."*

That is a sobering word for people who have spent decades doing. The invitation here is not passivity—**it is integration**. Action rooted in **contemplation**. (*Let me explain what contemplation is not*) So what might that look like in practice?

On the screen, you see these:

### **For those of us gathered here today, action can take many forms:**

- \* Writing a reflection, a letter, or a statement that is more truthful and more humane than the noise around us
- \* Engaging in a local effort focused on peace, racial reconciliation, care for immigrants, or environmental stewardship

- \* Revising how we speak—in our homes, our parishes, and our public lives—so that our words build rather than wound
- \* Choosing deliberate practices of nonviolence: in our media habits, our conversations, and our interior life
- \* Simply slowing down long enough to be present to the person in front of us.

## A Pattern Worth Keeping

Across every topic—polarization, immigration, racism, artificial intelligence, the environmental crisis, the loneliness epidemic—the See–Judge–Act method, as read through Merton, offers the same three movements:

1. What is the reality before me—not as I wish it were, but as it actually is?
2. What false self, illusion, or spiritual blindness is shaping how I see it?
3. What action would express compassion, truth, and solidarity—even at some cost to my comfort?

**This is not a checklist.** It is the core posture of this talk—a way of moving through the world that Merton believed was inseparable from holiness. The true self, he wrote, is found not in isolation but in a deeper union with God and others.

***Holiness becomes visible not in retreat from the world but in how we stand, walk, write, speak, and respond to each other.***

On the Screen ...

## Questions to Carry Home

As you leave today, I invite you to sit with these questions—not to answer them quickly, but to let them work on you.

1. Where in your own life have you been looking at the world through the lens of the false self—protecting your image, avoiding discomfort, seeing what you wanted to see rather than what is actually there?
2. Merton discovered at Fourth and Walnut that he could not be alien to any other human being. Is there a person or a group from whom you have allowed yourself to feel permanently separate—and what would it cost you to close that distance?
3. If your faith genuinely shaped the way you see current events—polarization, the treatment of immigrants, racial inequality, the pace of technological change—what would you be compelled to say or do that you have not yet said or done?
4. Merton warned that overwork and frenetic activism are themselves forms of violence. Where do you need to slow down—not to escape responsibility, but to act from a deeper and truer place?
5. What is one concrete act—specific, achievable, and rooted in your faith—that you could take in the next seven days? Not a resolution. An act.

"The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little." ~ Thomas Merton

Thank you for being here and for inviting me to share some of Merton with you. Hopefully you can begin applying it to your life. The work of seeing clearly, judging faithfully, and acting with compassion is never finished—but there is no better time to begin than today.