



*session one*

## BECOMING INSTRUMENTS OF RECONCILIATION

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### OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 16:3–6

He has put into my heart a marvelous love  
for the faithful ones who dwell in his land.  
Those who choose other gods increase their  
sorrows.

Never will I offer their offerings of blood.  
Never will I take their name upon my lips.

O Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup;  
it is you yourself who are my prize.  
The lot marked out for me is my delight:  
welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me!

### INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

In the ceremony that marked Merton's reception as a novice at Gethsemani, when he exchanged his street clothes for a white robe in the presence of the monastic community, his Abbot, Frederic Dunne asked him a ritual question in Latin: "*Quid petis?*" [What are you seeking?] Merton responded with the novice's ritual answer: "The mercy of God and of this Order." The novice did not ask for perfection in virtues, mystical experiences, or peace of mind. He asked instead for God's compassion and loving kindness that would be mediated to him every day by his community's continued acceptance of him just as he was. Being thus

received into his community's "school of charity," as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux called it, Merton experienced his community's first formal lesson in the long course of becoming an instrument of mercy for his community and for the world.

Francis of Assisi prayed to be an instrument of God's peace. Where there was hatred, he sought to sow love. In valleys of sadness, he prayed to sow joy. In gardens of despair, he sought to seed hope. The love and compassion that saves the world begins as a seed that grows to a rich harvest by ongoing decisions to serve others. Our decision to live contemplatively only comes to harvest through fertilizing deeds. Perhaps we should fast and go hungry from words like "compassion" for it is only *deeds* of compassion that matter, only *acts* of forgiving and accepting one another that makes community a reality. Deeds of merciful reconciliation plant peace in our world.

## MERTON'S VOICE

FROM *HONORABLE READER*

It is true, political problems are not solved by love and mercy. But the world of politics is not the only world, and unless political decisions rest on a foundation of something better and higher than politics, they can never do any real good for me. When a country has to be rebuilt after war, the passions and energies of war are no longer enough. There must be a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, as the creative dynamism of the will to live and to build, and the will to forgive. The will for reconciliation.

The principles given in this book are simple and more or less traditional. They are the principles derived from religious wisdom, which, in the present case, is Christian. But many of these principles run parallel to the ancient teachings of Buddhism. They are in fact in large part universal truths. They are truths upon which, for centuries, man has slowly and with difficulty built a civilized world in the effort to make happiness possible, not merely by making life materially better, but by helping men to understand and live their lives more fruitfully.

The key to this understanding is the truth that "No man is an island." A selfish life cannot be fruitful. It cannot be true. It contradicts the very nature of man. The dire effect of this contradiction cannot be avoided; where men live selfishly, in quest of brute power and lust and money, they destroy one another. The only way to change such a world is to change the thoughts and desires of the men who live in it. The conditions of our world are simply an outward expression of our thoughts and desires. . . .

We must all believe in love and in peace. We must believe in the power of love. We must recognize that our being itself is grounded in love; that is to say, that we come into being because we are loved and because we are meant to love others. The failure to believe this and to live accordingly creates instead a deep mistrust, a suspicion of others, a hatred of others, a failure to love. When a man attempts to live by and for himself alone, he becomes a little "island" of hate, greed, suspicion, fear, desire. Then his whole outlook on life is falsified. All his judgments are affected by that untruth. In order to recover

the true perspective, which is that of love and compassion, he must once again learn, in simplicity, truth, and peace, that "No man is an island." (pp. 125–126)

## ANOTHER VOICE

DOROTHY DAY, *ON PILGRIMAGE*

Whenever I groan within myself and think how hard it is to keep writing about love in these times of tension and strife, which may at any moment become for us all a time of terror, I think to myself, "What else is the world interested in?" What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved, in our families, in our work, in all our relationships? God is Love. Love casts out fear. Even the most ardent revolutionist, seeking to change the world, to overturn the tables of the moneychangers, is trying to make a world where it is easier for people to love, to stand in that relationship to each other. We want with all our hearts to love, to be loved. And not just in the family but to look upon all as our mothers, sisters, brothers, children. It is when we love the most intensely and most humanly that we can recognize how tepid is our love for others. . . .

When you love people, you see all the good in them, all the Christ in them. God sees Christ, His Son, in us and loves us. And so we should see Christ in others, and nothing else, and love them. There can never be enough of it. There can never be enough thinking about it. St. John of the Cross said that where there was no love, put love and you would take out love. . . .

It is an easy thing to talk about love, but it is something to be proven, to be suffered, to be learned. (pp. 123–125)

## REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

What images, words, or sentences in the readings most resonate with your life's experiences? In what ways do they connect with your life?

What have you learned about the kind of love that sustains peaceful relationships?

What is your personal prescription for healing divisions among us? Are you taking it yourself?

For what are you really hoping when you pray for peace?

## CLOSING

Conclude with one of the meditations on pages 55–56 or with a period of quiet reflection.