

Word and Life: Confronting Racism Series

Unbinding Ourselves through The Dual Action of Contemplation and Activism

By Maura Conlon-McIvor / Special to VOICE

THIS WEEKEND MARKED THE 56TH ANNIVERSARY OF BLOODY SUNDAY when 600 peaceful protestors marching for civil rights, including the late Congressman John Lewis, were brutally attacked by Alabama state troopers. According to Leslye Colvin, writer, contemplative activist, and social commentator, Lewis—anticipating the violence and his potential arrest—included in his backpack a book by the monk, Thomas Merton, whose work he had studied in his Non-Violence training.



Leslye Colvin

Presenting at Word & Life's "Confronting Racism" series, Colvin explored the connection between contemplatives and activists whose focus is woven of the same fabric. Merton, a Trappist monk, mystic, and author affiliated with the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky – and known for his more than 50 books including *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Seven Storey Mountain* – was, as Colvin said, also a leading voice advocating for racial equality.

Colvin, whose essays and social commentary are widely published, asserted: "Throughout our nation's history, there have been men and women who have contributed to the unmasking of racism and white body supremacy in each generation. Pope Francis recognized four of them when he addressed the United States Congress....Dorothy Day,

Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Merton.” These individuals were commemorated, she added, “because of the common thread of human dignity for those systemically relegated to the margins.”

John Lewis, upon hearing the pope’s 2015 address, she noted, “cried within to hear his words” as the pontiff recalled Bloody Sunday – where Lewis had been violently beaten – and urging elected representatives “to preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the social good.”

Colvin was born and lives in Alabama, “known before as the land of the Muskogee,” she said. She is the daughter of “Thomas and Alma, the granddaughter of Lessie and Quincy and Flora and Thomas.” Recalling her sojourn into the connection between contemplation and action, she cited a conference attended several years ago at Bellarmine University where in the Merton archives, she discovered his writings reflecting struggles around faith and action. She also uncovered his friendship with John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me*, a book Colvin had read in her youth. “Because of that friendship, I felt a connection to Merton,” she said, noting how he “challenged the certitudes of his times.” She also discerned that, within the mainstream narrative, his work on racial and social justice and nonviolence is less known... systemically muted.”

Colvin recalled the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, AL, in 1963, how “four girls in Black bodies—Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair were murdered” when the KKK detonated a bomb at their place of worship. Merton, struck by the tragedy, corresponded with one of the fathers, Chris McNair, who was a milkman and photographer, writing: “I saw the pictures of...Carole Denise in *Look Magazine*... one of [the photos] meant so much...it...said so much, principally about...the way in which the goodness of the human heart is invincible and overcomes the wickedness and evil that sometimes may be present in other men.”

A novice Merton researcher, Colvin cited how his “contemplative practices let him...unbind himself” from

normative beliefs of the supremacy of white bodies within Christianity, how he formed connections with journalist Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, and how a mutual friend facilitated the scheduling of a retreat for Martin Luther King, Jr. with Merton at Gethsemani. It was pre-empted by King's decision to travel to Memphis in support of striking sanitation workers where he was assassinated in 1968. A graduate of The Living School for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, Colvin cited the work of another contemplative activist, Franciscan author Richard Rohr, who founded the center after witnessing the burnout of activists. She cited Rohr's beliefs that "the concept of action as well as the concept of contemplation are parts of a whole – when they nurture each other – they foster the emergence of a non-dual, third path, contemplative activism."

Born before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Right Acts of 1965, both tied to the tragic events of injustices detailed here, Colvin believes that contemplation and action go hand in hand. "My contemplative practice...informs my conscience...to empower me to question injustice, to compel me to act, and to restore my soul on difficult days," she said.

Colvin addressed what gets "whitewashed" out of memory, such as Merton's advocacy for racial justice or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work on economic equality. "All of this is easy to ignore," she said, "except for those who are in the midst of it." The challenge is upon us to see how we remain "bound to practices and ways of knowing that privilege some at the expense of others...while unbinding ourselves to participate in the liberation of our brothers and sisters."

Word and Life series on Confronting Racism continues through March 18th. Archived presentations can be found at www.wordandlife.us.