The ecological conscience is also essentially a peacemaking conscience.”¹ These are the words of the 20th Century American Trappist monk Thomas Merton, from a book review he wrote just months before his death in December 1968. While Merton is well known for his spiritual writings on a variety of topics, including peace and nonviolence, he never published a major work on ecology. However, recent scholarship has highlighted his evolving ecological consciousness, sprinkled throughout his writings, in particular towards the end of his life.

Like Merton, my own religious community, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace (CSJP), has recognized the connection between the ecological and peacemaking conscience. We recognize that “[w]e live in a society marked strongly by the violence of war, violence to people through poverty and a sense of powerlessness and alienation, violence to earth, sea and sky—violence that is truly cosmic.”² At our 21st General Chapter in 2008, we adopted two Chapter acts, both under the theme of “Seeds of Peace,” that continue to guide our efforts to develop this ecological and peacemaking conscience. The first Seed of Peace Chapter Act is a commitment to growing in nonviolence. The second is a commitment to care for creation and respond to the crisis of climate change. Our Seeds of Peace commitments call us to deepen our CSJP spirituality of peace regarding care of creation.

This paper will consult Merton’s own writing and recent scholarly research to survey and explore the evolution of his ecological conscience and spirituality, particularly in the last six years of his life after his encounter with Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring.³ His ecological spirituality will be discussed in dialogue with his spirituality of peace in the context of the moral and spiritual crisis of the nuclear age. The present ecological crisis and my own religious congregation will also serve as conversation partners to consider how the writings of this 20th Century contemplative might be a resource for 21st Century Christians seeking to integrate spirituality with ecological concerns in the midst of our own moral and spiritual crisis and the urgency of human-induced global climate change.

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Merton’s Ecological Writings

From his monastery in rural Kentucky, Thomas Merton casted his contemplative eyes on issues of great importance in the Church and society. He was a prolific and oft-read writer, sharing his insights on a wide variety of topics from monasticism to existentialism, from systemic injustice to nuclear weapons. While he had a decided appreciation for nature and interest in the relationship of the human community with the natural world, Ken Buttigan notes that Merton did not outline a fully developed “theology of nature.”

In the years since Buttigan made that observation in 1984, however, scholars have given increased attention to Merton’s evolving ecological consciousness as it is expressed in his body of work. Kathleen Deignan observes that a “pentimento pattern of ecological consciousness becomes evident throughout his corpus as its complexity and unity become more transparent with time.” The image of the “pentimento”—the reappearance of an original painting or drawing later painted over by an artist—aptly describes recent research by scholars, such as those engaged in this paper, who take a closer look at Merton’s letters, journals, essays and other writings to find the threads of his ecological awareness which he was beginning to weave into an ecological spirituality in the last years of his life. In the light of our own increasing ecological awareness, the threads can become more visible and noticeable with time.

Merton’s ecological conscience and spirituality are best expressed in his own words in “The Wild Places,” a book review of Wilderness and the American Mind by Roderick Nash. Merton’s review of this book was published during the summer of 1968, just before his untimely death, in both Center Magazine and The Catholic Worker. Patrick O’Connell notes, in his introduction to a recent republication of Merton’s book review in the Merton Annual, that it is the “most extensive presentation of Merton’s developing ecological awareness” which is otherwise found for the most part in his journals and correspondence.

While “The Wild Places” provides a compact snapshot of Merton’s ecological spirituality, one can also discern in his other writings the development of themes such as reverence for creation, concern about the impact of technology and human activity, and connections between ecology and peacemaking. Towards the end of his life, Merton explored these themes in his journals and poems, in letters to public figures, and in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, finally consolidating his initial thoughts in “The Wild Places.” These works will be surveyed and considered below in order to discern the “pentimento pattern” that emerges of his evolving ecological conscience at the time of his death.

Musings of a “Contemplative Ecologist”

Deignan describes Merton as a “contemplative ecologist,” noting that he inherited his tendency to contemplate nature as the son of a landscape painter. His father imparted on him an “intense and disciplined … training in natural contemplation” which would become central to his later spiritual life. This was further developed through his exploration of Franciscan spirituality and eventual decision to embrace Cistercian spirituality as a Trappist monk. In the introduction to a collection of Merton’s writings on nature, Deignan remarks that while his “Franciscan soul” only experienced true peace and joy in the solitude of nature, his “Cistercian heart” led him into the paradox of silence which resulted in a “profound dialogue with the world and creation.”

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6 Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. “pentimento.”
Merton clearly experienced the presence of God in the natural world, as evidenced by this excerpt from a June 1952 journal entry: “The Lord God is present where the new day shines in the moisture on the young grasses. The Lord God is present where the small wildflowers are known to Him alone. The Lord God passes suddenly, in the wind, at the moment when night ebbs into the ground.”

One cannot read Merton’s journals or poetry without noticing how deeply he experienced the natural world as sacred. Indeed, Deborah Kehoe notes that “his journals are an ongoing record of reverence for the creatures with which he shared his home in the hills and fields of rural Kentucky,” while his poetry reflects “growing awareness of the intricate web of life.” His journals alone include 1,800 references to nature.

Merton’s contemplation of nature became an integral part of his spirituality, so much so that he sought special permissions to be able to spend more time outside the monastery in the surrounding forest and hills. In 1951, his request for greater solitude resulted in his unofficial appointment as “monastery forester,” making him responsible for restoring forests that had been cleared by earlier monks. Less than a decade later he received permission to spend time alone in a hermitage built on the monastery property on a knob named Mount Olivet. Deignan remarks that it was here that his “Cistercian heart found a wider community inviting him to the daily office of praise.” Or, in Merton’s own words describing a 1961 summer day:

Dawn at the hermitage. ... Once again—the office is entirely different in its proper (natural) setting out from under the fluorescent lights. There Lauds is torpor and vacuum. Here it is in harmony with all the singing birds under the bright sky. Everything you have on your lips in praising God is there before you—hills, dew, light, birds, growing things...

Such passages abound in his journals, giving voice to his obvious reverence for and delight in God’s creation. Readers “hear the voice of the creation mystic,” attentive to the beauty at our doorstep and the very creatures who are our neighbors. “I know the birds in fact very well, for there are exactly fifteen pairs of birds living in the immediate area of my cabin and I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance.”

Encounter with Rachel Carson

Merton’s December 11, 1962 journal entry begins with a typical attentive note about his surroundings. “Very cold. Some snow. Bright, silent afternoon.” His next words, however, are like a splash of cold water to the reader, interrupting his reverent contemplative stance with serious concern about his ecological balance with his creaturely neighbors.

I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Carson, on what is happening to the birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons... Some will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about both birds and people. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together.

10 I have chosen not to replace Merton’s own exclusive male language used for descriptions of God with inclusive language in this paper. However, in subsequent quotations I will replace exclusive male language referring to human persons with more inclusive language.
15 Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 140.
He ends the entry by saying that he must get a copy of the book because it is about a “very significant” truth that he wants to know more about.

The book in question is *Silent Spring*, published by the biologist Rachel Carson in June 1962. *Silent Spring* is credited by many with “igniting” the environmental movement.¹⁹ Using the particular lens of the impact of pesticides on songbirds, Carson asked deeper questions about the impact of humanity’s technological power on our natural environment. She pointed to the “disturbing magnitude” of our power to contaminate air, ground, and water, power which was growing with alarming speed. She noted that such pollution is “for the most part irrecoverable,” with chemicals forming part of a “chain of evil” in humanity’s “war against nature.”²⁰

Monica Weis believes that his encounter with *Silent Spring* was a “watershed” and “transformative” moment for Merton. She claims it is “akin to his Fourth and Walnut experience” when he realized that he could not hide from the world in the monastery because he was intimately connected to the people he saw on the sidewalks of Louisville “shining like the sun.”²¹ It certainly seems that he was himself ignited, first by the notice of the book, and then by obtaining and reading *Silent Spring* within the course of one month.

Even before reading the book, Merton voices key themes in his December 11 journal entry that were prompted merely by its notice in relation to his own experience.²² He sees an intimate relationship between the human community and the natural world. He raises concerns about threats posed to God’s creation by our destructive behavior. Perhaps most interestingly, he names this as part of a spiritual and moral crisis, a sickness.

After reading *Silent Spring*, Merton develops these themes further in his January 12, 1963 letter to Carson. He notes that this sickness is part of a consistent and pervasive pattern running through “every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life.” While unable to name the exact source of this illness, he suspects that it is perhaps a “very dreadful hatred of life” itself, connected to our affluent society. Writing from a religious perspective to this secular biologist, he suggests that humanity has lost “sight” of the wonder of God’s creation. Blinded by “gaining power and technical know-how,” we have lost our “wisdom and ... cosmic perspective.” Here is the spiritual crisis—humanity is losing sight of its relationship to God and creation—intimately connected to the moral crisis—we “destroy that on which our survival depends.”²³

In light of the two themes of this paper, an ecological and peacemaking conscience, it is especially interesting to note his lengthy comparison of the use of pesticides to kill the Japanese beetle with the use of nuclear weapons to kill our human enemies. He hopes that people who can influence public opinion, as well as lawmakers, will read her book, and he wishes that they are “able to see the connection between what [Carson says] and the vastly more important problem of nuclear war: the relationship is so terribly close.” Merton notes that we will use our technical power to “exterminate” the beetle—and one can read in the subtext, our human enemies—“even if it means danger to our children and to our very selves.”

Donald St. John notes that Merton’s letter anticipates “radical ecology.” Like Merton, radical ecologists see the ecological crisis as “deeply rooted (radix) in modernity itself.” In noting the consistent pattern “running through everything we do,” Merton was making connections between our social and political experience and the environment in which we live. While noting that a deeper analysis remains to be done in future research, St. John

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²² In his letter to Rachel Carson, Merton laments his “own follies” with the pesticide DDT which he has “now totally renounced.” A photo copy of the letter can be found in: Weis, *Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 14–15.

marks upon the “explicit and implicit” connections between Merton’s other writings on social injustice, politics and economics and his early ecological thoughts expressed in this letter to Carson.24

Silent Spring stayed in the consciousness, and conscience, of Merton. On Holy Thursday in April 1963, he noted in his journal that he had accidentally killed “a beautiful whistling” titmouse through his use of calcium chloride. He had intended to encourage some ants to move away from under the house, but the songbird had eaten the poison instead. “What a miserable bunch of idiots we are! We kill everything around us even when we think we love and respect nature and life.” He again laments the “sudden power to deal death all around us simply by the way we live,” calling it the “most disturbing symptom of our time.”25 Note the date of this observation—Holy Thursday. On the day that the Church remembers the Last Supper and the act of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples—an act of intimate relationship and connection—Merton repents of his own harmful actions in relationship to God’s creation and creatures.

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander

St. John sees a clear development from the 1963 letter to Carson to Merton’s 1965 book Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, in which he expands on some of the issues he identified in his earlier letter. While the format of the book as a “quasi-journal” does not lend itself to a clear treatise on the environmental movement—which St. John notes was in any case in its infancy in 1965—Merton does offer “insights into the causes underlying humanity’s alienation from nature and itself.”26

Merton notes in the introduction to Conjectures that he offers a “personal version of the world in the 1960s.”27 From his perspective in the monastery, he is a bystander of the “greatest revolution in history,” which he sees as an “upheaval of the human race ... a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions” of the human person. This “profound spiritual crisis”—there are those words again—is manifested in a variety of ways, including violence and conflict, creation and destructiveness, and progress and regression. At the root of this sickness, Merton sees “the sickness of disordered love” of self that is at the same time destructive self-hatred. He asserts that this 20th Century sickness is the “other side of the coin” of the 19th Century’s belief in unending progress and the inherent goodness of the appetites of humanity.28

The nuts and bolts of this sickness are manifested in the relationship between the human person and technology. While technology was made for the human person, not the other way around, our “idolatry of production and consumption” causes us to lose sight of this rightly ordered relationship. In the process, we also lose touch with God as creator of all. “This moral and spiritual disease” manifests itself in daily life.29

Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off “one to his farm and another to his merchandise.” Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. “Wisdom,” cries the dawn deacon, but we do not understand.30

25 Merton, Turning Toward the World, 312.
28 Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 54-55.
30 Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 118.
Given the style and tone of these passages in *Conjectures*, St. John himself conjectures that Merton intended to “evoke in the reader an emphatic response to a spirituality or vision rooted more deeply both in nature and our own humanity.”\footnote{St. John, “Technological Culture and Contemplative Ecology,” 170.}

**Ecological Consciousness: Letters to Barbara Hubbard**

Two days before Christmas in 1967, Merton corresponded with another woman concerned with technology and ecology—Barbara Hubbard, then a budding futurist and director of the Center for American Living in New York. Merton’s letter is in response to one from Hubbard, in which she asked two questions that she had been asking leaders in various formats since the use of the atomic bomb by the U.S. military in Hiroshima.\footnote{Hubbard famously asked similar questions of President Eisenhower in 1952 when she was a recent college graduate. Barbara Marx Hubbard, “The Unfolding Story of My Discovery of Conscious Evolution and Evolutionary Spirituality, in *Evolutionary Life: Voices of the Emerging Movement of Conscious Evolution*, http://www.co-intelligence.org/newsletter/BarbMarxHubbardStory.html, December 2006.}

“What do we know about the relationship between [humanity] and the process of organic and cultural evolution that can guide us forward now? And ‘What is really New now?’”\footnote{Weis, 150.}

Merton responds to Hubbard that humanity is certainly at a “crucial threshold” of existence. Our knowledge and power means that we can now determine our own future without knowing all of the implications. He notes that finding ourselves in this position, we must not be naïve. What is “excitingly new should not blind us to the other fact that [humanity] is still acting in the same wrong ways” as before. Merton sees the need for “life-affirming and loving” decisions, remarking that such decisions are unlikely to “emerge from a thought system that is largely programmed by … destructiveness, greed, etc.” We must recognize that “we are still problems to ourselves.” Again writing from a religious perspective to a secular thinker, Merton remarks on the need for “radical self-criticism,” openness and a “profound ability to trust” in the power of life over death.\footnote{Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 72-73.}

Merton and Hubbard continued their correspondence, with Hubbard asking his opinion of the space age. In a letter to Hubbard dated February 16, 1968, Merton explicitly names an “ecological consciousness” and the ethical implications of our technological age:

> The ecological consciousness says: look out! In preparing for this great event you run the risk of forgetting something. We are not alone in this thing. We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them. If we are to enter into a new era, well and good, but let’s bring the rest of the living along with us. In other words, we must not try to prepare the millennium by immolating our living earth, by careless and stupid exploitation for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreparable loss in living species and natural resources.\footnote{Weis, 150.}

Weis notes that it is clear that Merton had “been thinking through these issues and particularly the concept of an ecological conscience for several months.”\footnote{36 Weis, 150.}

**Ecological Conscience in “The Wild Places”**

Merton had in fact been reading and reflecting on *Wilderness and the American Mind* by Roderick Nash. While “The Wild Places,” his review of Nash’s book, was not published until later that summer, his February 25th journal entry includes the following note: “Yesterday I wrote a short piece on Wilderness (the Nash book) in the

33 Weis, 150.  
36 Weis, 150.}
afternoon. Importance of the ‘ecological conscience.’ (Same war as above!!)” Weis references earlier journal entries to note that the war in question was both the armed conflict in Vietnam and the “Imperialist policies” through which the U.S. was “raging an undeclared war against more than a billion people.” 37

Using the format of a book review “as an opportunity to discuss his current interests and beliefs,” 38 Merton does not stick strictly to a critique of Nash’s narrative of the historical American relationship to the wilderness, but instead issues a broad critique of the “stupendous ecological damage” wrought by human activity in the previous half century. 39 It is interesting to note, along with Diegnan, that this essay is Merton’s “last published statement on the challenges facing society.” In it, he “synthesizes” his own developing awareness and offers a “prophetic challenge to his American readers to heal our twisted thinking regarding nature.” 40

Merton laments our tendency to “proclaim our love and respect” for nature while at the same time confessing a “firm attachment to the values which inexorably demand” its destruction. Likewise, he critiques the “secularized Christian myth” of our struggle against nature, our supposed call to overcome and dominate the natural world. 41 He connects this myth with the “mystique of exploitation and power … that now exists in the American mind.” Our ecological balance is “turned completely inside out” in an “almost infinite number” of ways—from atomic waste to the destruction of forests to the police officer who shoots “every black man who gives him a dirty look.” 42

In place of this myth, Merton proposes the development of an “ecological conscience,” borrowing the term from Aldo Leopold. The ecological conscience is “one of the most important moral discoveries of our time.” We must be centered in an awareness of our “true place as a dependent member of the biotic community.” We must recognize our “obligations toward the other members of that vital community.” We must ultimately respect and affirm “all life.” 43 Catholic theology ought to take note of the ecological conscience and do it fast. Meanwhile, some of us are wearing the little yellow and red button with a flower on it and the words ‘Celebrate Life!’ We bear witness as best we can to these tidings.” 44

Merton believes that the “ecological conscience is also essentially a peacemaking conscience.” He draws connections between the war in Vietnam and environmental destruction—“crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm.” In the face of the “tragedy which has been revealed in the ecological shambles created by business and war,” Merton calls on his readers to move beyond the “tragedy of ambivalence, aggression, and fear,” noting that the development of an ecological conscience is a “most urgent moral need.” 45

Ecology and Peacemaking

Merton made this explicit connection between ecology and peacemaking in his last public statement on the challenges facing society. Given his untimely death later that same year, he did not have the opportunity to develop this connection further. Yet I believe that it is possible to discern at least the outlines of this inherent link

37 Weis, 147.
38 Weis, 148.
in his writings on peace and nonviolence. Drawing further upon the image of the pentimento, we might read Merton’s writings on peace through the lens of this ecological connection to illuminate key themes and insights.

Before embarking on this exercise, however, I would like to make it clear that I am not joining my voice to the chorus of “What would Merton have done if he had not died in Bangkok?” Monica Weis, for example, believes that he “would have been on the vanguard of contemporary nature writers and environmentalists,” writing “cutting-edge essays on ecojustice.”

Bonnie Thurston, on the other hand, challenges such conjectures, noting that Merton was a “mercurial figure” who reinvented himself many times. She makes her point well in pointedly asking: if Merton had died after writing Seven Storey Mountain, would we have “surmised” he would later become a pioneer in ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue?

I will leave such debates to those who knew Merton personally and scholars who are more intimately versed in the breadth and depth of his writing and thought. Rather, given that Merton wrote extensively on peace and to a smaller extent—though in no less of a strong voice—on ecology and its connection to peacemaking, I propose reading some of the key themes of his spirituality of peace and nonviolence through the lens of ecology. Using the pentimento image, we would then be looking at both “paintings” together, seeing where they might coincide and illuminate each other. In particular, I propose looking at three of Merton’s “canvases”—the moral and spiritual crisis, a sense of urgency, and Merton’s belief in the nonviolent response of love—in light of our present ecological crisis, in particular climate change.

**Moral and Spiritual Crisis**

Merton’s writings in the 1960s reflect his deep concern with the moral and spiritual crisis he observed in society. We have seen above his ecological observations in this regard. Looking back at his letter to Rachel Carson, we see the connections Merton makes between this moral and spiritual crisis and our destructive impact on the natural world “on which our survival depends.”

The attentive and honest contemporary reader, equipped with at least some knowledge of the negative environmental impacts of our overconsumption and destructive behavior, will be able to recognize themselves as participants in the evolving sickness Merton observed in human communities. Whereas Merton recognized the 20th Century sickness as the “other side of the coin” of the 19th Century’s belief in unending progress, it is becoming clear that the rapid technological development and globalization of the 21st Century has elevated this sickness almost to a new form of currency, one that just might break the bank of our ecological balance.

The theme of crisis is equally present in Merton’s writings on peace and nonviolence, particularly in response to the threat of nuclear war and the near “total war” of the Cold War era and the conflict in Vietnam.

It should be clear from the moral and mental confusion of our time that the present world crisis is something far worse than merely political or economic conflict. It goes far deeper than ideologies. It is a crisis of [the human] spirit. ... The moral evil in the world is due to [humanity’s] alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of spiritual life within [humanity], to [humanity’s] alienation from God.

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46 Weis, 152-154.
47 Thurston, 287-288.
This “moral and spiritual problem” impacts all members of society and compels us to “discuss the fateful problems of our time.”

**Sense of Urgency**

Merton was reflecting on the fateful problem of the threat of nuclear war, which arguably seemed more imminent in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis than it does today. I believe it is possible, without too much of a stretch, to compare the sense of urgency Merton felt regarding nuclear war with the sense of urgency many feel today in light of global climate change. Contemporary theologian Sally McFague has said that climate change, “quite simply, is the issue of the twenty-first century. It is not one issue among many, but, like the canary in the mine, it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster.”

Of course, Merton died well before we began to fully comprehend the devastating impact of human activity on the climate, in particular our use of petro-chemicals, fossil fuels, and the emission of greenhouse gases. Nevertheless, he was concerned about our use of natural resources, writing in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that we waste the oil and iron of our own and developing countries to “fill our cities and roads with congestion,” noting that this “largely useless” activity is a “symptom of the meaningless and futile agitation of our own minds.”

Merton was attuned to our increasing technological power and our consequent ability to wreak havoc on our very existence, even if inadvertently. Remember his words to Barbara Hubbard, warning against “immolating our living earth by careless and stupid exploitation … which will be paid for by irreparable loss in living species and natural resources.” One can easily imagine a contemporary writer using those same words to describe our climate crisis.

Merton’s sense of urgency in the nuclear age was due in no small part to what he saw as both the possible and probable destruction of the world and society. For the first time in human history, it was now possible “to wipe out the entire human race either by nuclear, bacterial, or chemical agents.” He felt that this was probable “in proportion as the world’s leaders commit” to policies of nuclear deterrence. Today, our continued reliance on nuclear weapons means that this destruction is still possible, if (hopefully) less probable due to incremental efforts at nuclear disarmament.

At the same time, however, we know that climate change is not only possible or probable, it is already happening with devastating effects. In the past 100 years, our planet’s average temperature has risen 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit, and is projected to rise another 2 to 11.5 degrees Fahrenheit over the next century. The environmental impacts of climate change—including desertification, pollution, loss of biodiversity, increase in natural catastrophes, and deforestation—are already causing “profound” human impacts such as environmental refugees.

In light of possible and probable destruction, Merton cautions us not to “shrug off” our individual and collective responsibility. While policy makers play key roles, so too do we. “We are the ones concerned. We are the ones responsible....In plain words, in order to save ourselves from destruction we have to try to regain control of a world that is speeding downhill without breaks...The remedy would seem to be to slow down...” He believes

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52 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 63.
that for the Christian, it is “our duty to God the Creator...to strive in every way to preserve and protect” God’s creation.57

Merton’s mid-20th Century caution against the tendency to “shrug off” our responsibility resonates with the words of an early-21st Century Pope. Pope Francis, writing about “a globalization of indifference,” asserts that the “culture of prosperity deadens us.” Consequently, we fail to hear the “outcry of the poor”—and I would add the cry of the Earth and future generations—“as though all of this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own.”58 Pope Francis also recognizes that “whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market.”59 I welcome the strong voice of Pope Francis, calling us to reject indifference and to defend whatever is fragile, including creation. The urgency of this moment, in the face of devastating impacts of human-induced climate change already present in extreme weather events and environmental refugees, demands that we “shrug off” our indifference and claim our responsibility both as Christians and members of the human family.

The Nonviolent Response

Rooted in the Christian tradition, Merton names the religious responsibility as one of acting in hope. Jesus calls his disciples to a “vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself.”60 In the face of the destruction of our very planet—be it from nuclear war or environmental destruction—Merton calls us to slow down, to preserve and protect God’s creation, and to love nonviolently. “There must be a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, and the creative dynamism of the will to live and to build, and the will to forgive. The will for reconciliation.”61

I believe that Merton outlines such a nonviolent response in his ecological writings as well. It is a response that reconciles the relationship between the human community and creation and between the human person and the Creator. Through his increased ecological awareness after reading Silent Spring, Merton recognizes that in our daily lives we are acting violently towards ourselves, our human community, and all of creation. Developing an ecological consciousness in his letter to Barbara Hubbard, he identifies the need for “life-affirming and loving” actions, openness and trust in the power of life over death. Articulating an ecological conscience in “The Wild Places,” he affirms our interdependence with all creation and the need to respect all life. In this way, the ecological conscience is indeed a peacemaking conscience.

CSJP Ecological Commitment

As noted in the introduction, my own religious community, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, has also come to recognize that the ecological conscience is a peacemaking conscience. Promoting peace has been an integral part of our charism and community life from our very founding. At the profession of the first Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace in January 1884, Bishop Edward Gilpin Bagshawe of Nottingham, England noted, “You will hope, if God blesses your work, to sow the seeds of peace in modern society.”62 This motif of “seeds of peace” was picked up at our 21st General Chapter as the title for the Chapter acts.

57 Merton, Thomas Merton on Peace, 88.
59 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, no 56.
60 Merton, Thomas Merton on Peace, 112.
The ecological consciousness of our vowed Sisters and lay Associates has grown over time, just as society’s awareness has increased since the 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*. At our 18th General Chapter in 1990, the Congregation committed to “long-term ecological soundness in lifestyles and structures that reflect respect for the earth.” The Congregation Council noted that this commitment reflected a desire in the membership for “an effective consistency between word and deed, intention and action, stated charism and actual commitment.” Twelve years later, as the Congregation prepared for its 20th General Chapter, the Congregation Council noted that “we came to a heightened awareness that earth/creation consciousness is constitutive of our charism of peace and justice.”

At our 21st General Chapter in 2008, we adopted two “Seeds of Peace” Chapter acts seeking to give life, form and commitment to our evolving ecological and peacemaking conscience in light of our charism. The intent of the Chapter was not to write lofty words that would sit on a shelf, nor was it to create dogmatic rules to be enforced (or ignored).

Nor are these commitments to be confined to specific actions. They relate to an attitude of heart and mind as much as to the specifics of what we do. The intent of the Chapter is that they inform the totality of our lives together, our manner of living and relating as well as our actions, prayer, discussion, and decisions.

Consequently, both acts incorporate personal and communal commitments. In our nonviolence Chapter act, we committed to regular prayer, reflection, and study through the lens of nonviolence. We also committed to practice nonviolence in our relationships, communication, choices as citizens and consumers, and in solidarity with those who are poor as we respond to injustice. Similarly, our care of Creation Chapter act includes a mix of regular prayer, reflection, study and action. The action commitments are both personal and communal:

- Identify and reduce our carbon footprint in communities, ministries, and institutions; … participate in legislative efforts to support the integrity of creation; stand in solidarity and act in justice with marginalized people whose lives are already affected by the devastation of Earth; collaborate with others, including interfaith and civic groups, who are addressing climate change.

I attended the 21st General Chapter—my first—as a novice. I served on the writing team for the growing in nonviolence Chapter act and have been a member of the group of Sisters charged with engaging the Sisters and Associates in the embodiment of the care of creation and climate change Chapter act. This has given me keen interest and insight into the intersection of these two ways of integrating spirituality and justice—nonviolent peacemaking and ecological concern.

My experience has shown that the commitment of the General Chapter—the highest level of governance in the Congregation—has indeed led to transformation and impacted the totality of our lives together. Perhaps the largest measurable impact has been our work with our sponsored institutions, including hospitals and nursing homes, to support their efforts to reduce carbon footprints and develop more sustainable practices. Yet the impact in our own lives, relationships, and communities has also been tangible, whether it was the decision of my local community to plant two trees in our front yard as a symbol of our commitment, our policy decisions

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to purchase more fuel efficient cars, or the ways that we are more aware of our use of violent language in our interpersonal communication.

However, I have also come to realize that even in a community of religious women and lay associates with a heightened ecological and peacemaking conscience, it can be a challenge to embody this commitment in ministry and daily community life. We are steeped in our culture, in the moral and spiritual crisis of our time. Just as Merton lamented his accidental killing of the songbird—even though his consciousness had been raised on this very issue—I find myself lamenting my own periodic wasteful use of resources. Whether it is the carbon emissions from my plane travel to a community meeting in Seattle or my incessant use of paper—albeit recycled—to print articles for school, I find myself confronted with my own violence daily.

Lamentation is important. Yet it is also important to recognize the wisdom of our Chapter. When we confine our growing ecological and peacemaking conscience to actions, we can miss opportunities for transformation. On the other hand, when we embrace the commitments as an attitude of heart and mind, we open ourselves personally and communally to the transformative power of the love of God.

I believe that the spirituality of peace articulated by Thomas Merton, especially in dialogue with his insights into ecological spirituality, might serve as a spiritual guide to individuals or communities seeking to integrate spirituality with ecological concerns. On the one hand, he helps us to tell the truth and recognize our violence towards ourselves, others and creation. Yet he also calls us to develop a creative and loving response through our relationship to God, self, other and creation.

Rather than focusing all our attention on our lamentations—or even claiming ignorance of our violence entirely—Merton calls us to enthusiastically claim our interdependence with all of creation. Through his own example as a contemplative ecologist, he inspires us to embrace the community of creation that is at our doorstep with reverence and joy. Lastly, he challenges us to articulate our own ecological and peacemaking conscience and to embody this in ways that respect all life. He reminds us: “We are not alone in this thing. We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them.”