

One of the Greatest of Modern Catholic Prophets, Visionaries, and Eco-Theologians

Andrew Angyal

Andrew Angyal, Professor of Environmental Studies and English at Elon University, is the author of biographies of Loren Eiseley, Lewis Thomas, and Wendell Berry. He was honored as Elon University's "Distinguished Scholar of the Year" in 2003.



Thomas Berry was the kindest, most generous person I have ever known. He was generous with his time, with his talents, with his concern for others, and, most importantly, with the scope of his ideas. He showed an innate kindness and compassion of a fully enlightened person. He had an intense interest in people, particularly children and young people, whom he saw as the greatest hope for the future. He understood that everyone has their particular contribution to make in the Great Work of the Earth. He had a particular gift for friendship, for making people feel valued and appreciated. He had the self-effacing modesty of greatness. He was an Elder, a Grandfather, a wise person, and a natural teacher. Thomas broadened my interest in ecology by deepening the spiritual dimensions of my environmental awareness. Most of all, he taught by example, since he was truly a saintly man who lived a saintly life.

I had the pleasure of getting to know Thomas for ten years after his return to Greensboro, which was no retirement for him but an enlargement and extension of his life's work. He was always available to speak with church, school, or civic groups. He would always make himself available for lunch or dinner with guests. He enjoyed good conversation and the company of friends, especially when he could expand on his ideas. His environmental vision, affirming the goodness and rights of all forms of life, was comprehensive and universal. He was a strong advocate for environmental law and for basic rights of habitat and fulfillment, and legal protection for all forms of life.

An ordained priest, Thomas remained a faithful member of the Passionist Order and never left the Catholic Church. His books were never censored and, unlike Teilhard de Chardin, he was never officially silenced or forbidden to teach by the Curate. The time will come for the Church's official recognition of the importance of his writings, and he may come to be recognized as a synthesizer of ideas as important as his namesake, Thomas Aquinas. Along with Francis of Assisi, he will be honored as one of the patron saints of ecology. He had a vision of ecology as central to liturgy and worship, and his self-description as a "geologist" best describes his Earth-centered spirituality. A truly ecumenical thinker, he assimilated the wisdom of the world's great religions and made it part of himself. He was particularly influential in shaping the eco-spiritual concerns of American women's religious orders, particularly among the Dominicans and Passionists. Srs. Miriam McGillis and Gail Worcelo are among Thomas's most important disciples.

Thomas's intellectual interests were enormous, and they kept expanding throughout his life. His life spanned almost a century and his memory reached back almost to World War I. He was a cultural historian with a

comprehensive, rather than a systematic mind. His intellectual curiosity, endurance and stamina were legendary, especially in late night sessions when he would wear out his listeners. He spoke at least three times during the winter term at Elon University before he was awarded an honorary degree last year. Unfortunately, by that time he was too ill to attend the ceremony, but his niece, Dr. Ann Berry Somers, graciously accepted the award for him.

We will be poorer without Thomas Berry, but his spirit is with us and will inspire the Great Work. He belongs to history now as one of the greatest of modern Catholic prophets, visionaries, and eco-theologians. He represents the best of the Vatican II spirit of engagement with the world. He was also a North Carolina native who never lost his affection for his roots in Greensboro and the North Carolina Piedmont landscape. Thomas will be missed by all of his family, friends and admirers, but he will be remembered for his lofty vision of the religious and spiritual significance of the natural world.