

Homily, Mass of the Resurrection for Thomas Berry

Immaculate Conception Monastery
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First of all, on my own behalf, and that of the Passionist Community, and especially, Fr. Joseph Jones, our Provincial, I wish to offer sincere condolences to Thomas's niece, Anne, who is present here with us, his surviving brothers, and the extensive Berry family, and particularly to his sister Margaret, who has shown him such support and care over these last years.

It is a very great honor and humbling to be asked by Fr. Provincial to be the homilist for today. I venture to say that no one could comprehend all the facets of his life, which Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, his former student, then colleague, then, of late, his editor described as a kind of "rose window," each fragment of colored glass stunning on its own merits.

It is a matter of record that Thomas Berry became a Passionist shortly before I was born, that he was ordained a priest in 1942, that he earned a doctorate in history and developed as a world renowned scholar of religions and cultures, while also serving in the Passionist China mission, in the military chaplaincy in Germany, teaching, publishing and indefatigably offering his "preachment," as he called it, advocating a mutually enhancing relationship between Earth and its humans.

All that being said, the privilege I have had of collaborating with Thomas each summer for more than twenty years and personal encounters that long pre-date those years will have to suffice to guide me in my remarks today.

Shortly after Thomas's sister Margaret informed me of his death, I, hoping to have a quiet background for my thoughts, happened to turn on the radio to a classical music station. To my very pleasant surprise, I had cut in on a part of Eric Copeland's Appalachian Spring that seemed extremely appropriate: it is his approach to *The Shaker Song* called "Simple Gifts." The very familiar words are:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come out right. [1848]

Thomas used to insist that, like a symphony, a *life's* significance and meaning is not truly known until the last note is played. If you've ever seen Thomas participate in a dance, you would realize how *unlikely* is the suggestion I am about to make. But the dance of the exuberance of "simple

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gifts” seems to me like *that note*. It’s not as though he could not party. In every one of his twenty and more trips to Port Burwell in Canada, each day, after exhausting hours of lectures and probing question and answer sessions, when the participants would relax with some wine and cheese and story telling of a much lighter variety, Thomas would be the last to retire...only to start again next morning with his accustomed vigor. And he had a playful side that doubled as a pedagogical tool. He would set his audience on edge with a one-liner, certainly not without humor, that could only be understood if you took the time to *puzzle* about why he said it. At one point, Anne Lonergan and I compiled a little book of these sayings. Any thought of publishing them went up in flames, however, ignited by his rare stern *withering* stare when we suggested the title: *Gaia’s Elegant Gnome*. (He might now be arranging some cosmic retribution for my even mentioning it). Gnome, I suspect, was too cuddly, because he wanted us to experience *distance*, specifically, distance from conventional thinking. He would say as a starter: “God is a dreamer and a gambler”, and follow it up with “God would as soon kill ‘ya as look at ‘ya.” Consider the distance factor when you answer this question: “I sometimes ask” he said, “what time is it? What time is it...for the sun?...for the Hudson...for your hand ...for this continent?” Finally, he would say, but by no means exhausting his storehouse: “I agree with Kant: all knowledge is self-knowledge, but the self is the larger universe.” And—“People say you can’t treat people as things; I say you can’t treat *things* as things.” And for us religious types in the congregation: “You never quite know who is the saint and who is the demonic person. They keep changing places.”

The *point* is always distance. He said of himself: “I have always lived marginally. My mother told me once that I was so difficult as a child that by the age of four my mother and father had a conference one day about me, and my father said ‘We have been nice and sweet and kind to this boy. We have spanked him, we have punished him. Just nothing’s going to work. *I guess he will just have to raise himself.*’” That we are *here* today is a testament to how *successful* that child rearing program was! Yet there is also a certain poignancy. For the thousands who understand what he meant by asking us to put the Bible on the shelf for 20 years, there are other thousands of religious leaders who are merely scandalized. There is a poignancy, too, in this very Monastery where we are celebrating his life. It was while living in this Monastery that he was forbidden to teach. It is in this Monastery that he took up the responsibility to greet and listen to and counsel anyone who came to the front door for personal advice—from whoever had “door duty” that day. It has been the experience of the Passionists as a group that Thomas was, in effect, forced to raise himself intellectually.” Thomas has said: “This sense of a certain distance from what was officially

happening has never bothered me.” Nevertheless *distance* carried a certain pathos on *multiple* levels that he felt deeply. He noted: “Our modern world is not working. Christianity, in this sense, is not working. Particularly, there is the inability of the Christian world to respond in any effective way to the destruction of the planet.”

But some moments of transcending that distance are noteworthy. His famous Center for Religious Research on the grounds of the Passionist Spiritual Center in Riverdale is a prime example. Also: that Fr. Colmille Regan, when he was Provincial, asked him to chair a think tank he personally convened; that in the 'sixties, and up until the turn of the century, his Canadian Brethren gladly offered him the opportunity to expand the circle of his appreciative audience beyond Riverdale; that *individual* Passionists were supportive of him...most notably Brother Conrad Federspiel, for which we are extremely grateful. All of these are witness to bridging the poignant distance. Thomas makes reference to this in his volume *Evening Thoughts* when he dedicates it:

*To my monastery community, which has guided,
Educated, and supported me through these many years.*

And it must be said—the thousands of people all around the world who found it possible to respond to Thomas as a prophet of our time were very sustaining for him. But Thomas would insist, more importantly, they were sustaining what he termed the Great Work—and the Passionist community is grateful to all of them, and among them, several of you who are present here today.

Fr. Terry Kristofak, our formal Provincial superior, noted in his homily at Wednesday's beautiful service in Greensboro, North Carolina, that Thomas has “transformed our Passionist community, not only here, but around the world.” I would hope this homily can continue that transformation by bringing *Thomas's perspective* to my brief commentaries on our three readings.

In the beginning, the story of Genesis says. In my own life as a Passionist, I especially remember two things that date all the way back to 1951. (I won't tell you how old I was.) Fr. Coleman Haggerty was teaching us about evolution. This was so far back I don't know whether he was for it or against it, but for some reason he made a point of the Greek translation of that phrase: “in the beginning”...*en arche*. He noted that these were the same words with which St. John's Gospel begins...because *linking* the two texts suggests a cosmic dimension of Christ. The words, then, gained what Thomas would call a “numinous” quality for me. The other thing I remember was that 1951 was also the year that Thomas's teaching career

at the Prep Seminary ended—in no small part because in that McCarthy era, he felt he could not teach college level European history without having the students read Karl Marx! This began my interest in his confident intellectual leadership. Today, it allows me to interpret, in terms of the new cosmology, our reading from Genesis when it says humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and the cattle and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground”. It would be better to think about Thomas’s quip: “Maybe opera is the degradation of the bullfrogs.”

Genesis speaks of God. Thomas spoke with a sense of mysticism about the *Divine*. His thoughts are particularly apt on this, the day before the Feast of the Trinity. “There exists in the Christian world” he said, “this sense that the inner life of the divine is community. To say that community is at the heart of the ultimate simplicity (we attribute to the Divine) is a challenging statement.” Barbara Reid, OP, a scripture scholar teaching at Catholic Theological Union, says: “Augustine liked to speak of the three persons as ‘Lover, Beloved, and Love.’ Hildegard of Bingen favored ‘Fire, Burning, and Flashing Forth.’ One might name them ‘Eternal Giver, Receiver and Outburst of Joy’. There is no limit to the ways we can speak of the profound mystery of the Three in One.” She further notes: “the saving activity of God is concrete and visible both in great moments and in the routines of everyday life.” (*America Magazine*, May 25, 2009)

Thomas would so agree with her that there is no limit to the ways we can speak of the profound mystery of the Three in One. He considered the model of differentiation, inner articulation, and communion—insights emerging from our scientific understanding of the universe—as another way. He thus offered a vast theological program to further articulate the numinous meaning of *en arche*.

Our second reading is insisting we realize that Divine love is *gifted* to us; the gift is primary...*our* love of the Divine is secondary. The genius of the author of this epistle is that he gives us a practical guideline: “No one has ever seen God, yet if we love one another God dwells in us and God’s love is brought to perfection in us.” In the several beautiful and moving eulogies of Wednesday’s service in Greensboro, various members of Thomas’s family introduced us to the many ways this man of towering intellect also proved to be a man of outstanding heart. By St. John’s standard: “The person without love has known nothing of God, for God is love.” Thomas certainly proved himself to be in possession of *profound* knowledge of the Divine. That is what he meant in yet another quip: *Resist Ecstasy!*

But Thomas gave us a challenge in what he called the *Third Mediation* of the Divine. Succeeding the Christian mediation found in sisterly and brotherly love, but not dispensing with it, the Third Mediation of the Divine is discovered in the numinous universe. He said: “The basic mood

of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through Earth...Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture. (*Dream of the Earth*, 137)

Finally the Gospel for this Mass of the Resurrection deals with the counter intuitive Evangelical norm of “turning the other cheek” and learning to love those who would present themselves to us as enemies. Each person here, I am sure, could cite numerous examples of this altruistic behavior in Thomas’s life story that would surely make us expect that St. Luke’s sense of the exuberance of the Resurrected life applies to him: “Give and it shall be given to you...good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over.” However, I feel that St. Luke is also giving us the opportunity to contemplate a further aspect of the numinous cosmos. St. Luke’s sense of exuberance suggests what Thomas called the asymmetry—the wild disproportion—between the *gift* and response.” He cites the sacrifice parents make for their children. If the child responds with gratitude, the asymmetry is accomplished. Yet that too can demand sacrifice. Thomas said, further: “The thing that exists in our times and the root of the tragedy might be considered to be our *unwillingness to make the return* for what has been given us...We did not choose to be here, the story (of the universe) selected us to be here. Once we are here, we must be willing to fulfill the destiny assigned to us; that is our grandeur, that is our blessedness, that is our joy, that is our peace...We are not making the journey simply by ourselves. We are making it with the entire universe community, the human community, the life community, the earth community...All the great transition moments are *sacrificial* moments. Our present transition will not be accomplished without enormous sacrifice.” He later names that sacrifice as “the entire industrial system” and describes that system as “taking beneficial resources and giving back poisonous products, rather than the return of gratitude.” (*Befriending the Earth*, 132- 133)

But the last note is not tragedy, but dance. Along with Thomas, we are aware that the story of the universe has “brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, (so) there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has *awakened* in *us* our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process.”

Thomas’s Grandniece, in Wednesday’s ceremony, read from Brian Swimme’s book that imagined a conversation between a wise person, unsurprisingly having the name Thomas, and a young person who was not named. It was in the book’s “conversations,” she said, that she *discovered* her Uncle Thomas *and* herself. This was the heart of her discovery:

Thomas: What began as the outward expansion of the universe in the fireball ripens into your desire to flood all things with goodness.

Whenever you are filled with a desire to fling your gifts into the world, you have become this cosmic dynamic of celebration...

Youth: But how do I know...How do I know what I have to celebrate is worthwhile?

Thomas: Every song has tremendous value! Learn to sing, learn to see your life and work as a song by the universe. Dance! See your most ordinary activities as the *dance of the galaxies* and all living beings. If we attempt to constrain the self-emergent expressions of joy, we bottle up the exuberance of the universe. Imagine trying to hold back a supernova! It's the same with human celebration, generosity, and creativity: try to bottle them up and you only get neurosis and destruction.

Think of the unborn of today and *tomorrow*, all the future generations and *all the possible species*. They, too, are waiting for the exuberant generosity of being. They are dependent upon it, just as you were dependent upon the generosity of the supernova five billion years ago. Fall in love, sink into intimacy *with all things*, explore the relationships *throughout* the Earth's realm, pursue your dreams and flood all creatures with goodness" (*The Universe is a Green Dragon*, 148, emphasis added)

The last note is the *exuberant* dance of *Simple Gifts*.

And so, we take this opportunity to declare how deeply indebted we are to Thomas Berry's presence with us during our part of this numinous journey. His legacy goes ahead of all of us, for the "rose window" of his life can never be repeated. In particular his legacy to the Passionists beckons us across that poignant distance he himself transcended when reminding us a few years ago "We have been friends together for a long time." So we might well ask with Thomas:

What time is it?...What time is it for the Passionists, what time is it for the legal profession, for the religions, for the universities, for the governments of the world...for each us here?

Our Eucharist brings the mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection into our very midst...may the thanksgiving it generates also bring us a deeper awareness of the numinous universe that was Thomas Berry's Passion.