

The Passion of Earth

Stephen Dunn, C.P.

Thomas Berry was the first person to call attention to the “Passion of Earth.” That makes him a special kind of member of the Passionist religious order.

Vatican II alerted the world to the “signs of the times”—not a sociological, but a religious perspective, the interruptive energy of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic world was encouraged to view the plight of the poor as religiously significant, to learn new dimensions of the virtue of justice. It then became possible to extend our sense of the sufferings—Passion—of Jesus and speak of the Passion of the Poor, taking us far beyond simply a moral response. This was religious meaning. Thomas Berry perceived a sign of our quintessential times. This excerpt from his poem “Morningside Cathedral” suggests what may seem an even more radical religious meaning, a more radical extension of the meaning of the Passion:

*Listen – Earth sound
Listen – the wind through the hemlock
Listen – the owl’s soft hooting in the winter night
Listen – the wolf – wolf song.*

*Cry of distant meanings
woven into a seamless sound.
Never before has the cry of the wolf expressed
such meaning
On the winter mountainside
Morningside*

*This cry our revelation
As the sun sinks lower in the sky
Over our wounded world.*

*The meaning of the moment
And the healing of the wound
Are there in a single cry*

*How see the wolf as guardian spirit
As savior guide?
Our Jeremiah, telling us, not about the destruction of
Jerusalem or its Temple,
Our Augustine, telling us, not about the destruction
Of Rome and civilization,
Our Bach, telling us not about the Passion of Christ
In ancient times,
But about the Passion of Earth in our times?*

Wolf—our Earth, our Christ, ourselves.

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It has been my privilege to know Thomas Berry across the span of well over 50 years. I've always known him as a Passionist, but one with a specific energy. I think of this dynamic of his life the way we might think of the "matryoshka," the famous Russian stacking dolls, each one revealing another that preceded the image that has caught our attention. In reverse order, these Passionist manifestations, starting from my first encounters with him, each have the dynamic of "pushing the envelope" of what "Passionist" means, finally revealing what it means to bear that name in the 3rd millennium.

So I start with the early manifestations. It is no secret that Thomas is a man of towering intellect. That gift has always played havoc with his role in a community dedicated to popular preaching rather than, say, university teaching. But because he had no reason to doubt the authenticity of his gift, his intellectual pursuits have had a threatening dimension to many of his brethren and a stimulating power with others. I count myself in this latter group.

All Passionists in the era of Thomas Berry's training and for the first half of his years in the priesthood, lived a quite cloistered life. Thomas was no exception. But he pushed this envelope too. Precisely because of the scope of his intellectual energy, one could say he demonstrated a paradoxical reading of the Gospel dictum to be "in the world but not of the world"—he was in the cloister, but his mentality was not at all "of the cloister." He had a deep yearning to understand the complexities of human culture in history and the role of religion within it. Ultimately, in the expression coined by *Newsweek* magazine, he became "a prophet crying *for* the wilderness."

A few years ago, after a particularly ardent talk he gave at the Centre for Ecology and Spirituality at Port Burwell, Canada, he observed playfully, in his North Carolina drawl, that he really got caught up in "preachment." Preaching may be one of the most important Passionist envelopes he has pushed to larger dimensions. In the days of my own training as a Passionist, the year after ordination was not called a "Pastoral Year," helping the young priest gain confidence in diversified ministries, although it accomplished that. Rather, it was called a year of "Sacred Eloquence" because preaching—and learning to do it well—was among the highest of Passionist priorities.

Thomas Berry became convinced that his message as a preacher needed to be addressed first of all to the general public of our society. This has two major consequences: first, one must address issues of common concern, not just issues of current interest to the Catholic or Christian communities. Second, in many cases Catholic and Christian symbols need to be re-cast in order to speak authentically to what at first might have seemed to be simply secular concerns. In this he has been an outstanding example of how preaching becomes transformed in light of the "signs of the times."

This work of contemporary preaching, the rhetorical power to engage the listener in both the problem and the solution, is his great strength. Exercising it brought him to reveal a surprising dimension of the religious identity of a Passionist today: contemplation of the *Passion of the Earth*.

Thomas Berry is convinced that the major concern of society in this century is the future of the planet and the human role in that future. He is equally convinced that the scientific insights of the 20th century have provided us with a story of the cosmos and the planet Earth capable of healing the alienation from Earth that is so ruinously expressed in our industrial economies. That story also has the potential to heal the *religious alienation* from Earth that has condemned most Christian preaching to a deafening silence regarding the *Passion of the Earth*.

How fitting that the Passionist, Thomas Berry, should have broken this religious impasse. How important to shift the focus from fear about our human future to a robust religious perspective that encourages us to greet dawn and dusk, the “cosmological moments” of each day with reverence to rival that of the ancient monks and nuns. Greet them with

confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the earth. If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, 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. 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.

Although sensitive to the pain of Earth as it continues to suffer: its living energy choked by industrial pollution; its latest inhabitants, humankind, aggressively killing off other species, we can heed the cry of the wolf, realizing that:

*The meaning of the moment
And the healing of the wound
Are there in a single cry.*

Each day we can pray that dawn will once again become life-giving and dusk once more have the promise of renewed life—our gift from the sun. To do so will be our deepest tribute to Thomas Berry, Passionist.