

The Smartest Guy in the Order

Regis Mansmann, C.P.

I first became aware of Thomas Berry when I was a 14-year-old postulant monk, a “new boy” at a preparatory school. An “old boy” of 15 pointed him out to me from the chapel doorway. I couldn’t see his face as he was bundled in the high collared black cloak the monks wore against the drafts of the monastery chapel. Thomas was there by himself, still and silent in one of the back choir stalls reserved for the monks. He was meditating. This was a contemplative order.

We two boys were doing Saturday housecleaning chores and I have the feeling we were supposed to be somewhere else. My New Yorker companion in the peculiar accent of that sacred city, which at that time added authority to his pronouncement, said, “That’s Father Thomas Mary Berry. He’s the smartest guy in the order!”

The place where I became aware of Thomas was in an institution on the shores of Lake Eire, one that was commonly considered in the order as an assignment to a physical and spiritual Siberia.

I can’t remember when I first met Thomas face to face. I can’t remember him having a teaching assignment at that time either. I think he did not, and I surmise now from later information that he may have been there touching up his doctoral thesis before taking his assignment to go to China. It was well known in the school corridors that he was preparing for China. I thought that this was a great move on Thomas’s part, but I couldn’t understand why they’d send their brightest light so far away.

I will share another thing about that year that seems to have little import, but I tell it because it has stuck vividly in my mind for 60 years. After Thomas left for China there was a crate of Thomas’s books left in the “stamp room” off the junior postulants’ recreation room. (The stamp room was where the postulants during their hour of recreation sorted out and repacked used postage stamps collected and mailed in by devout Catholics; these were to be sold as “mission mix” to stamp collectors. Proceeds went to the orders’ missions. Let us not disparage such humble efforts—they feed retired missionaries to this day.) To get back to the crate of books, it was open and you could peruse the books, but since there were few pictures the books sat there undisturbed for more that a year. On top of the open crate was—mysteriously—Thomas’s mantle, the same one he had worn for contemplation in the chapel. Of course every postulant tried it on, using it as a prop to mimic the various monks’ dramatic chapel entrances, sweeping in to sanctuary center for their signature interpretation of the Catholic genuflection. Despite the fun we had with Thomas’s cape, there was something poignant about the open crate of books that was waiting to be sent on to Thomas while the Red Army engulfed China.

As I remarked earlier, this monastic prep school was widely considered in the order as a Siberian assignment. Besides the resident monks and the

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faculty who had been carefully selected and equipped with advanced degrees to qualify them for the task of teaching a classical education to the postulants, there were also a small number of exemplary monks who, for one reason or another, the superior didn't know what to do with. Among this group the following year was "the smartest guy in the order" newly expelled from Peking, China.

Thomas Berry was assigned to the prep school with an enrollment of less than a 100 students. These were good Catholic boys who wanted to do something good with their lives. Some few were brilliant or close to it; others were hard working ham-and-egggers, the backbone of any society; still others were border-line, boys who couldn't hack the studies or were indifferent students, and finally the boys who didn't know whatever possessed them to come here in the first place.

All of them were boys and they dropped off the enrollment list like flies. But one may bet his last pair of shoes that every single boy who went through that school never forgot the experience.

The main subject that had to be mastered was not theology, religion, catechism, or spirituality, but Latin. If you couldn't get Latin, forget being a leader in the Roman Catholic Church. It was probably as good a criterion of intelligence as any. A little unfair, sure (Italians with immigrant parents excelled), but, hey, you've got to draw the line somewhere.

At first Thomas was assigned to teach, I know not what, but one of his students two years ahead of me described, years later, how Thomas taught him 17th and 18th century philosophy by playing records of classical composers and showing how the music demonstrated the philosophies of their times. I am not sure that such innovative teaching was entirely appreciated in that monastic educational system.

During this period, speaking somewhat superficially, I can testify that Thomas was "into," as we say these days, *Dante's Divine Comedy* (for which he taught himself Italian), Chinese poetry (in Mandarin, I believe, but I have no recollection of which Chinese poets), and the Apocalypse (which I do know is the last book of the Bible).

All of this leads to the time, as I thought then and think yet, that Thomas was demoted to teaching Special Latin. "Special Latin" is like saying special children; you know something is wrong with the kids. Thomas, "the smartest guy in the order" was teaching the border-line students Latin. Here were World War II and Korean War veterans who were trying to gain minimal Latin to qualify as potential Roman Catholic Church leaders. Also there were the students who were consistent Latin failures but who still had some faculty members who believed in them. I was one of the latter and thus became a student of Thomas Berry.

What sort of teacher was Thomas Berry? To begin with, Thomas wasn't one to beat dead horses; I never mastered Latin. But as we learned from his former students, Thomas was easily distracted by questions about his current self-study program. We learned about Virgil (after all this was a Latin class) leading Dante through the nine circles each of hell and purgatory and then of Beatrice (who could ever forget Beatrice?) showing Dante heaven. We learned that Dante was the greatest of modern European writers. To get this idea through the border-line boys' skulls, Thomas drew a short vertical line on the blackboard. "That's Shakespeare," he said, and then drew a vertical line to the very top of the blackboard. "This is Dante!"

Thomas was also making a study of the Apocalypse at that time, and he taught us in our Special Latin class that the seven headed beast with the ten horns was a code name for the seven hills of Rome, Evangelist John's arch enemy. "Yes," Thomas said, "seven heads and ten horns. I still haven't figured out where the other three horns go!" Thomas was a teacher then as now, who could put you and keep you in a state of awe.

Thomas assigned me to write a paper on Cicero's use of the literary device of understatement. I did a parody of academic style and in a painstakingly careful hand wrote the first page in green ink with my Parker fountain pen on fine smooth lined paper. It looked fine, and I was proud of it. Thomas looked it over approvingly and said to continue in the academic style and finish it up. But I had shot my bolt. I didn't know a single other thing I could say about Cicero's use of understatement. Funny, the things you remember.

The discipline and spiritual training was fairly intense, adolescents being urged to seek sanctity through controlled asceticism and prayer. Signs of scrupulosity, that psychological aberration peculiar to Catholics, were carefully monitored. Reverence for the sacred vessels, for example, was not to become an obsession. Thus when the postulant sacristan privileged to touch the chalices discovered a tiny white speck on one of the patens, thinking it might be a particle of the sacred host, sought out the nearest priest to "purify" the gold plate, who should be coming down the corridor but Thomas himself. Thomas took the paten from the agitated boy, briefly examined the speck and blew it off the paten. "If Jesus can put himself in," he remarked, "I guess he can take himself out."

Then there was Barsi. I have to tell you about Barsi. Barsi was a kid from West Virginia, 14 or 15 at the time, and a caricature of adolescence: twitchy, self-conscious, and the target of insensitive boys' remarks, but a good enough student and some years younger than me. How he and Thomas got together I never knew, but Thomas would visit him regularly in the study hall where he would lean over Barsi's study table and show

him book after book. This was unusual behavior for a faculty member at that time, and Thomas's appearance caused a stir, a murmur throughout the study hall. Thomas noted this and announced to all of us, "Barsi and I are studying Chinese poetry." This got a happy response from the crowd, and Barsi was on his feet, a great broad smile, all twitches and hitches, eyes rolling, embarrassed and pleased at the same time. I remember it well.

Leaping a time gap of several decades each with their own adventures and vicissitudes, I find myself in Riverdale Religious Research Center, this time on the shore of the Hudson River Estuary and again, like Barsi, at the feet of the master.

I was there from Mindanao, southernmost island of the Philippine archipelago, where I was working with a number of indigenous peoples. The visiting American provincial superior had suggested that during my next furlough I should spend some time at the Riverdale Center with Thomas Berry. This was a period of fad and frenzy in American religious circles for updating and remodeling the psyches of religious persons. I was having none of it, although many of my confreres were coming back to the Philippines renewed, remodeled, reoriented, and best of all "sensitized". I listened attentively to their enthusiastic reports. I was having none of it. One confrere had spent some months with Thomas and told me I'd like the experience. So it was with certain misgivings that I was received with warm southern hospitality into the world of Thomas Berry.

We sat at a small table across from each other, and at Thomas's direction I began trying to tell him where I was coming from, so to speak. Thomas listened intently and asked surprisingly relevant questions about my experience with tribal people—questions I might add that no one else had the interest or, perhaps, competence to ask. I was quite pleased to answer his questions as well as I could. Here was a man, I thought, within the outer boundaries of New York City who seemed to know about tribal peoples. It was a pleasant exhilarating surprise.

"So what do you want to do here?" Thomas asked. I told him about the interesting reading I had been doing, Christopher Dawson, and the early histories of monasteries in Dark Age Europe when Europeans were all tribal peoples and were in the process of being Christianized. This would be, I thought, an excellent guide for me in my work.

"Well," said Thomas in that slow ingratiating drawl that I later learned was the prelude to introducing a totally new and unheard of direction, "that would be a very enriching study...but it won't really help you."

"It won't? Why not?"

Gently now, "Well, because history doesn't repeat itself."

"It doesn't?"

“No, your circumstances are totally different in just about every aspect you can think of.” Finis. Silence.

“Well, what do you suggest I do while I’m here?”

“Study my thought.” Simple. To the point.

I was stunned. I was trapped. I ask my reader, how many people have you met who suggested you study their thought—meaning I assumed, not an idea, a paper, or a book, but a whole system of thought, a philosophy? I was correct, that is what Thomas meant.

This was more than I bargained for. I was not thinking of such a thorough renewal or refresher as a whole philosophy implied. This wasn’t a course but a lifetime commitment. How could I get out of this graciously without hurting this gentle kindly brilliant man? I would give two weeks to it. I was tough. I could take anything for two weeks.

“Well, then let’s begin.”

Thomas began by explaining the great American problem of dealing with astronomical numbers of tons of waste every year. “How do the people you work with deal with waste?” I’d never thought of that. It seemed the tribal peoples’ problem was getting something to waste. In fact this was something of a joke among our staff as we tried to introduce hole-in-the-ground toilets to people who for 5,000 years had relied on bacteria and other soil creatures along with daily tropical down-pours to solve their waste problems. Then I realized from my prep school days what was happening: Thomas was deep into the study of the problem of home and industrial waste management. So began my study of Thomas Berry’s thought.

I had explained to Thomas during his “listening” that though I had lived with tribal peoples for more than 12 years, I really couldn’t understand where they were coming from or how they thought. Thomas’s answer was to introduce me to the discoveries of C.G. Jung, introduced to me by an essay by one of Jung’s protégés, Erich Neumann, *The Creative Unconscious*, which I read diligently.

“I didn’t understand a word of it,” I complained.

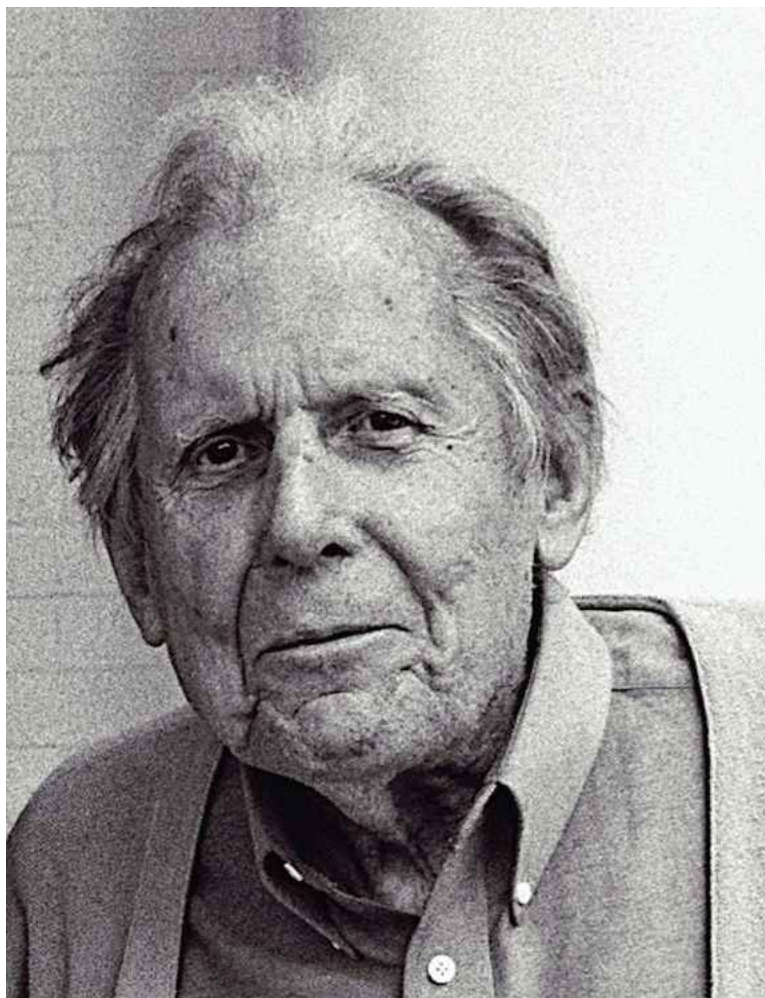
“Read it again,” he replied.

The daily sessions were awe-inducing (can we ever say “awesome” again?). We started *in media res*, no introduction, no sequenced course, no roadmap. It was learning to swim by being thrown into the deep. Before the two weeks expired, I was hooked. In fact I was experiencing a paradigm change. Pieces were fitting together. It was exhilarating and you never knew what Thomas would say next. There is no doubt that Thomas is the epitome of the southern gentleman, but, if I may be permitted to say so, there is more than a touch of the Piedmont “good ol’ boy” in him, something so American. He seems to relish casually dropping the unconven-

tional remark. This is done with style and timing and, in Thomas's case, kindly and humanely. And these occasions are immensely entertaining.

There is so much more that could be written here, and that must be put on paper, but those familiar constraints of time and space make us postpone that endeavor.

To know Thomas Berry's writings and thought is an awesome experience. To know Thomas Berry is something else again. And as Thomas himself might say, let's just leave it there.



Thomas Berry. Photo by Caroline Webb.