

Father Thomas

Catherine de Bary Sleight

“Father Thomas,” as we called him, would often join our family for a meal after saying mass at the local Dominican orphanage or after baptizing a baby we knew. When we saw his car in the driveway we would race to the front door, and as he walked up, he would open his arms and give a shout, “Hello Angel!” We would leap into his arms from the top step and he would embrace us in a huge hug. (I often hope to be greeted by St. Peter in the same way!) How he kept his balance when we were catapulting ourselves at him is still a mystery to me.

Sometimes he arrived unannounced just before dinner—a tribute no doubt to my mother’s great cooking and the fresh vegetables always in abundant supply from my father’s garden. Unwilling to feed Thomas whatever ordinary meal she had planned for the six of us, my mother would head for the grocery store and then prepare a “special” meal.

While she did this, Thomas was left to keep an eye on the younger children. Sometimes we wandered through the garden or played at the pond, but often his favorite babysitting pastime involved teaching us how to play poker. At five and seven, we were hardly the card sharks he wanted us to be. There’s no point in a “poker face” when you are showing the priest on your right your cards and asking him what to do with the hand he’s just dealt you. Nevertheless, he patiently waited for the day when we might actually grow into the crafty opponents he wished us to be. He even brought a coffee-can full of pennies along with him (more money than we had ever seen in our lives) to entice us into mastering this vice.

He was not always so patient however. Once he brought me a book about the family life of Jesus as a young boy. It had lovely illustrations done in black lines that looked to me just like a very fancy coloring book. Since I was not yet old enough to read, I did the next best thing. I took the book to my room and got out my water colors, and carefully began to “fill in the lines.” Checking up on his baby-sitting charge awhile later, Thomas found me on the floor with my paints and the new book. He scolded me and I began to cry. My mother came home from the store to find me howling in tears, and Thomas perplexed by the whole thing. I will never forget hearing her explain that I meant no disrespect to him or the book, that at four years old this was my way of enjoying the present.

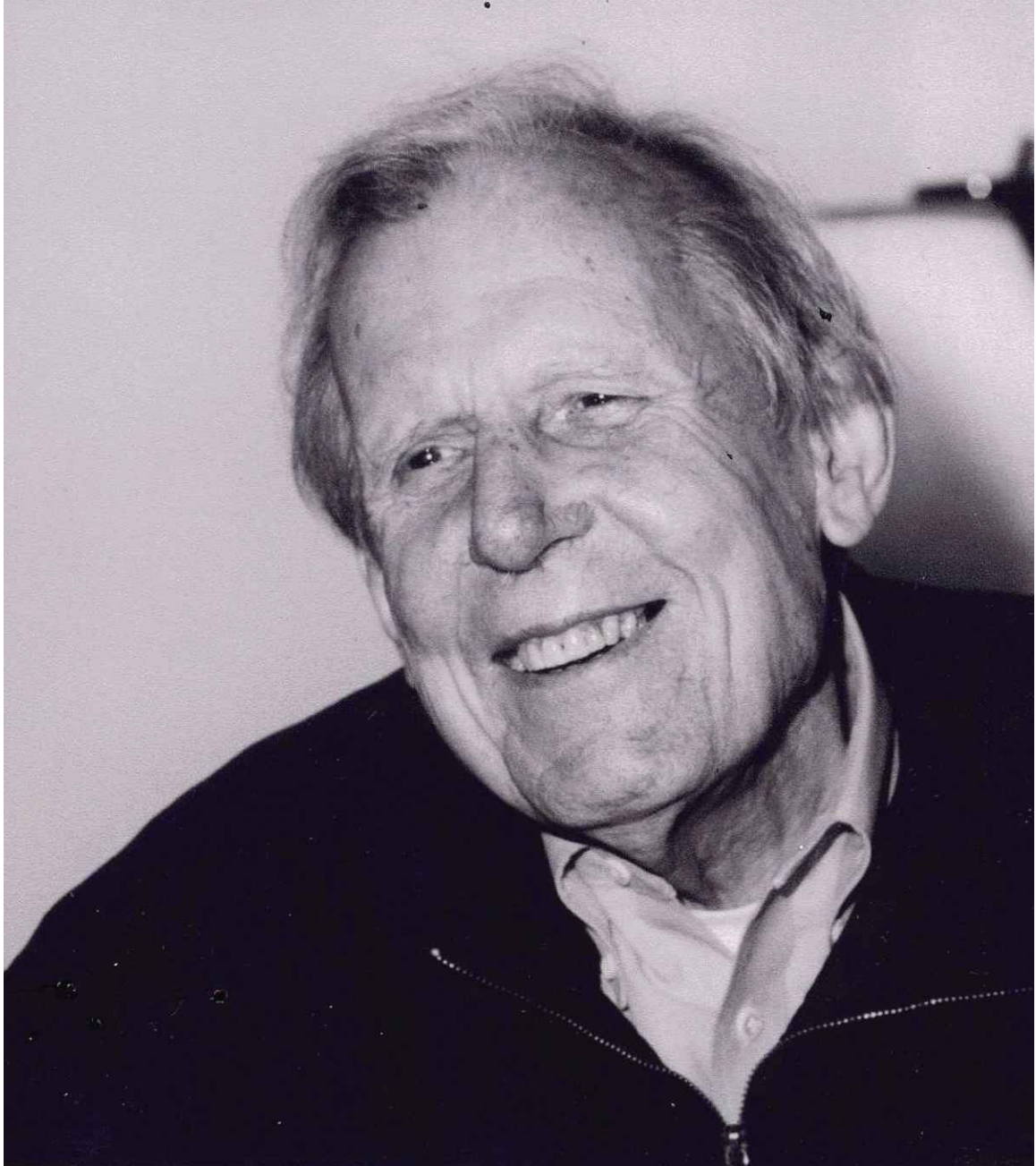
I said I was sorry and then Thomas told me a story about St. Augustine and how it was a CHILD’S voice that told him “Tolle lege!” (take up and read) the scriptures—with the emphasis on the “lege” and not on the coloring! A few years later I learned to embroider and I made him a bookmark that said “Tolle lege.” All was forgiven. I was blessed to be so close to Thomas as I was growing up.

I know that Thomas won’t mind me telling these stories. He always said I provided the “levity” and besides, one of his favorite persona was “the scamp.” I can still see the fun in his eyes when he told us what a wonderful thing it was to play hooky from school.

Catherine de Bary Sleight lives with her husband, Bill, in northern California where they have raised three children and published two magazines. The Sleights cherish their participation in the Benedictine community at Woodside Priory. Brett, Paul, Beatrice and Catherine are the children of Ted and Fanny de Bary. Mary Evelyn Tucker was Catherine’s “Big Sister” at boarding school in 1965.



Thomas at Herbies Place, Greensboro, NC



Thomas Berry; photo by Lou Niznick.