

## THE PASSIONIST STORY OF THOMAS BERRY, C.P.: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON HIS LEGACY AND INSPIRATION

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“So how do you understand the impact of Mao Zedong on China?” Without hesitation I answered that Mao had left his mark on China as a realist. From the 1920s into the 1940s the Hunan province native proceeded to lead a peasant-based revolution. Soon after the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, his policy decisions created political and human chaos most evident in the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). I also added, “Mao’s Long March was an important mythic journey for Chinese society and the world.”

The above exchange occurred during my PhD dissertation defense at Georgetown University in the spring of 1992. At that time, because the pros and cons of Mao were a subject of great debate, one of my professors took advantage of the moment by asking me to elaborate on my intriguing reference to Mao and the Long March. Thereupon I proceeded to explain I was echoing the thought of Thomas Berry in his essay on “Mao Tse-Tung: The Long March.” He had written: “Nothing makes sense apart from the story and the particular shape it takes. Not to know the story is to know nothing; to know the story is to know everything. The comprehensive story, the primary myth, the ultimate context of communist Chinese affairs is the account of the Long March, the Chinese version of the ancient archetypal symbol of the journey.” Truth be told, I had completely surprised myself by citing Thomas Berry during the dissertation defense. At that moment, the opportunity to acknowledge a fellow Passionist as it pertained to Chinese history provided me with intellectual confidence, pride, and imagination.

For me, as the years have progressed, the above three attributes have become more pronounced. I am fortunate that Thomas Berry and I share the Passionist story. As the years have passed, I have gained comfort to research China, appreciate Passionist history within and beyond China with a wider interpretative lens, and in more recent years acquire a deeper self-respect for my ministry in the intellectual apostolate. Following a brief overview, I will explore how the legacy and inspiration of Thomas Berry helped shape these three attributes, especially as it has applied to China.

## Overview

Possession of an undergraduate degree in history from Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts, proved to offer me a solid foundation when events unfolded that essentially allowed me free access to explore and study the Passionist Historical Archives (PHA). Undertaking the effort to study Passionist history became fun when I was able to bring it to life during my PhD studies. American history was my major concentration; East Asia was my minor area. Essentially, this encompassed the entire scope of American, Chinese, and Japanese history. My thesis, *Life, Death, and Memory: Three Passionists in Hunan, China, and the Shaping of an American Mission Perspective in the 1920s*, led me to become immersed in the Passionist China Collection (PCC) within the PHA.

Presently, in my capacity as long-time historian for the Passionist province of St. Paul of the Cross since 2000, I have had the humble and gifted privilege to know the PHA intimately. As a result, when the Thomas Berry biography by Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal began to take shape, I was pleased to contribute PHA documents and photos. To truly understand Thomas Berry, C.P., knowing and pondering his legacy and inspiration within this wider Passionist story will always be essential.

## Personal Stories of Thomas Berry, Passionist

Like those of many people, my encounters with Thomas have been memorable, sometimes puzzling, yet in retrospect unique. As explained above, in the late 1970s when I discovered the then dormant archives of the PCC as it existed within the larger PHA, I was quite surprised to learn and see a photo of Thomas Berry as one of the Passionist missionaries who had been assigned to the China mission in 1948. That he had to return to the United States in the same year because of the rise to power of Mao Zedong provided me the opportunity to consider a then unexplored perspective on the Passionist story of Thomas Berry.

At that time, I was a young Passionist assigned to theological studies at St. John's University in Queens and living at our Jamaica, New York, monastery. Thus, to me, it made perfect sense to just get in a car and drive to the Passionist residence in Riverdale, New York, where Thomas lived. He was most welcoming. As I recall, I asked the following question: "You were a Passionist missionary to China. If I wanted to understand the history of that Passionist mission what advice would you give

me?” In his respectful pensive tone he answered: “There is a new era in China. Look to study the pollution of the Yellow River and Yangtze River.”

However, this was not what I was after. I explained I was interested in how the Passionist missionaries survived in Hunan province from the 1920s to the 1950s. He listened well as I told him about my experience as a novice researcher in the PCC. It ended up being a good visit. In the process, I think I mentioned to him that I would continue to read his footnotes and someday I hoped he would be able to read mine as I came to know the Passionist China story. In addition, this meeting provided me the opportunity to attend his 1977 summer Riverdale seminar on New York City as a sacred city. An intellectual door had opened.

A second encounter was just as memorable. It was 2002. Andrew Angyal had just contacted the PHA to commence his research on the life of Thomas Berry. The more I made resources available that documented the Passionist past of Thomas, the more I thought it was essential to have his own understanding of the Passionist story—in his own voice. Others agreed, notably Andrew Angyal and Tom Keevey. With pretty much the same confidence I had had when I first approached Thomas, I contacted him in North Carolina. (Thomas moved to North Carolina in 1995.) My request was simple: that we carve out time to do a professional quality taped interview concentrating on the story of Thomas Berry, Passionist. It would be done at the media studios of Elon University, in Elon, North Carolina. Thomas was open. To strengthen the process, I sent questions in advance. However, as the days approached the scheduled interview, Thomas expressed reservations about the project. I was a bit surprised, but not totally. Having had prior experience conducting audio interviews with Passionists, particularly those who had been missionaries to China, a sudden reluctance to share their historical story was not uncommon. My response was best served by honesty. On several occasions it meant telling the former China hands that if they did not teach me their historical past, then it might be left up to me to make it up on my own. In one instance, with a smile and clear tone of voice, I told one former missionary this might occur when I spoke at his funeral. In the case of Thomas Berry, I reminded him that whereas he had helped a generation of scholars understand the multiple sacred stories as they pertained to Buddhism, the American Indian, the Earth, and so on, it was imperative and unfair if he did not tell his Passionist story. I advised,

it would be a personal loss for him, for those who knew him, and for the Passionist Congregation itself. As the Passionist historian I made the case that I was in the best position to listen and respect his story.

With abiding grace, the September 2003 interview proved to be a success. For me the dynamic consequence of conducting the interview was letting Thomas Berry bring to life his Passionist story in his own words. Especially valuable is how he reflected on the formative years of his Passionist journey. From 1933 until 1943 he lived a common-vowed life with other Passionists in Dunkirk, New York; West Springfield, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Jamaica, New York; Union City, New Jersey; and Brighton, Massachusetts. As Thomas expressed in that interview, it was during these years that he gained a deeper insight on compassion: a central principle of Passionist spirituality and life in general. In each monastery where he lived the Passionist cloistered life, he successively and creatively developed a sound Passionist spiritual and intellectual life. The respective Passionist story associated with each location can be found in the PHA. Likewise, the PHA holds documentation on his ministry as a military chaplain in Germany from 1951 to 1954. Building on the existing knowledge as found in the biography, I believe a creative rereading of the PHA archival sources might provide increased awareness about this era in the life of Thomas. For example, my having had access to read and think about the Passionist documents that coincide with these moments of his life, has inspired me to refocus my own free spirit of inquiry on Passionist history. This has been especially helpful when, at various assignments, I have had to live out my Passionist story with or ministering alongside Passionists and others who advanced an anti-intellectual milieu. It was during such encounters that I turned to the journey undertaken by Thomas Berry. His Passionist story reminded me to uphold and pursue the value, inspiration, and purpose of the intellectual life. This was essential as I came to study and reimagine the Passionist China story.

In the process of writing this reflection, it has occurred to me how the institutional commitment of the Passionist Congregation to China shaped both of our personal stories. Being assigned to China in 1948 led Thomas to meet and build on his relationship with Ted de Bary into the future. That the Passionists had preserved their China Collection proved to be the catalyst for me to pursue the study of their twentieth century Hunan mission. Whereas Catholic China was absent from the public

consciousness in the 1970s, it was coming alive for me as I read through the letters in the archive folders. In fact, five years after Thomas Berry had published his 1975 *Cross Currents* article on Mao Tse-Tung, I was fortunate enough to publish my article on the Passionist China mission in the *Catholic Historical Review*. My ministry in the intellectual apostolate was taking shape.

Most important in my Passionist story was the opportunity to teach as a foreign expert at Sichuan International Studies University in Chongqing, China from 2007 to 2008. To be able to live in the former Nationalist wartime capital and Mao's base in Yan'an gave me confidence to return home and expand my research into the era of the 1950s expulsion from the China mission.

To my surprise, I again encountered the wisdom of Thomas Berry in a 1956 *Worldmission* article. This was a time of worldwide anti-Communism. The last Passionist China missionaries had been expelled from China in 1955. Instead of accentuating the chaos of the moment, Thomas offered what might be interpreted then to be a radical, yet compassionate viewpoint. Although the political reality of China had changed, he did not think this signaled an end to the study of missiology in China. Rather adaptation might be in order. Thomas was concerned, and had undoubtedly seen firsthand, that some of the China hands who had returned from their mission to their home culture were struggling from what we now know as post-traumatic stress. "Communists or no Communists, get on with our work," he wrote. He feared the rise of anti-intellectualism among these veteran Catholic China hands: "Of these missionaries who returned to this country," he wrote, "none have yet manifested the ability or the interest for serious study." To remedy the situation, Thomas proposed that a "group of dedicated American Catholic Sinologists is a basic requisite. It is not necessary that all be priests."

Thomas thought it was essential to demystify China: It is "no more a mystery than any other country or any other people. The only mystery is our ineptitude and lack of interest in fundamental studies required to give us some real insight into these wonderful people and their amazingly 'Christian' culture." Thomas lauded the Mission Institute at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York, and the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey. In subsequent years Thomas fostered relationships with both of these universities.

Moreover, Thomas promoted the idea that value existed in pursuing diversified scholarship on China. “We must distinguish clearly between the missionary, the missiologist, and the Orientalist.” He then questioned why the “very large portion of American Sinologists, victims themselves of pseudo-liberalism, are taking a very mild or even approving attitude toward the present [China] regime there.” Thomas then examined the relationship between study and mission. “A first lesson for us to learn is that prayer for China is no substitute for study, as study is no substitute for prayer. Each should be joined together.” Overall, this article offered me compelling insights on China that promoted engagement rather than disengagement.

In retrospect, the openness of Thomas Berry to understand China that was evident in his 1956 *Worldmission* article and the 1975 *Cross Currents* article continues to provoke reflection. Since coming across that 1956 article some years ago, I have found the three points cited above helpful; each presents a perspective and challenge that guide me as I continue to study and personally contribute to shape the Passionist China story. Important, first, is the reminder to stay focused on a specific area of China study. As much as possible, this has meant my concentrating on making readily available to scholars the Passionist historical narrative on China found in the PCC. Likewise, it is good to pay attention to how the voice of justice is served when there are so many injustices in contemporary China. Given the multiple ways to engage with China, this had led me to be a much more creative and compassionate scholar than I had ever envisioned. For example, accepting invitations to participate in ongoing scholarly exchanges has provided me the opportunity to embrace and increase mutual compassion of the mind and cross-cultural understanding. Lastly, the importance of prayer, penance, solitude and a concentration to keep the passion of Jesus on the cross sustains Passionist religious life and those associated with that charism. Thomas Berry’s assertion that prayer and study of China are “joined together” remains soul-searching.

### **Conclusion**

The study of China offers the means to understand where the legacy and inspiration of the Passionist story of Thomas Berry has joined with my Passionist story. As I have explored in this reflection, my hope is that others might continue to ask how the Passionist story of Thomas Berry

continues to manifest itself for all who study and meditate on his writings. Additionally, it might also provide the impetus to enact his vision in creative and viable ways.

### **An Afterstory**

By the mid-1990s the Great Red Oak on the Passionist property at the Riverdale Research Center in the Bronx was getting old. Fear had increased that a bad storm could uproot it and cause damage to the historic Center house. After consultation and reflection, the Passionists decided it was best to have contractors take down the tree. At that time I was a resident member of the Riverdale Passionist community; like many I had heard the Great Red Oak had been a sapling when Henry Hudson first glanced upon the Palisades as he sailed the *Half Moon* up the Hudson River in 1609. Since Thomas Berry had taught me and others under that Great Red Oak, it seemed to represent his story as well as the sacred story of the Earth. So, as workmen systematically cut and carved, I walked to the work area and picked up a solid piece of the great oak. Since then, it has been safely preserved in the PHA as a unique artifact that will continue to assist us to remember and tell the Passionist story of Thomas Berry into the future.