

Thomas Berry CP: The Passionist Heritage in The Great Work

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I am very happy to offer these reflections on Thomas Berry within the context of his life and formation as a Passionist religious and priest. And I thank Herman Greene for organizing this Colloquium and supporting such a presentation.

First a disclaimer: this paper makes no pretense of being an academic presentation or commentary on the thinking of Thomas. It is concerned with the life of Thomas as a Passionist and the influence the Passionist community had on him and he on the community. I believe it is an aspect of his life little known and, in some instances, not fully appreciated. Although some would disagree with this approach, I do speak from my experience as a member of the Passionist community for some 30 years who lived with Thomas and as one who has spanned both pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II developments within the community. As director of the formation program for our theology students, I enlisted Tom's help for various presentations, and I was also his Provincial superior for a number of years as well as a friend and student of his thinking, frequently visiting him in Greensboro.

I. Introduction

Thomas described himself as a cultural historian and a geologist. I would paraphrase these approaches as teacher and mystic, namely as one who had a great desire to teach, study, and communicate the evolution of cultures and as one who, in his broodings or meditations, became spiritually in touch with the mysterious processes of the universe and Earth—a priest-shaman, as he would often say. In developing these two aspects of Thomas's life within the Passionist community, I found the great phrase of St. Irenaeus of the second century to be appropriate: "Gloria Dei, homo vivens"—the glory of God is the human person fully alive or, as Gregory Baum, a Canadian theologian, translated: God is what happens to someone

on their way to becoming fully human. I believe Thomas sought to bring the human community into a new consciousness, a new completeness—fully alive and thus being part of the Earth community and not *apart* from it so that God is glorified when the human sings and celebrates with the rest of creation.

To understand these two approaches, I propose to treat the Passionist culture historically, to see Thomas within that culture as teacher and contemplative, and finally, his prophetic role within that same community. Thomas often said that it is all a question of story and again, to tell the story of anything, you have to tell the story of everything. So, here is my story.

II. The Congregation of the Passion—Brief History and Paul Daneo

The community and culture that Thomas Berry accepted and until his death vowed his life to was the Passionist community. Paul Daneo, who was born in 1694 and died in 1775, founded the Passionists. Paul's early education was sporadic, either at home or with various priest teachers, but he quickly excelled in all his studies. Early in his twenties he was going to join the crusade of 1714, but as a result of prayer and a series of interior visions, he set out on a determined path to live a life of poverty and to preach the gospel. In a later vision he saw Mary dressed in a black habit with a sign over her heart with the inscription: "Passion of Jesus Christ," and thus the quest began to gather companions and found a community dedicated to prayer and intensive missionary activity. Years later, in an attempt to get approval from Roman authorities for his community, he was refused and abruptly thrown out of the Vatican. His determination, zeal, and holiness were soon recognized, however, along with his dramatic preaching of missions throughout Italy. Befriended by officials and the Pope himself, he was able to establish what was called at that time, "The Congregation of the Discalced (not wearing shoes) Clerics of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ."

If we take culture to mean the behavior patterns, the arts, and the beliefs of particular groups, we can outline a certain culture that

has perdured in the Passionist congregation. This culture flourished through the writings and Rule of Life written by Paul Daneo, as well as the practices established by his followers. Paul became known as Paul of the Cross—later canonized as St. Paul of the Cross, and every Passionist followed that practice with a new name and title: thus William Berry became Thomas of the Mother of God and later, Thomas Mary Berry.

A. Charism of the Congregation

A charism can mean a special talent or spiritual gift that bestows power, influence, or knowledge and, for religious orders, it denotes their spiritual orientation and special characteristics of the order's mission and values. For Paul of the Cross, his charism, and that of the community, was to contemplate and preach the Passion of Christ. Paul frequently quoted the words of St. Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified." Besides the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience taken by all religious, Paul of the Cross went further in strengthening the charism of the congregation by adding a fourth vow, namely to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Christ in mind and heart and to give witness to it in word and deed.

Paul of the Cross often called prayer, penance, poverty, and solitude the spirit of the congregation, and this spirit enhanced and gave nourishment to the charism of preaching the Passion of Christ. Symbols are powerful expressions of various realities, especially as found in nature, and need to be controlled by so-called rituals that should neither suffocate nor be too expansive. So what rituals are to symbols, so too for Paul, the spirit was to the charism of the community, namely keeping a balance between being too powerful or too weak. For Passionists, a contemplative spirit of prayer, penance, poverty, and solitude held the charismatic preaching of the Passion in balance.

B. Prayer: Rhineland Mystics, Geography

Paul was insistent on long periods of prayer for his community.

Up to the 1960's, the worldwide *horarium* called for chanting the entire Divine Office: the canonical hours of Matins from 2 a.m. to 3 a.m. in the early morning, again at 6 am for Lauds, and the rest of the Hours throughout the day with at least two hours of silent prayer together in the chapel. It was said that Passionists were Trappists at home and Jesuits on the road as preachers of missions and retreats.

The language of Paul of the Cross regarding prayer is found in the writings of the Rhineland Mystics, especially that of John Tauler of Germany. Paul devoured Tauler's writings, freely using them in his own voluminous letters on the spiritual life and recommending him to others. His predilection for Tauler was completely original as a mystic, since Tauler at that time was little known in Italy and, being suspect of Protestant and Quietistic leanings, was everywhere ostracized. Paul also used John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. This group of contemplatives, the Rhineland Mystics, was sometimes called Nature Mystics and again, Friends of God. Hildegard of Bingen was one of those who launched this European brand of mysticism, but their father was the Dominican priest and theologian, Meister Eckhart, from Germany. John Tauler and Henry Suso were medieval mendicants of the Dominican Order who were disciples of Meister Eckhart. This mystical and contemplative tradition from Germany was like a deep underground stream, often hidden and at odds with the organizational church, spanning the time of the Black Death and the Avignon papacy, which flowed through Europe and appeared like springs in Spain, with Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and in England, with Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton, author of the *Cloud of the Unknowing*. These mystics emphasized such themes as the birth of God within us and the Incarnation; spiritual motherhood; nature being in God before creation and God remaining in nature after creation; and the creative power of the "word" which becomes the world and makes the world divine. Tauler, like Thomas Merton, was an active mystic in his teaching and preaching. He did emphasize that contemplation also goes back to the Passion and Death of Christ. From these mystical waters and the writings of Tauler, Paul of the Cross drank deeply and developed his own emphasis on mystical death as part of the contemplative life, as well as the themes of "the ground of being and divine rebirth."

In his Rule of Life, Paul called for solitary walks so that in silence one could commune with God through nature. He often spoke of the divine presence in all the wonders of nature; they were the voice of God. He was known for speaking and listening to the flowers, the woods, the sea, and the nightingale as they loudly proclaimed the praises of God. One time, while walking in the woods, he remarked to his companion: “Ah do you not hear the trees and shrubs crying out: Love God, love God.”¹

The mysticism of Paul of the Cross translated into where he chose to build his monasteries—deep in the woods or on a high hill or overlooking the sea. The preacher, he felt, returning from arduous missionary work needed to refresh his soul by being close to nature in silence and prayer.

C. Education/Study

Although Paul had a literary and humanistic education, his theology and philosophy were mainly self-taught in addition to receiving spiritual direction from his Franciscan mentors. He was insistent that his religious community members, both priests and young students, spend much time in study and adhere to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. We read in the original Rule and Constitutions: “Let all the schools of the Congregation firmly adhere to the unshaken doctrine of the Angelic Doctor and let all the teachers be strictly obliged to teach it.”² Thomas Berry would always insist that he was a Thomist, and he took many of his principal themes from the works of Thomas Aquinas.

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1. Constante Brovetto, “Mystical Death and Divine Nativity,” in *Introduction to the Spirituality of St. Paul of the Cross*, trans. Simon Wood, and Silvan Rouse, (Rome: The Passionist, 1955), 40. Brovetto also mentions that Paul, in his letters, urged his correspondents “to accustom themselves to see a sermon in nature” and “when you are walking alone...lift up your spirit and listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sky, the sun and the whole world” (39).
 2. Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ, *Rule and Constitutions* (Rome: 1984), 55.

III. Thomas Berry within the Passionist Culture

A. Initial Formation Years

Into this culture of the Passionist community stepped young William Nathan Berry, a quiet seeker of truth from Greensboro, North Carolina, who was energized with his own charisma of nature mysticism and a missionary desire to explore and teach various cultures. What I call his nature mysticism was rooted in an experience he had when he was eleven years old of gazing at a meadow with its flowers, hearing the sounds of the crickets, and seeing the clouds in the sky that convinced him that all human activity had to support the meadow as part of the wonder and beauty of creation. He called this experience “a magic moment” and it remained with him for the rest of his life and appeared in many of his writings. He was seeking a place “to brood,” as he would so often say and fondly remember, and this brooding, pondering, or contemplating would later serve to help him probe and understand the cultures of Asia, the Indigenous peoples, and, ultimately, the mysteries of the universe and the beauty of Earth.

As with many young vocations to religious life, Thomas was first attracted to the community when he met a Passionist priest, Fr. Egbert Albert, preaching in the area and then, through research on the various religious orders, he found in the Passionists what he was looking for, namely solitude and a place to study, read, and partake in missionary activity. There, he felt he could think and be independent. Although the Passionists counseled him to become a diocesan priest, Thomas insisted that he wanted the religious life of the monastery and not the priesthood. So, after high school and a year of college, he was accepted as a postulant into the community.

Holy Cross Seminary in Dunkirk, New York, was where he completed his second year of college, as education in the preparatory seminary called for high school and two years of college. Then, the postulant entered the novitiate for a year of intensive introduction to Passionist religious life, followed by three years of philosophy and four years of theology as a professed religious of the community. At Dunkirk, Thomas found the Lake Erie beachfront and the pine

groves on the property to be places where he could walk and meditate. Early on, especially in the novitiate, he felt a sense of foreboding of what the industrial world would do to the planet. He pondered his vocation as one of warning against these mechanisms that would destroy, because, as he later said, “What we make, we become.”

B. Post-Novitiate Studies in Preparation for Priesthood

It is interesting to note that Paul of the Cross began as a hermit and did not envision himself as an ordained priest. However, establishing a new religious order and desiring to preach the Passion would ultimately be facilitated by his ordination to the priesthood. Something similar happened to young Thomas, who saw himself as a hermit or monk, but soon realized that for what he wanted to do, he would accept ordination. Later, he would sometimes refer to his ordination as an entrance into a kind of “shamanic priesthood.”

After the introductory year to religious life, called the novitiate, Thomas took vows and became a professed religious. He found the daily rhythm of chanting the psalms and hours of silent prayer conducive to his contemplative nature. In a very real sense, these ancient monastic practices would remind him of the cosmic dimension of the universe and the old maxim “to pray always,” which for Thomas became a prayer in union with the world already at prayer and a cosmos celebrating a liturgy of wonder and praise.

As regards his education in philosophy and theology, Thomas did mention some outstanding teachers from the Passionist community, such as Simon Yungfleisch and Ralph Gorman, but he also did extensive reading on his own. He read much of the great classical literature, including modern European writers, St. Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. While completing his studies in the New York City area monasteries, he took advantage of the opera, the museums, and the abundant resources of the city. He would often say that he led a medieval life in the monastery but enjoyed what the city had to offer, and this included the social activities of the Catholic Worker where he met Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and other peace activists as well as those who were poor and homeless.³

3. Robert Carbonneau, “Interview with Thomas Berry,” DVD (Elon, NC: Elon University, 2004).

Perhaps it was these experiences within and outside the monastery that prompted Thomas to speak so warmly about compassion. In an interview conducted by Fr. Rob Carbonneau, who is the Province Archivist and a scholar of Chinese culture and language, Thomas spoke of the mystery of redemption as God's compassion and that Passionists, in contemplating this mystery, became Compassionists—a good name for the community, he thought. He went on to say that compassion was the key to the meaning of life and, although other religions had this sense of compassion, Christianity brought a special dimension because God entered into human suffering. Compassion, or suffering, was one of the deepest mysteries of the universe in which love and suffering created their own wisdom.⁴

C. Thomas: Missionary and Teacher; China and Germany

After ordination, every young priest was quickly introduced to Sunday preaching through weekend assistance in parishes and, at the same time, received training in preparing and delivering formal sermons for missions and retreats. This special year was called "Sacred Eloquence," but it soon became evident that Thomas was not so eloquent a preacher. He often joked about parishes calling up and requesting that he not be sent back again!

His desire to teach and be a missionary in China, along with the study of languages and various Asian cultures, only increased with time. As a young boy he was already attracted to the Chinese culture, its religions, and especially Confucianism. Since the Passionists had a foundation in China, it was not unusual for someone to volunteer for that assignment. So, after he had obtained his doctorate at Catholic University in Washington, DC, he was off to Peking, China. It would, however, be a short stay because of the Communist uprising, but, like the meadow experience, the enduring qualities of the Chinese people with their strength to survive and protect their beautiful and rich heritage would always remain with him.

The years following his return from China were filled with the study of languages and various cultures. He also taught for a few years at the preparatory seminary in Dunkirk, and his students have

4. Ibid.

fond and often interesting memories of his teaching style. Fr. Victor Hoagland remembers the time he came into the first day of class and gave them the Communist manifesto for study and followed it up the next day with Augustine's *City of God*.⁵ Needless to say, the superiors did not appreciate this unusual curriculum for young seminarians.

In an attempt to return to Asia, Thomas, believing he would get close to his beloved China, volunteered as a chaplain in the army during the Korean Conflict. However, he was assigned to Germany and there, using his own innovative methods, he did his best to educate the soldiers and their families in Christian doctrine and practice.

Upon his return, Thomas once again renewed his insatiable appetite to digest various approaches to other cultures and languages. For him the missionary and preaching charism of the congregation was translated into his desire to teach. Although the community had sent many young priests for further education, including doctoral studies, it was for the purpose of the internal education of seminarians in Dunkirk and the professed students taking philosophy and theology. Teaching outside of the community was not seen as part of Passionist activities; the community was founded to preach the Passion of Christ and nothing else.

D. Post Vatican II and the Passionist Community

1. Emergence of New Forms of Community Life and Activities

Following the Second Vatican Council, religious communities were asked to revise and update their Rules and Constitutions in light of the approaches outlined in the documents of the Council. The Council had emphasized the need for the church to adapt to the modern world, to other religions, and to its own internal life and worship. For the most part, religious communities faithfully carried out this directive. In one sense, pre and post-Vatican II life within the church and religious communities was similar to a Newtonian

5. Victor Hoagland, personal conversation with author, Immaculate Conception Monastery, Jamaica, NY, 2014

worldview and that of Einstein, between a fixed mechanistic order of reality and that of an evolutionary world of relative realities. The transformation process was huge and, for many, very difficult. In a vocational film from the Passionists, a priest said his life was so regulated that if you gave him the time of day in ten years, he could tell you precisely what he would be doing. That kind of a fixed approach to Passionist monastic life was slowly changing.

New forms of community life began to flourish in accordance with the revised Rule and Constitution of the Congregation. For example, there was a Charismatic community using spirit-filled expressions of praying and preaching, a House of Greater Solitude that followed the previous strict observance, and smaller communities emerged in neighborhoods dedicated to preaching and simpler small group living. Within this context the Riverdale Center of Religious Research founded by Thomas was new, but well within the view of expressing the Passionist charism. I was once asked how I, as Provincial, dealt with these various groups, and my answer was that when I was with the Charismatics, I prayed in tongues, in the House of Greater Solitude, I was up at 2:00 a.m. in the morning, and at Riverdale—well, how do you capture the thinking and enthusiasm of Thomas Berry? One listens and learns!

2. Speaking Engagements, Academic Conferences at the Center, Other Countries

During this enthusiastic time within the church, Thomas was in constant demand for lectures and workshops at academic conferences and universities. He spoke to religious communities as they looked to their future in a changing world. In one instance he was requested to present an article for the Superiors General of Women Religious in Rome entitled, "Apostolic Women Religious as a Voice of the Earth." Little did Thomas know how profoundly he would influence religious orders, not only then, but even more so today.

At the same time, his courses at Fordham University were well attended, and many of today's scholars in ecology and spirituality owe much to his guidance and generous giving of time and insights. The Riverdale Center itself offered numerous workshops and lec-

tures and hosted the meetings of the Teilhard Society, of which Thomas was for many years president. At the Center, Thomas produced an outstanding number of scholarly and timely papers, the *Riverdale Papers*, that he freely shared with whomever came to visit him. And, of course, there was the usual cup of tea with him as he asked his favorite question: “Now, what are you doing?” But Thomas could easily depart from an in-depth conference or presentation to explore other avenues of art and culture, or describe the geography and trees in the Riverdale area. One evening after a long day’s workshop, he invited a small group to the back room, or salon, of the house for a reading, and there we listened to the Four Quartets read by T.S. Eliot himself while Thomas commented on the same—truly a delightful experience.

Paul of the Cross envisioned his Congregation spreading to other countries, and he had a special predilection for England. It is interesting to note that one of the founding fathers of the Passionists in England, now Blessed Dominic Barbari, was the one who received John Henry Cardinal Newman into the Catholic Church. In that spirit, Thomas was a missionary to other countries where he was invited to speak or participate in conferences. Two places where Thomas did outstanding work were Canada and the Philippines. In Canada he conducted an annual workshop on ecology issues at Port Burwell, Ontario, where the Canadian Passionists had a retreat house. He was also instrumental in assisting with the design of the rebuilt parish church of St. Gabriel in Toronto. The church’s website has this to say: “The Passionist community commissioned Roberto Chiotti (Larkin Architect) to design the new church. Chiotti is a Canadian architect who is also trained in theology, especially in eco-theology arising from the wisdom of Father Thomas Berry—the Passionist thinker whose work inspired many in the ecological movement around the world.”⁶

Thomas was a visiting lecturer in the Philippines where the American Passionists had made an earlier foundation in the southern island of Mindanao and fostered the growth of Filipino vocations, who now have their own province. At the invitation of Fr.

6. *Église Verte* Green Church, St. Gabriel’s Passionist Parish, Toronto, ON, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://stgabrielparish.ca/who-we-are/green-church/>.

Rex Mansmann, who had worked for years with indigenous peoples and particularly the T'boli in the mountainous regions, Thomas came and, through seminars and consultations, helped establish "The Great Work Foundation" that is still in existence today.⁷ The Foundation strives to implement the vision of the Great Work through education and practical applications with regard to land management and agriculture. There is always the struggle to keep their ancestral lands from those, especially corporations, who want it for development.

3. Prayer: Contemplative Life, Nature, Cosmos

Although much of the discipline and rigor of Passionist community life was changing at this time, Thomas maintained his own prayer discipline. Thomas was quite reticent about his personal prayer life and piety, but in several interviews Thomas explained his own prayer as one in union with Earth already at prayer praising the creator. He placed his emphasis on compassion, which is best defined by Meister Eckhart "as the keen awareness of the interdependence of all living beings which are all part of one another. Whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion." Thus Thomas would acknowledge the beauty of the planet but lament the destruction taking place, especially as it affected the future of our children.

His reflection and prayer led him to see, as he states in one of his papers, now published in *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, that the Wisdom of the Cross and the Wisdom of the Universe are aspects of a single wisdom.⁸ For Thomas, the redemptive cross had to be kept in balance with the redemptive or transformative process of the universe. In this he was echoing his understanding of the Early Fathers of the Church who placed the "Book of Nature" on a par with the Book of the Bible and, oftentimes, said that nature was more important. Thomas's prayerful insights were also in the context of great sacrifices—"moments of grace" as he called them—

7. Great Work Foundation, "A Movement to Advance Philippine Tribal Society," accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.greatworkfoundation.org/>.

8. Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 82-95.

that both the cross and nature represent. Like Teilhard, Thomas saw Christ not only in the mystery of the cross, but also in the great fulfillment of the cosmos, the Cosmic Christ. Perhaps, one might describe his outlook on prayer by again quoting Meister Eckhart: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me,” which I might paraphrase for Thomas: The eye with which I see the divine in nature is the same eye with which nature sees me.

IV. Prophetic Role in the Community

A. Trials, Difficulties, Support (Superior General and Provincial Chapters)

1. Teaching and Superiors

For some years Thomas endured the suffering of not being able to teach. His provincial at that time, citing misgivings about his orthodoxy, forbade him to do so and assigned him to the Jamaica monastery and the front door apostolate. This was a critical time for him as he thought of leaving and finding a place where he could fulfill his passion for teaching. He eventually accepted his role of what we called “being on the door,” thanks to friends who likened this apostolate to the work of Confucius who opened the door of the mind to many people. In this capacity, I fondly remember him serving tea to my parents on one of their visits. I also remember that, as professed students, we were not supposed to talk to Fr. Thomas for reasons not given at that time, but we suspected it was because of his radical ideas. No one, however, could forbid us from going to confession with whomever we chose, so we had long chats with him during confessions.

2. Superior General; St. John’s and Fordham Universities

The Superior General, Theodore Foley, intervened and released Thomas from this purgatory of the front door and allowed him to teach outside of the community. It should be noted that Theodore had a broader vision of the Congregation and its mission than did

some superiors on the local level. Thomas's difficulties with his own Provincial were partially due not only to strict interpretation of Passionist Ministry, but also personal issues, especially in their understanding of theology.

When Thomas was teaching at St. John's University he was involved, although minimally, in a protest against the administration. The President of St. John's fired all who, criticizing the administration without due process, signed a petition. Thomas defended his involvement, but, along with other professors, was terminated. Again the Superior General, Theodore, stood up for Thomas and dismissed any process from Rome barring him from teaching. In his personal letters to Thomas, Theodore assured him of his rightful place within the Congregation and the contribution he was making. Once freed from St. John's, Thomas found his true and lasting teaching home at Fordham University.

3. Provincial Chapter of 1974: Riverdale Center in the Bronx, New York

The original foundation of the Passionists was a large Victorian house in Riverdale, with adjacent property located on the banks of the Hudson River that faced the impressive cliffs of the Palisades in New Jersey. Eventually a new large retreat house was built on the property and, although Thomas lived in the retreat house for a while, he eventually moved with a few others to the "old house." At the 1974 Provincial Chapter, the highest local legislative body, the work and reputation of Thomas was recognized and the "old house" became his Riverdale Center for Religious Research. Necessary accommodations and restructuring took place, which the Province supported. The activities of the Center are too numerous to detail, but Fr. Columkille Regan, retreat director at that time, remembers offering Thomas any number of available times on the yearly calendar for his programs. Unfortunately, Thomas could not operate in such a planning mode, so his programs usually took place in the Center. During the years, 1975 to 1987, that Thomas was President of the American Teilhard Association, monthly meetings were held during the academic year where there was a lecture, discussion, and

potluck dinner.

Thomas produced an enormous volume of written papers and he eventually had a secretary to type them. Eileen Doyle became a fixture at the Center and would often comment on how massive Thomas's output was and how much she enjoyed learning from this gentle priest. During these years, a few Passionists were assigned to assist Thomas in the Center's management as well as studying with him in order to continue his vision and work. Of all of those religious, Brother Conrad Federspiel stood out as a companion to Thomas and assisted him in the programs that were offered. He also took care of the house and grounds as well as the many visitors who came to consult with Thomas, and he loved to regale us with the list of famous people he had met. He often said that being educated by Thomas in history, the works of Teilhard, and ecology was such a wonderful privilege. He was a strong promoter of Thomas within the community.

4. Colloquium à Deux: Debate on the Hudson

The work of Thomas Berry and his approach to creation and redemption gradually captured the minds of Passionists in other Provinces, especially in Europe and Asia. One of those who delved into the thought and writings of Thomas was Stanislaus Breton, a French Passionist. Through the sponsorship of Stauros International, the Congregation's international organization for the academic promotion of the Cross and Passion of Christ, a meeting was set up so that Stanislaus could have an opportunity to discuss ecology with Thomas. This conversation or dialogue—better still, debate—took place at the Center. I mention this because Stanislaus was a leading European philosopher and expert on Marxism. He was imprisoned during the Second World War and brought much of that experience to his writings. The European Passionists held him in high esteem—a very gentle and kind man.

Thomas did not have too much to say about this debate, but Stanislaus did write up some reflections on the meeting and some of the *Riverdale Papers* afterwards in one of the "Stauros Bulletins."⁹

9. Stanislaus Breton, *Soteriology or Cosmo-theology?* *Stauros Bulletin* (Leuven,

The text demonstrated that Stanislaus had read many of the *Riverdale Papers* and saw Thomas as continuing and expanding the thought of Teilhard. It was also evident that he appreciated the works of Thomas, who, as he said, had the key to the Riverdale garden and was where Stanislaus found the primordial Silence, the birthplace of the Word, and the promise of a universe. At one point, when Thomas spoke of the coming ecological age, Stanislaus wrote, "He raised his voice, a tear illumines his compassion for a battered mother." They parted friends but with fundamental disagreements regarding redemption and cosmology. Still Stanislaus summed up the "ambitious and magnificent project" of Thomas with this synthetic and interesting definition: "The task of our times involves taking the responsibility for building a new history, at once cosmic and human, physical and spiritual, in order to bring into being by a third mediation (man-Earth)—specific to our ecological age and in which East and West are united—the values of diversification-complexification, interiority and intercommunion which will make of man, by his consciousness of the universe, the new man, authentically universal and fully human."¹⁰

B. Prophetic Vision; Three Mediations

I would like to think that Thomas's prophetic role and his vision quest for a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship became his passion, his Great Work. The result was a Passionist priest-shaman filled with compassion for Earth and its future, as well as a belief in the divine workings of the universe. Like the beautiful window in the Chartres Cathedral depicting the evangelists on the shoulders of four Old Testament prophets, so too Thomas relied on many previous prophets, such as: Aquinas, Dante, Christopher Dawson, and Teilhard. His vision would be fulfilled in the next great era of history, which he called the Ecozoic era. Whereas Paul of the Cross would frequently call his vision for the community "the Good Work," Thomas had his "Great Work."

Thomas frequently outlined the arc of history in three media-

Belgium: Stauros International Association, 1979), 3.

10. Ibid, 25.

tions: human-divine; human-human; Earth-human. Now was the time to reverse the degradation of Earth and restore a primitive and mutually enhancing relationship between the human and Earth itself, with all its variety of life forms and wondrous aspects. I believe Thomas envisioned the community taking up this third mediation by expanding its preaching of the Passion of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth to the Passion of the Cosmic Christ and the redemption and sacrificial process already present in the universe, and presently in the passion and suffering of Earth. Our retreat houses and parishes, before being closed for financial reasons, were ideal places to explore this relationship—their locations had the perfect landscapes and magnificent views of nature. While many Passionists in both American provinces and in other countries implemented his vision in their preaching, it did not become a focus to be explored or translated into a way of carrying out the charism of the congregation. Many Passionists objected that people would not understand this so called eco-theology, but the audiences that Thomas addressed, particularly the young college students and so-called millennials, reacted with enthusiasm and a renewed sense of Christianity on hearing his message. They were also open to understanding and appreciating the spiritual dimension of nature and the universe.

C. Province Meetings: Reciprocity

Thomas often quoted Confucius who, when asked to sum up his teaching in one word, replied “reciprocity.” In that sense there was mutuality between Thomas and the community. Locally, when Thomas lived in Riverdale, one could find him early in the morning in the retreat house dining room ready and waiting to discuss the topics of the day with members of the community as they arrived for breakfast.

It was during the years of 1986-87 that the Provincial, Fr. Columkille Regan, gathered a group to do some serious planning for the Province. Columkille recalled that Thomas so mesmerized the group with his vision for the future that he practically took over the whole process. The Provincial knew that, for his purposes, he had to take another approach to the planning process.

As regards Province meetings, Thomas was invited to give a major presentation at the Philadelphia Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Passionists' arrival in the United States in 2002. There, Thomas gave his "Christianity in the 21st Century" paper with interesting references to the history of the Passionists in the country and their contributions. The celebration took place in one of the large hotels in order to accommodate the hundreds of invited guests. Thomas had an overbooked crowd at his talk and it was well received. He took this occasion to outline the devastation of the planet by the industrial world and the efforts being made at sustainability. He saw for the Passionist community a progression for preaching the Passion of Christ, namely the Passion of Christ in Christ himself, the Passion of Christ in the Christian people, and the Passion of Christ in the entire Earth community. He returned to his familiar theme of hope for the future as found in the souls and desires of young people. Like St. Paul's challenge to Peter at the first council, he called for a transformation, a new exodus from the past to a future coming toward us. For this transformation process, he turned to the words of Fr. Jose Orbegozo, Passionist Superior General at the 45th General Chapter when he spoke of the need for the renewal of religious life, not just through the reform of legislation or structure, but through something far greater that he described in these words:

The need [is] to die, abandon houses and ministries rather than settle for half measures and capitulations vis-à-vis the demands of the religious life. Holding back that death only serves to block or hold back the renewal of our Passionist lives or our opening up to alternative models of life and mission. Appeal [is] sometimes made to providence and tradition in order to legitimize that delay. Frequently however, there's a deeper reason, the fear of dying charismatically or the fear of incapacity to live evangelically.

This statement appealed to Thomas, which he often quoted and cited as an opening to his own vision for Passionist life and ministry.

It was at the Provincial Chapter of 2007-2008 that Thomas was

honored and spoke at the evening session. He came before the assembly clothed in his Passionists habit and briefly spoke of the transition to the 21st century and his own efforts to foster this awakening that, for him, meant recovering the sense of the Sacred as part of the destiny of the Passion of Christ itself. He concluded on a note of gratitude to the community which had sustained him in his efforts.

D. Legacy

It was around 2006-2007 that a proposal was drawn up and given to the Provincial, Joseph Jones, outlining a project to continue the legacy of Thomas by the Passionist community. The original proposal read: "It is proposed that the Passionist Community, Province of St. Paul of the Cross, establish an Institute to preserve, develop and carry on the work and ideas of Thomas Berry. His work has been significant in the area of Ecology which he has outlined in his book, *The Great Work*, and in his conception of the Ecozoic Age. The Institute might be named the "The Thomas Berry Institute." The Provincial approved the idea and a committee was formed to explore various possibilities. Discussions lasted over several years ranging from using the Riverdale Center, other places, or a special Chair of Studies or Institute at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago that was founded by several religious communities including the Passionists. It was hoped that progress could be made so that such an Institute or undertaking could be announced at the annual fundraiser, called the Passionist Presence dinner, during which Thomas would be honored.

I remember going to see Thomas in Greensboro at the committee's request to receive his permission and blessing on the project. Thomas was very cordial and, after assuring him about the viability of such an undertaking and the support this project had from both provinces, he agreed. It was his sister, Margaret Berry, who helped facilitate this meeting. Margaret was always there to help and support Thomas when he lived in his little hermitage and, later, when he joined her at the Well-Spring Retirement Center. She had carefully preserved all documentation referring to Thomas and his undertakings, and sent them to Harvard University. This documentation

known as The Thomas Berry Collection, for which Margaret is the liaison, is part of Harvard University's Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives. The attempt, however, at creating a Thomas Berry Legacy within the Passionist Community, after much time, energy, and meetings did not succeed for a variety of reasons.

V. Conclusion

A. Defining Thomas Berry

Thomas Berry is beyond a clear definition, but within the Passionist community he does have several reference points. He began his life in Greensboro, North Carolina, and eventually returned there. He looked for a place to brood and meditate and found the contemplative life with the Passionists. Like Paul of the Cross who first began as a hermit, so too Thomas had his hermitages on the Hudson and on the old farm property in Greensboro. In the meantime, this active mystic taught us all how to reverence the divine in the universe, how to see the Cross and Passion of Christ in a cosmic dimension, and how to respect the beauty, wonder, and intimacy of Earth, our home.

So, I have attempted to define Thomas in terms of teacher and mystic within the Passionist tradition. Sr. Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun and spiritual writer, gave me an insight into his passion for teaching. In a conversation with her, she said that after many years she realized that she was a writer first and a Benedictine religious second. So, too, Thomas was a teacher first in all that he undertook and then a Passionist. However, it was a mutually enhancing relationship.

B. Sophia: Divine Feminine and the Four Wisdoms

"Wisdom" was a word frequently used by Thomas. In the early Jewish scriptures, wisdom was the inherent principle that guided and filled the universe with the presence of God. Wisdom, or Sophia, was personified in Old Testament wisdom literature as a female figure. St. Irenaeus said: "God made everything through his

Logos and made everything beautiful through his Sophia.” The role of Sophia in the divine activity reached a new level in the 9th century depiction of the Holy Trinity in a Bavarian Church. There, the Holy Spirit is in the form of a woman.¹¹ Could this early emphasis on the Divine Feminine, Sophia or Wisdom in biblical and theological writings, have been an influence on Thomas and his prophetic insight in naming the wisdom of women as the most important of all the wisdoms to guide us into the Ecozoic Age? Also, Paul of the Cross’s early foundational vision of Mary wearing the Passionist habit, the place of devotion to Mary in the Passionist community, and Thomas’s taking the title “Mother of God” might have contributed to his emphasis on the wisdom of women. The thinking and writings of Thomas had a great influence on religious communities of women and their leadership personnel. Even today at this time (2014), that same leadership, the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious), is in the headlines as they are again being questioned by Rome about their orthodoxy. Various commentaries on this debate mention Thomas Berry as one of the leading *influences* on their stance towards the world and religion.

Perhaps the four wisdoms that Thomas named as guides for the new age are also indicators of his own developmental thinking and journey towards the Ecozoic Age. 1) The wisdom of classical civilizations: Thomas used the wisdom from past civilizations, especially thinkers from the Chinese and Greek cultures as well as Aquinas, Dante, and Dawson. 2) The wisdom of indigenous people ; he praised and honored the wisdom of native peoples, especially our own native nations, as having a deep spirituality based on their love and respect for Earth and their sensitivity to the elements of creation. 3) The wisdom of science: Thomas accepted the new wisdom coming from science that shapes the modern world and scientists’ writings on evolutionary development, especially the contributions of Teilhard de Chardin. 4) The wisdom of women, which brings us to the divine feminine in creation, Sophia, the hope for the future.

11. Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1998), 391.

C. Virtues

Thomas had many outstanding qualities, or virtues, and here are just a few that were his hallmark within the community. His gentleness made him a true gentleman who took interest in what other Passionists were doing. His respect for others made it rare to hear an unkind word from him, no matter what disagreements they might have had. His deep sense of gratitude for all that the community had done for him was a sentiment he quite frequently repeated. Here I would like to again quote Meister Eckhart: "If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'thank you' that would suffice." Thomas practiced an important aspect of Passionist life, namely hospitality. Whenever people visited him, they always received a warm and genuine welcome from him. Thomas also had a profound humility regarding the importance of his work or his name, not unlike the final days of Thomas Aquinas. Like Teilhard, he had an abiding hope in the future and placed that hope in his belief in the goodness of the world. Lastly, the virtue of compassion was an abiding presence with him, so much so that he saw it as animating and flowing from the contemplation of the Passion of Christ in the world and the universe.

D. A Final Note of Gratitude: "Going Home"

I conclude with Thomas's touching and deeply felt letter to the Provincial, Fr. Terence Kristofak, and to the community in 2005. Again we find his abiding sense of gratitude, his love and concern for the community, and one of his familiar themes, namely "going home." During his final years at the Well-Spring Retirement Community with his dear sister Margaret, he would always inquire of us about the community and its activities. Thomas may have been absent physically from the community but never psychologically or spiritually. As he said to Fr. Rob Carbonneau: "I couldn't have done what I did in any other context." In that context here is his letter:

Dear Terry,

To yourself and to every member of the community I send greet-

ings of this Christmas season! The nativity is such a joyful occasion. I am infinitely grateful to the community for all that they have done for me over these past many years. I am much the same as I have been since I came here [to the Well-Spring Retirement Community] some two years ago. I have recovered some of my ability to read, a capacity that I had lost for the first year. It is a question of diminished sight and then interpreting the meaning of the words. I read like a grammar school child. I can write well enough, although I have lost my ability to remember the names of persons, places and events.

Still I do a bit of thinking and may be able to publish a collection of earlier essays. It will not be a very good book but it will, I hope, carry a thought or two. Although it will be almost entirely of past writings, it will be entitled “Evening Thoughts”—from one of the recent essays. [It was dedicated to the community.]

Please give my greetings to everyone. As the years pass I am ever more fond of my monastery home. I am ever more conscious of being given a home, of being cared for, educated and supported throughout my life. It’s no small gift! It has lasted a lifetime.

Thomas

I would like to sum up by returning to my introductory quote from St. Irenaeus: “*Gloria Dei, homo vivens*,” the glory of God is the human person fully alive, which I now paraphrase for Thomas as “*Gloria Dei, terra vivens*”—God’s glory is the whole Earth fully alive in all its splendor and multitude of life forms.

Appendix: Personal Thoughts

Final years and drifting

During the final years when Thomas was weakened by various issues, whenever I called or visited him, he would say that he was drifting. The idea, I explained, suggested the Irish notion of “white martyrdom.” Early Irish monks, I explained, were not subject to the bloody—that is, “red martyrdom”—of the Roman Church, yet they found other forms of suffering for the faith. “Green martyrdom”

was living as hermits on mountaintops or lonely islands, studying scripture and communing with God like the anchorites of the Egyptian desert. “White martyrdom” they saw as setting sail adrift (drifting) to wherever God would take them for whatever purpose. I think Thomas was amused by this notion of white martyrdom as “drifting.”

Last wishes

About twice a year Mike Bell, Bob Molyneaux, and I—all former Passionists, followers, and friends of Thomas—drove to Greensboro to spend a few days with him, whether he was at the farmhouse or at Well-Spring Retirement Community. Margaret arranged our meetings with Thomas. There we would discuss his latest papers and projects and, as usual, he would ask what we were doing. But what really bonded us during those days and made them so enjoyable was our common history in the Passionists: We told familiar “war stories.” We reminisced about certain members in the community who had done outlandish or crazy things that were fondly remembered by everyone. We laughed and told jokes to which Thomas would give his usual response, “Oh my.” And We wondered together where the church and religious life were going or what the evolutionary process might entail. But in the midst of these conversations during some of our last visits, he would ask about the details of his burial, especially whether he should be clothed in his religious habit. He would ponder our replies, perhaps brood over them, and move on. He was buried, eventually, in his religious habit.

The Beethoven Difference, the Thomas Berry Difference, the Prophetic Difference

Finally I would like to make a comparison between Thomas and Beethoven. A few weeks ago I heard a lecture by Scott G. Burnham, Scheide Professor of Music History at Princeton University. In his lecture, “The Beethoven Difference,” he discussed how Beethoven galvanized the musical classical style, thus moving Western music into the 19th century; he was the difference that has lasted to today.

His difference was the power of his universality. His music, as Victor Hugo said, helped the dreamer to recognize his dream, the sailor his storm, and the wolf his forest. Illustrating these ideas by passages from Beethoven's compositions, Professor Burnham summarized the composer's motivation by the phrase *ad astra per aspera*, to the stars through adversity. His music is powerful and in-your-face; whereas Haydn's Minuet took twenty seconds to set the theme, Beethoven did the same in four seconds. His Third Symphony, the Eroica, opens with two wham-bam notes. Beethoven then takes us on the hero's journey up into the heavens, wandering among the stars, and we ask about where he is going or if he is lost, and then he comes down to the musical text and concludes the journey.

All during the lecture I kept thinking about how Thomas changed the discourse about ecology and theology, how he would hit us hard with his shocking statements, take us on a wandering journey into the divine energy of the universe, and then bring us into his discourse of present day problems and possible ways to enter into the dawning of a new age. As with Beethoven's innovations, Thomas's ideas were prophetic, and like many prophecies they were difficult to take, often misunderstood, and underappreciated. Beethoven and Thomas were harbingers of something radically new. As one conductor said, Tchaikovsky played to the soul of the human, but Beethoven played to the soul of the universe. Thomas has played and continues to play, bringing us to understand the universe and this wondrous Earth that we must love and preserve.

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