

WOMEN RELIGIOUS: VOICES OF EARTH

By Gail Worcelo, SGM

The human and the natural world will go into the future together or both will perish on the way!" This is the first sentence spoken by Thomas Berry during our novitiate training with the Passionist community.

In 1982, I entered the Passionist Nuns of St. Gabriel's Monastery in Pennsylvania, a congregation of Catholic sisters, priests, and brothers founded in the 18th century by Italian mystic and preacher Paul Danao, who was later canonized as St. Paul of the Cross. Thomas Berry had entered the same congregation of Passionists forty-nine years earlier. So it was no surprise that Thomas, as a seasoned member of the order, was asked in 1984 to be a visiting scholar during our joint novitiate training of men and women novices. Thomas oriented us and our religious vocation within the comprehensive context of our unfolding universe and so gave us a deep time perspective and challenged us to re-imagine ourselves within the entire sacred community of life.

There were about ten of us who were novices at the time. In the mystery of things, I, knowing there was nothing else I could do as his words rang so deeply within me, was the only one in the group who asked Thomas if I could continue studying with him.

Following this novitiate experience, my studies began with Thomas through monthly visits to the Riverdale Center for Religious Research in New York City where we explored thinkers and writers like Nigel Calder author of *Timescale*, William Catton who wrote *Overshoot*, and groups like the Club of Rome and their published work, *Limits to Growth*. Thomas would also come and visit my monastery. Each time he brought books and we had conversations well into the night. On many occasions I remember saying, "Thomas it is late, time for sleep," and his response would always be, "Why sleep, there is so much to talk about!"

Beginning then in my novitiate in 1984 and continuing until his death in 2009, Thomas taught, guided, and mentored me, and set my life in a clear and focused direction of service to the Earth community as a sister within the Catholic religious life tradition.

In 1991, Thomas presided over my Final Vow Ceremony with over two hundred people gathered. He gave me the ring of Final Profession and celebrated my vocational commitment within our emerging universe. He began his homily by saying, "I have been to many religious

professions in my life, but never before, never before has anyone been so conscious of their deep commitment to the universe and Earth community.”

Shortly after making Final Vows, Thomas said, “To begin all you need is a room, a phone, and a letterhead.” So with that guidance I founded with Thomas Berry “Homecomings: Center for Ecology and Contemplation,” a new ministry of my monastery. Homecomings became the vehicle for concretizing the thought of Thomas through an on the ground understanding of Earth as a “communion of subjects.”

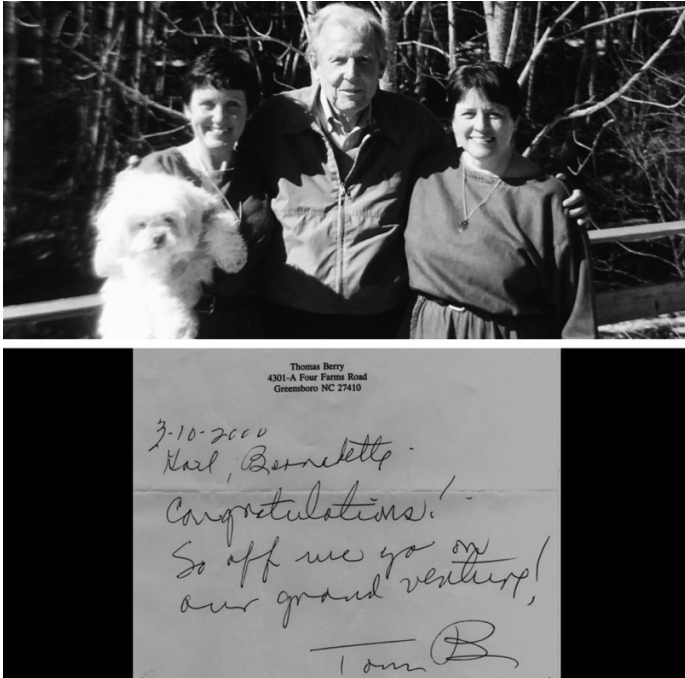


This unfolded through the creation of organic gardens, children’s programs on the land, community supported agriculture (CSA), sustainable building design, and educational programs on the themes of cosmology, spirituality, and the Universe Story. We studied *The World Charter for Nature*, *The Silent Spring*, *A Sand County Almanac*, *The Immense Journey*, and many other documents and books.

In addition, I began traveling around the world (India, Africa, Australia, South America, Asia, and Europe) teaching and leading programs on the work and challenges of Thomas Berry for many different groups, including seminaries, houses of formation, and chapters of men’s and women’s religious communities. In 1994, along with sisters Mary Southard, Toni Nash, and Mary Lou Dolan, I gathered Catholic sisters from around the country together to form what has become the vibrant network of “Sisters of Earth.” The first gathering took place at my Passionist monastery in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.

In 1994, my life direction was significantly impacted by Thomas’s paper, “Women Religious: Their Future Role.” In this paper, Thomas pointed out that throughout history women’s religious communities in the Catholic tradition were founded to meet the needs of the human community (through schools, hospitals, social services, and more) but no community had been founded to tend to the needs of Earth.

This pivotal paper along with conversations with Thomas inspired me to ask my Passionist community to mission me, joined by sister Rita



Ordakowski and lay associate Bernadette Bostwick, to begin a new community of sisters the founding of which would be for *the healing and protection of Earth and its life systems*. In 1999 the sisters of St. Gabriel's Monastery gave their blessing by missioning Rita, Bernadette, and me to found with Thomas Berry a new religious community. We called ourselves *Sisters of the Earth Community* with a mission of *Going into the Future with the Natural World as a Single Sacred Community*. We were welcomed into the Diocese of Vermont by Bishop Kenneth Angel, and on June 1, 1999, we arrived in Vermont.

During the years 1999-2009, Bernadette and I made many trips to Greensboro, North Carolina, to visit Thomas. On these visits our understandings deepened, and we laid the cosmologically oriented foundations for our new community. On the home front in Vermont, we began to make connections with farmers, artists, professors, and activists as well as offering programs on the universe story while establishing financial stability.

In 2001, we raised enough funds to purchase 190 acres of wild forest land in the Green Mountains with the vision of building an ecologically sustainable green monastery and retreat. We explored the land for two

years and then, because of a right of way issue, had to sell the property, which we did for added value. This enabled us to purchase 160 acres of land with an ecologically designed building in 2004 in the town of Greensboro, Vermont. Thomas called this beautiful synchronicity “a touch of heaven.” Our place, Green Mountain Monastery and the Thomas Berry Sanctuary, became known as Greensboro North while Thomas’s place of residence became known as Greensboro South.

A 30-member advisory board was formed, and one hundred companion members accompanied our new community, which was designed at all levels to reflect a consciousness of communion with the natural world. I continued traveling around the world leading programs and retreats, while Bernadette worked on art projects, including designing the beautiful



Mary of the Cosmos Icon and Earth Prayer Beads both of which are found in centers all over the planet. This icon was Bernadette’s attempt to express in image and color Thomas’s words spoken to us on one of our visits, “The universe is more in Mary than Mary is in the universe.”

The legacy of Thomas Berry continues through us with many programs, retreats, guests, and visitors from around the world who spend time at Green Mountain Monastery/Thomas Berry Sanctuary. In addition, many gatherings have taken place around the arts—concerts, writing, poetry readings, dance, rituals—expressing ourselves as a single, sacred community.

On June 1, 2009, ten years to the day of our founding, Thomas Berry passed on and at his request was buried in a meadow on our land, where many visitors come to pay their respects. Honored by his request, we continue to be custodians of this sacred trust.

In the years following, new sisters joined our community, including Amie Hendani and Kris Prasetyo from Indonesia, with several women currently in discernment. These women continue to bring our mission and legacy of Thomas Berry to many gatherings and places in Asia, especially to younger generations.

On June 1, 2019, we celebrated our 20th anniversary of our order and 10th anniversary of the passing of Thomas Berry. Highlights of the celebration included the unveiling of four cosmic stained glass windows by the glass artist Amber Hiscott from Wales, windows that were five years in the making, displaying in a tent art works by women artists curated by Bernadette, and conferring of the Thomas Berry Award for Selfless Service to three friends who had given so generously of themselves over the many years of our unfolding. The Great Work continues as we prepare to finalize placing 145 acres of our land in a conservation easement with the Nature Conservancy and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board in 2020.

In his book *Evening Thoughts*, Thomas reflected on the need for a new pattern of rapport with the planet. Only a profound change in human consciousness, he said, can remedy the deep cultural pathology manifest in our destructive behaviors. His words continue to ring true in this moment of profound planetary collapse. Joining his wisdom are new voices coming through in papers and books such as *Deep Adaptation*, *The Sixth Extinction*, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, and *The End of Ice*.

We are linking with and supporting young people in movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and the Global Eco-Village Network. We are also working on United Nations NGO status so that we can connect with others and extend influence at a global scale. Our dream is to spread our mission and legacy of Thomas Berry all around the world by establishing extensions of Green Mountain Monastery in countries beyond the United States, as we branch out as Sisters of the Earth Community.

Our first international Thomas Berry Sanctuary is currently unfolding in the country of Indonesia where we are meeting with supporters to find land and establish this new sanctuary. Our special concerns reach to palm oil plantations that are depleting biodiversity and destroying the tropical forests of Indonesia as well as the threat they pose to the extinction of the critically endangered orangutans.

Amie has brought the thinking of Thomas Berry to Indonesia by translating into Bahasa *Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth (Kosmologi Kristen)* and writing a book on *Laudato Si'* in conjunction with Thomas Berry's work entitled: *Memahami Laudato Si' Bersama Thomas Berry*. Kris leads programs, rituals, and retreats in Indonesia for young people and religious communities to introduce the work of Thomas to these

groups. Through her hands-on work with the land, Kris also brings others into connection with Earth. Her particular passion is the love of and protection of animals.

Through our new website we are offering online Planetary Grief sessions to help all of us around the world deal with the enormous amount of grief, anger, and planetary trauma we carry. We are also offering deep rest retreats for climate activists and those engaged in the Great Work as well as a worldwide training program to integrate the wisdom of Thomas Berry into our current moment of planetary ecocide.

Bernadette continues creating contemporary art pieces flowing out of the interface between environmental collapse and political turmoil. A recent piece entitled “So Many Words, So Little Time” was displayed at the University of Vermont conference “A Feverish World.” Part of her series entitled “All that Glitters” is displayed at the new Work Artz Gallery in Los Angeles, California.

Here in Vermont I am involved in the Perennial Turn Environmental Studies course at Middlebury College as a community partner, mentor, and presenter as well as part of the New Perennials Champlain Valley Hub. I am also co-leading a group of forty women from around the world who are engaged in a now three-year collective deepening of the interior together as a way to help guide us through our current planetary ecocide. We are exploring Thomas Berry’s admonition that when our cultural coding no longer has the capacity to guide us forward because it has lost its wisdom and integrity and can no longer be trusted, a return must be made to our deeper knowing. Urging us to go inward and seeking guidance from the deep interior, he called this “inscendence.”

Finally, we are extending our membership to include various levels of community involvement as we take the legacy of Thomas Berry into the future and honor the fundamental cosmological principles at the heart of our mission: greater differentiation, deeper interiority, and more profound communion.