

## Thomas Berry, environmentalist-priest, dies

Passionist priest and acclaimed cultural historian Thomas Berry died in Well-Spring Retirement Community, Greensboro N.C. at 6:25 a.m., today, June 1. He was 94. Berry was one the 20th-century's most probing thinkers on the human relationship with the natural world and its implications for religion.

Funeral services will be held Wednesday, June 3, in Greensboro, N.C. for his family and the local community, then on Saturday, June 6, at the Passionist Monastery in Jamaica, N.Y at 11 a.m. A Mass of Resurrection will be celebrated Monday, June 8, at 11 a.m. at the Green Mountain Monastery, in Greensboro , Vt. A more general and public service will be held at St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City at a later date, sponsored by the Thomas Berry Foundation.

Fr. Thomas Berry, described in Newsweek magazine in 1989 as "the most provocative figure among the new breed of eco-theologians," was among the first to say the earth crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis. His diagnosis of the negative effects of our religious views on our treatment of the planet rang true for many who were willing and able to work for a cure. Many created their own earth ministries, inspired by the work and life of Fr. Thomas Berry.

Rather than a theologian, Berry considered himself a cosmologist and "geologist," an Earth scholar.

He believed the only way to effectively function as individuals and as a species is to understand the history and functioning of our planet and of the wide universe itself, like sailors learning about their ship and the vast ocean on which it sails. "It takes a universe to make a child," he said, adding that he was "trying to establish a functional cosmology, not a theology." The amazing, mind-boggling cosmological perspective, he felt, can resuscitate human meaning and direction. The most important spiritual qualities, for Berry, were amazement and enchantment. Awe is healing. A sense of wonder is the therapy for our disconnection from the natural world.

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### More Resources:

- [Awakening people to something inside them](#) [1], Tom Fox talks with Thomas Berry, a podcast interview from 2006.
- [Thomas Berry 101](#): [2] Some key ideas from the work of Fr. Thomas Berry

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William Nathan Berry (named after his father) spent his childhood roaming the woods and meadows around his home in Greensboro, N.C. At the age of 11, he says, his sense of "the natural world in its numinous presence" came to him when he discovered a new meadow on the outskirts of the town to which his family had just moved. "The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass," he said. "A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember."

It was not only the lilies, he said. "It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in the clear sky. ... This early experience has remained with me ever since as the basic determinant of my sense of reality and values. Whatever fosters this meadow is good. What does harm to this meadow is not good." By extension, he said, "a good economic, or political, or educational system is one that would preserve that meadow and a good religion would reveal the deeper experience of that meadow and how it came into being."

Berry reflected, "It was a wonder world that I have carried in my unconscious and that has evolved all my thinking."

He entered the novitiate of the Passionist order in 1934, taking the name Thomas after the great scholar Thomas Aquinas. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1942.

Berry earned his doctoral degree in history from The Catholic University of America. His early interests expanded to include Asian history and religion as well as the culture and religious life of indigenous people. He studied Chinese language and culture in China in the late 1940s. He served as an army chaplain in Europe in the early 1950s. Berry then taught the cultural history of India and China at Seton Hall University in New Jersey and at Fordham in New York. He was director of Fordham's graduate program in the history of religions from 1966 to 1979. In 1970 he founded the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in Riverdale, N.Y., and was its director until 1987.

It was during this period that he began to lecture widely on the intersection of cultural, spiritual and ecological issues. His first book, *Dream of the Earth*, was published in 1988 by Sierra Club Books. This was followed by a joint effort with physicist Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, published by HarperSanFrancisco in 1992. One of his key works, *The Great Work*, was published in 1999 by Crown Publishing.

He influenced many other writers, theologians and environmental activists, both within the Catholic church and beyond.

Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-director of the Thomas Berry Foundation and co-director of the Yale University Forum on Religion and Ecology, told *NCR*: "Thomas Berry will be remembered as one of the great figures of our time. He captured so powerfully the urgency of our current environmental and social crisis. His legacy of writing and speaking is immense and his poetic voice for the Earth community will endure for all future generations."

John Grim, who is Tucker's husband and co-director of both the Berry foundation and the Yale Forum, said:

"A line from the Kentucky poet, James Still, is also a tribute to Thomas: 'I was born humble, at the foot of mountains, my face was set upon the immensities of Earth, and stone, and upon the oaks full-bodied and old. There is so much writ upon the parchment of leaves, so much of beauty blown upon the winds. I can but fold my hands, and bend my knees in the leaf pages.'"

Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu, author of *Quantum Theology* and *Reclaiming Spirituality* and popular lecturer, told *NCR*: "For me, Thomas Berry was the single greatest disciple of Teilhard de Chardin, who initially awoke in me a profound sense of the sacredness of God's creation."

"In Thomas's own writings one almost feels the sense of an evolving spirituality, capturing the beauty on the one hand but also the birth pangs which beget the evolutionary process at every stage. Perhaps in his death, the wider Christian churches, and the Catholic church in particular, will wake up to this great prophetic figure of our time. His legacy will certainly endure, but as with Teilhard before him, more in the spiritual ferment of the 21st century rather than among either the scientists or theologians which his vision challenges so strongly."

Holy Cross Br. Dave Andrews, former director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference who currently works with the Washington-based NGO Food and Water Watch, said:

"I came to ecological thinking via concerns of production agriculture and through Berry's work came to see a new view of history, culture and religion that included agriculture in a whole new context. It was a breathtaking vision that encompassed so much richer a framework than I had previously."

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