

**Remembrances of Fr. Thomas Berry
John Borelli**

**October 30, 2019
Thomas Berry and The Great Work
Opening Dinner
Riggs Library, Georgetown University**

President DeGioia summarized the intent of this conference and the significance of this evening so nicely at the beginning of our dinner together. We are here these two days to honor the memory and contribution of Thomas Berry with particular interest in his calling us to *The Great Work*.

Tonight, we take a few moments to recall the person of Thomas Berry. We have heard such lovely memories of Fr. Thomas, the Passionist. Quoting Robert Ellsberg on St. Paul of the Cross, “It is said that, while listening to his sermons, even battle-hardened soldiers would ‘tremble from head to foot.’” [“Blessed Among Us,” *Give Us This Day*, October 19, 2019] By contrast, in the confessional, “he was a voice of tender mercy.”

Those of us, who studied with Thomas Berry in his pioneering history of religions program at Fordham, had an analogous experience. Enthralled by how he presented the rise and developments of Asian religious and cultural traditions, and later Native American traditions, and the wisdom he had found therein, we often took very few notes. Fortunately, he did not examine us on what he said. Grades depended on the final papers or the essays for comprehensives, based on our own research—all handed in to him for grading. We trembled at how he might subject our own ideas to his manner of grading. To our surprise, this magnificent and generous man would take an interest, without intrusion, in our lives and would initiate an ongoing discourse about our work and the directions we seemed suited to take, and then gave us back our papers, graded but within those warm and personal narratives.

He came to our homes. He met our parents. My father, a practical man with a degree from Oklahoma University in civil engineering, a farmer, president of a farmers' coop, cattle rancher, and field grade officer in the army reserve for decades, thought Thomas Berry was the smartest man he had ever met. That helped. He had serious doubts the direction of my life and my abilities to discern the practicalities involved. Others had similar experiences where our families truly appreciated Fr. Thomas, despite their doubts about us.

I called Fr. Thomas on the day our son was born to say that we named him "Stephen Thomas" in his honor. He was grateful, recalling how Richard and Jane Cefalu had told him that their new son Tommy already had an Uncle Thomas but grateful that a graduate grandbaby was now appropriately named. "Which St. Thomas?" he preseed, "well Aquinas, right?" "Of course!", came his immediate reply. He baptized our daughters, Claire and Eleanor, and other children of his students.

He did not like to convey bad news. Uncharacteristically, he used few words in such situations. When he called with the sad news that Karlanne Tichy, a young mother, one of his earliest graduate students at Fordham, had passed away from cancer, he could hardly get the words out. Melanoma was the cause. "It begins with a tiny dot that you can miss," he blurted the words out to keep from choking on the tragedy. He felt such moments of sadness, and moments of joy too, deeply. He could hardly get the words out for the marital blessing for Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim without pausing to keep his voice from breaking. He presided several other weddings of his students with equal sentiments.

Make no mistake; he could be firm. If he felt you were not doing the work, he had "the talk" with you. The experience rallied a few to finish and aided others to enjoy doing something else. He was pastoral, sitting quietly for the better part of an hour on his visits with an elderly

Sister of Charity under nursing care who could only take a few drops of water or the tiniest fragment of the host. He brought her the Eucharist from the community liturgy. He often presided for that community up the road from his Riverdale Center. I learned about it only from someone in the community at that college where I taught for a dozen years.

“Ah, don’t worry about it, something better will happen,” he told me on the day after the theology faculty had decided not to maintain my full-time teaching status beyond the one year. The Provost had written in my contract that it was not intended to be renewed. But, Fr. Thomas had encouraged me to apply. I was scheduled to defend my doctorate in February, and would it not be nice to remain alongside him, he has suggested. I was too absorbed in myself to know it was more a rejection of his work, than of mine. It represented an unwillingness to regard religious pluralism as a critical feature of all religious study. And, Fr. Thomas was correct, many better options would arise in the years ahead.

Fr. Thomas loved to joke, especially when he had all the cards. A couple days after my doctoral defense, he suggested that I ought to address, on the next Friday night, the Columbia University Faculty Seminary on Oriental Thought and Religion. He was chair that year. “That paper of yours on Carl Jung and Yoga will be just fine.” I fully appreciated his opening of a door but was ready for a vacation from the tensions and worries of that final doctoral year. His car stalled out in a large puddle on the way. He had to call the Passionist monastery for someone to pick us up and get us to the Faculty Club. I was nervous as could be. Late for the dinner beforehand, hardly able to eat anything, as he had encouraged me with “Sure, we have plenty of time,” I finally got to present and then looked up. The custom then was no applause until the very end. Fr. Thomas commented, “Let’s see what we think about that.”

Our connections with him were often the most significant factors for our first positions. This was true for me for the first, the College of Mount St. Vincent, and the second, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. On both occasions, they wanted someone associated with Thomas Berry. In the mid-1970s, with few positions available, we had to take advantage of how opportunities unfolded in our lives, and with a little help from Fr. Thomas, to carry forward his message, the method we derived from working with him, and the learning that we were acquiring along the way. Eventually, we discovered our own ways to make contributions.

William Cenkner, a Dominican and Fr. Thomas' first student to defend his doctoral dissertation at Fordham, received an instruction when he arrived at his first job at the Catholic University of America: "Don't expect to do here what Thomas Berry has done at Fordham." Fr. Cenkner did so anyway and eventually became Dean of the School of Religion and Religious Education. Msgr. George Higgins, the great labor priest, commented on Cenkner's appointment, "The next one has to be an animist!" I replied when he repeated that to me in person, "Msgr., I have a couple to recommend." Among our numbers were at least one other dean, a provost, two archbishops, an abbess, religious superiors, and faculty at a handful of colleges and universities across the country.

He happily answered our calls at any time of day or night. He put his library at our disposal, loaned us his books, and forgot that we had them. He welcomed and entertained the guests we brought to his door. He enjoyed our parties, and would quote Taoist sources on drinking and dancing. He liked to host Saturday evening gatherings at the large house, and took in a few doctoral students as boarders.

He was not the most organized for marketing his ideas and programs. He ignored temperatures, shunning an overcoat in New York winters, and never seemed to get rid of that

distracting cough. We learned not to click pens or attempt to unwrap candy while he was lecturing. His propensity for hyperbole left a few inaccuracies in his wake. He could be impatient, "I could have strangled him," he said years later about Cenkner's lack of spunk with his doctoral examiners, and he lacked tact, which caused a few serious difficulties. Some of the theology faculty did not appreciate his comment that the Bible was the most over-read scripture in the world. He drove recklessly, especially in snow, laughing in spinouts. He listened to our burdens but did not burden us with his bad news. If asked, he would relate a little. We only found out indirectly the kinds of difficulties that he faced. The department has sent his writings to an esteemed biblical scholar for his tenure review. By an intervention, he survived to guide us.

For Fr. Thomas, there was no fatal flaw, no deadly sin. In the month between leaving the bishops' conference and beginning at Georgetown, I availed myself of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, the so-called "thirty day retreat" or "the long retreat." That first week was painful for a 57 year old. One day, I tried a new tactic, not dwelling on my failings, embarrassing sins, and unaddressed flaws, but listing those persons who have stood out in my life as the ones I have sought to emulate. I called Fr. Thomas on my cell phone that night. He was 89 at the time. I told him that he was the only one of these several figures without clay feet. "That's about the nicest thing anyone has said to me all week," he quickly replied with more than a hint of glee. It was a small gift to a teacher and guide, who had given us so much.