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GEORGETOWN TEXT

By Stephen Dunn CP

I first encountered Thomas when I joined the Passionist community as a postulant, at a very impressionable age. He was controversial; he seemed unusually smart. It was quite *captivating*, for a young postulant.

Through the years, I subliminally expected him to offer compelling insight into the theological heart of being a Passionist,¹ what nowadays we especially like to call our charism. This is a brief account of how I feel he did not disappoint.

Many felt he side-stepped discussing suffering.² That impression, I would contend, misses his life long preoccupation with pain; the pain arising from what we label *the human condition*. He was actually offended by what he called a “deep hidden rage” in the Western soul against the human condition. Because of that rage we live within a cultural pathology that seeks to avoid those sufferings, whether by inventions, therapies, prayers, or now particularly, technological hubris.

As a cultural historian, he explored this theme in the varied religious traditions of the world, without privileging Christianity. But as his historical horizon expanded to the cosmological, his focus turned to the human as a *species*, always in the context of the Universe Story of *cosmogenesis*. – much to the disappointment of those narrowly concerned with individual salvation.

Few people have lived within that intellectual horizon as thoroughly and articulately as Thomas.³ In 1994, he countered the traditional, if sophisticated, interpretation of the theology of the Cross of French Passionist, Stanislas Breton.⁴ Asserting that the human is a species born in violence,

¹ As time passed, no one ever doubted Thomas’ smarts. And, if anything, he broadened the range of how controversial he could be. But there were popular misgivings about how much he identified with his Passionist calling *per se*. In a talk at Port Burwell, detailing the shortcomings of monastic spirituality, he sighed: “It’s a wonder I survived it all”. Hesitations gained strength when, late in life, he dedicated one of his books to the Monastic Community. His gratitude seemed more related to the provision of bed and board than Passionist monasticism. Addressing the Community on the 60th anniversary of his priesthood, he chose to praise relationships with his Passionist brethren in the manner of Raissa Maritain: “We have been friends together,” sharing significant American and world historical periods, side by side. The fact that he insisted on being buried in the Passionist habit didn’t really solve these questions. Nor did those tokens of Passionist identity satisfy my long-held expectations.

² I am inclined to think that his controversial side distracted us all, as when he advocated putting the Bible on the shelf for a few years (the dictionary too, by the way).

³ As Ilia Delio has pointed out, even Pope Francis’ welcome restoration of Earth as our Home failed to present Laudato ‘Si within a horizon of cosmogenesis.

⁴ Thomas Berry, “The Wisdom of the Cross in Relation to Creation and Its Role in Reconciliation of Peoples and Cultures. Rome, 1994 (copy of manuscript).

he noted that without the supernova explosion that produced our solar system, our very existence and spirituality are unthinkable. Yet that violence was the precondition for our amazing role as “the universe reflecting upon itself”. The explosion of that first generation star, he suggested, could be seen as a *sacrifice*, and a cosmological moment of Grace.⁵

His strongest assertion, though, was his insistence that “the Wisdom of the Cross and the *Wisdom of the Universe* are two aspects of a single wisdom ... integral parts of a single story ... neither is complete without the other”. [p.6] As for sound bites, he offered phrases such as: “the foolishness of the Cross can be matched by the foolishness of Creation. Neither is within human comprehension”. [p.8] And “redemptive wisdom cannot be alien from *creative* wisdom. There has been no mistake” [p.7] Also, “The *sacrificial* dimension is a scandal in both instances” [p.12]

At an earlier time, Stanislas Breton⁶ had described three icons of *response* to the *Crucified One*. They overlap, of course, and co-exist; none is confined to any one historical period, but each has had an era of dominance in the life of piety. First, he named the contemplative *Stabat Mater*; with the hallmark of *compassionate accompaniment*. His second was *The Suffering Servant*; the justice-restoring Prophet. The third he identified as “*Fools of the Cross*”, using St. Paul’s remark: “The message (Logos) of the cross is foolishness.” (*1 Cor. 1:18*). For Breton, however, rather than foolishness, the Cross gives these Christian mystics the freedom of judgment to inspire unique, even scandalous spiritual creativity for their time; paradoxically demonstrating the “power of the Cross.” (*1 Cor.1:18*)

I find that ironically, Breton’s three icons give us a hint of how Thomas’ vision of the Cross finds echoes in contemporary thought and piety.

First, consider how, in *Laudato Si* the compassion characteristic of the *Stabat Mater* is evidenced in Pope Francis’ turn toward *compassion for the Earth*: “we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a (personal) physical ailment”, he writes. Second, we continue to be inspired by the decades-old praise of Thomas Berry as “a prophet crying *for* the wilderness”. That prophetic message is now carried forward even by children, such as Greta Thunberg and her companions across the globe on strike for the planet.

But I think the third icon best reflects Thomas’ originality. Rather than “Fools of the Cross”, perhaps we could call them *Earthling Mystics of the Cross*.⁷ Their response is a shock to both

⁵ Taking “the Bible down from the shelf”, as it were, he noted that this horizon sheds light on the Christ dimension of the universe suggested by both John the Evangelist and St. Paul. He offered the provocative statement: “perhaps the cross is written into the history of the universe”.

⁶ Stanislaus Breton, *The Passionist Congregation Today and its Charism*, Rome, 1987.

⁷ Today’s mystic, reflecting the cosmological reality of humans as Earthlings, might claim the tradition of *Shaman*, but, exerting the contemporary insight of cosmogenesis, will integrate the wisdom of the Cross and the Wisdom of Creation. Perhaps this is the *Earthling Mystic*.

society and spirituality.⁸ They have discovered the truth of Thomas' teaching: "Subjective communion with the Earth, ... provides the context in which we now make our spiritual journey". They lead the way toward "a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world".⁹ The real foolishness is our contemporary society's "common sense"; destroying the Earth community to avoid the pain of the human condition .

In his address, Thomas presciently suggested in 1994: "we are now entering a new period in the religious-cultural history of our christian-derived civilization." [p.19] ... "coming generations...will need something beyond a sacred book that teaches the spiritual wisdom of the Cross." They will need, "the additional wisdom of the (sacred) universe".

The three icons of response to the *Crucified One*: Compassionate earth healing, sacrificial earth advocacy and above all falling in love with the numinous wonder of earthly existence, mark the present and future path in this "new period of our Christian-inspired civilization". They prepare for moments of Grace within and beyond the ecological crisis.

Thomas concluded: "We might consider that we are just now at a moment when the Wisdom of the Cross can arrive at a more expanded expression of itself and now more than ever be our secure guide into the future." [p.20]

Finally:

As with many other Institutes, Passionists today are developing the narrative of the spiritual *Family*. It appropriately acknowledges the validity and *vitality* of a "charism without borders".

With this in mind, I have three hopes:

- i) for continued study of Thomas' interpretation of that charism.¹⁰
- ii) that these "Passionists without Borders" will become sacrificial co-creators of "a new Earth".
- iii) Using Thomas' own famous icon of medieval cathedral builders, they will work modestly alongside the *other stone-cutters*, joining in the Great Work of building a "re-invented human species", ecologically fit for *Eozoic* living.

⁸ They are establishing the elements of a new "ecological imaginary", as attests the work of Heather Eaton and others, hoping to eventually supplant the world-destroying social imaginary now in place. Following their argument, one might say that, as we have been able to believe "the market," we now have much better reasons for believing Lovelock's *Gaia*.

⁹ See e.g., "Christianity's Role in the Earth Project," in *Christianity and Ecology*.

¹⁰ Thomas' major *threshold considerations* have given us, whether within the Passionist Community or not, the challenge of revolutionizing the spirituality of the Cross for our age.