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Fr. Thomas Berry's funeral service in Greensboro, N.C.

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By PATRICK O?NEILL
GREENSBORO, NC - A great thinker and scholar, the Rev. Thomas Berry was known worldwide for his passionate love of Creation and planet Earth. Another side of the Passionist priest, who died June 1 at age 94, was revealed in the glowing tributes delivered at his June 3 funeral at St. Paul the Apostle Church in his hometown.

Speaking for the Passionist community, Fr. Terence Kristofak, C.P. said Berry had ?entrusted himself to the Divine cosmic embrace that he so often contemplated, brooded over and spoke about.

?We say goodbye to our beloved friend and companion, Passionist religious and priest, prophet and seer, thinker and lover of humanity and all created reality, and in the same breath know that he has been welcomed into another dimension of Divine life.?

It was Berry?s family -- a close knit clan of Southern Catholics who seemed to delight in the wonder of their collective relationships with the man they simply called ?Brother? -- who painted a picture of a humble, monastic man, the third child of Elizabeth and William Berry, a man who genuinely loved his dozen siblings and their many spouses and children. Siblings and nieces and nephews spoke again and again of the joy surrounding Berry?s visits back to Greensboro throughout his life as a seminarian, renowned scholar and priest.

?Your individual family can be your severest critic, the first ones to see through any pretense or insincerity,? No. 11 sibling, Benedict Berry, told about 200 mourners. ?Yet in him we never found any trace of it. He was the truest man I ever knew.?

Benedict Berry said his brother, who was baptized William Nathan Berry, after his father, but adopted the name Thomas after Thomas Aquinas, maintained ?a special friendship? with Mitchell, an African-American worker at the Berry family?s coal business, at a time when friendships between whites and blacks were rare in the South.

?When brother would come home from seminary the first one he would look up would be Mitchell,? said Benedict Berry, who never knew Mitchell?s last name. ?They really did have a deep affection for one another.?

Benedict Berry said Brother even had a special relationship with Prince, the family?s dog.

?Prince was beloved by us all, but especially Brother,? Benedict Berry said. ?Does not a man of such goodness feel sorrow more profoundly? Indeed all of my recollections bear out this beauty.

?Compassion is a human and divine virtue. Brother loved the poor, the sick, the downtrodden. He loved the misunderstood in a Christlike way. He seemed to suffer the sorrow of the lowly and the oppressed.?

To his nephews and nieces, Thomas Berry was ?Uncle Brother.?

Nephew Zack Kelleher said his visits from Uncle Brother were always exciting. Kelleher said his mother, the

late Theresa Berry, idolized her brother. ?Because he was special to her, we paid him a lot of respect, and this guy had something to say. It was always cool to have Uncle Brother, who was a little odd.

?He was always special because he was different. Everyone else got married; all the brothers got married and had kids. He had a kind of gentle presence.?

The church often gets caught up in the culture and the consumerism that comes with it, Kelleher said, and the view of many scientists is very materialistic, views that Berry did not accept. ?Certainly there?s a part of science that wants to see no mystery in the universe at all.?

Timothy Watson, an architect from Hillsborough, N.C., said his professional priorities changed when he attended a 1993 ?green architecture? symposium at Ball State University where Berry spoke.

Watson, who had just read Berry?s highly regarded 1988 tome, ?The Dream of the Earth,? said he showed up at the symposium without even enough money for a motel room just so he could listen to Berry.

??It?s at that time that I began to slowly come alive to understanding that we sentient beings, human beings here on the Earth have a sacred contract with Earth,? he said.

Fr. Kristofak said ?at times the expansiveness of (Berry?s) quest for knowledge was not understood by his own brethren; it seemed to go beyond the boundaries set by the Passionist lifestyle.

?Nevertheless, his own gentle personality and irrefutable wisdom earned him a respectful place among those who valued higher education in the community and those who resonated with his thinking.?

In the post-Vatican II era, when many boundaries of church and monastic life were changed, Berry ?became the spokesperson for so many who longed to understand our special place in the cosmos and who accepted his invitation to enter the Ecozoic Age by implementing the Great Work as he so often called our vocation and mission in this world,? Kristofak said.

Kristofak said as a young priest Berry engaged in ?surreptitious reading? of the works of Thomas Aquinas after night office at 3 a.m., but Berry was also challenged to hold true to his vow of obedience.

?The community guided him, even though that guidance was at times a tough discipline, especially in not allowing him to teach and assigning him to the door at the Jamaica monastery - (as) a porter. This was a dark and difficult time for him, and yet like so many previous saints and scholars in the church, he accepted it in obedience and took solace in the reminder from a friend that Confucious was a doorkeeper to the wisdom of the Orient.?

In 1970, Berry founded the Bronx-based Riverdale Center for Religious Research, a place where the doctrine of the Great Work took shape, Kristofak said.

?What else can I say about our brother Thomas? ... He passionately felt a strong kinship with all of the creatures of the Earth, that he observed the universe with the awe and wonder of a child, and that he befriended people from every walk of life.?

Kristofak said Berry?s simple declaration that ?The Earth is not a collection of objects but a community of subjects,? was one he expected people to understand. ?He would add with an impish smile, ?If you don?t get this, you don?t understand anything.??

Young scholar Malcolm Kenton was invited to speak at the funeral. He called Berry his mentor and friend. He said Berry told him ?to be an integral actor in the profound transformation he knew humanity must undergo in

order to restore our planet to health and reestablish our proper place in the universe.?

Kenton said Berry urged him to write a book, and it was clear from his comments that Kenton is already trying to expand on Berry?s theories.

Regarding society?s four core institutions -- organized religion, the business sector, the government and the education system -- Thomas Berry said: ?The churches are too pious. The corporations are too greedy. The government is too subservient to the corporations. And the universities should know better.?

Said Kenton: ?Instead, guided by a firmer sense of context, the faith that guides religious institutions and the knowledge that guides academia can perhaps work together to restore corporations and government to their proper roles in fulfilling society?s material needs while curbing its excesses.?
Herman Greene, president of the Center for Ecozoic Studies in Chapel Hill, NC, often visited Berry, and shared Berry?s reverence for the Earth and cosmology. Greene is editing a compilation of 120 scholarly tributes to Berry.

?I do think that Thomas?s work has just begun,? Greene said. ?On the intellectual side he set the context for the transformation in the human community that?s needed in the future ... There?s a small community in China that?s following his work, and I know people from throughout Europe and in Japan and in other places that are following his work so I really do think that Thomas will become a major figure in history for studying that broad context for the direction of the human community.?

In 1995, Berry returned to Greensboro to spend his later years. There he turned to his sister, Margaret Berry, who managed his busy calendar of guests who stopped by the retirement community where he died.

Niece Ann Berry Somers, daughter of Jean Berry, was with her uncle when he died.

?I was lucky enough to be with him during his last days and hours which were soulful and sweet, as befitting Thomas Berry,? she said. ?I also saw Thomas?s response when he became alert and was comforted in knowing that Margaret was nearby. Thomas had a great life and a good death.?

[Patrick O?Neill is a freelance religion journalist living in Garner, N.C.]

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