

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 2, 2009 at 8:34am

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## \''The wisest man I ever met\''

by Rich Heffern

NCR Today

*I received this reminiscence about a 20-year friendship with Fr. Thomas Berry from Vic Hummert, former Maryknoll priest and environmental activist who lives in Louisiana.*

Thomas Berry and I first met in April 1989 as I awaited an extended visa to teach English in an ecumenical seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. I tried to do some environmental education in the area while patiently waiting for the visa in St. Paul's parish in Yonkers, NY. With time as a precious gift I decided to phone Thomas Berry in the Riverdale Center on the Hudson River.

?Father Berry, my name is Vic Hummert, a Maryknoll priest. I have been reading some of your papers and would like to know if I could just come to visit you some day.?

?What are you doing for lunch today??

?Nothing planned. I will get on the train and come down to Riverdale.?

?That would be fine. What do you mean? Coming on the train? You don't have a car??

?No, I gave up on cars since going to Hong Kong in 1970.?

?Stay right there, I'll come and pick you up.?

Within ten minutes Fr. Berry arrived in a small car and we drove to a modest restaurant in Yonkers where our lunch was similar to a three-hour seminar on the cosmos. He then gave me a copy of his mind-expanding book *The Dream of The Earth*.

I remember our conversation as we sat later in the rectory of St. Paul's. What we must consider today is the question: Is the Earth viable or not? To this sweeping question I asked: Is Earth viable? Thomas spoke with a prophetic confidence that was gained from visiting many countries and an analytical mind that kept me spellbound.

In many places Earth is NOT viable.

I read *The Dream of the Earth* within a week and marked many powerful passages before leaving for Cuba. While in Havana waiting for a final extension on my visa, I read the book again. It is one of those precious volumes that I have not lent out in 20 years for fear of not receiving it back.

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In my personal estimation, Thomas Berry is a reincarnated Teilhard de Chardin. However, Berry has at least two advantages over Chardin. Teilhard died in 1955 and never saw Earth from space. Thomas had that cosmic vision and also was more critical of the nuclear age than Teilhard could have been because of its relative infancy. Berry served as president of the Teilhard Society for several years.

Berry's writings were prophetically perceptive. What the world of the 20th and 21st century has yet to grasp is his devastating comment: You cannot have a healthy economy in a sick world. As a spiritual geologist Berry knew that the ocean, rivers and soil all suffer from centuries of industrial abuse. If the economy of today is collapsing, will CEOs reflect on the fact nature has been trashed and possibly now, Earth as our source of life is fighting back for survival?

In 2000 Roselyn, my wife and I visited Thomas in Greensboro, N.C. where he was living in the loft of a barn. While they chatted about places of origin, I checked out the bulletin board in his living area. I saw a book review of *Dream of the Earth*. The paper was given an A+ with the following commentary by the student's teacher:

Dear Student,

You must recall that Thomas Berry is one of the greatest thinkers of all time.. He is in a category with Aristotle, Descartes, Thomas Aquinas, Chardin and other intellectual giants. Your review of his book is well done.

I interrupted Thomas and Rose to say how impressed I was by comments on the book review by a university professor. Berry chuckled and said, I read that whenever I get depressed. But I never witnessed depression in 20 years. On the contrary, I was buoyed up following frequent phone conversations with Thomas.

During our second visit in 2004 Thomas pressed me to write my life story. When I hesitated by asking, Who would want to read that? He insisted he wanted to read it. After pressing me three times to do so, I began writing my story for the wisest, most prophetic person I ever met. I quietly adopted Thomas as an amiable mentor. By means of weekly phone calls, he sustained my spirit. I will be grieving Thomas for the rest of my sojourn but will treasure a warm 20-year friendship. Thomas has influenced thousands of us and his spirit is as great as the universe he loved.

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