

Fr. Thomas Berry's burial service at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont

Rich Heffern | Jun. 11, 2009 NCR Today

This is an account of Fr. Thomas Berry's burial at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont on Monday, June 8, by Angela Manno.

"The weather at Green Mountain Monastery on June 8th, the day of the funeral mass and burial of our dear friend and teacher Thomas Berry was impeccable. With bright blue skies and a few puffy white clouds, the mist from the early Vermont morning had burned off completely by the time people had assembled in front of and to the side of the monastery entrance, greeting each other in wait for the toll of the bell to signal the commencement of the service.

Upon hearing the first bell, all fell silent and began to follow one by one as Sr. Gail Worcelo led us to the back of the building to circumambulate the iron statue of St Francis donated by Frederick Franck in 2006 to Green Mountain Monastery in honor of Thomas Berry. After circling the lower meadow and given mid-sized evergreens, people gathered in front of the statue. The dedication by Franck was read aloud:

'I dedicate this steel icon to the deathless spirit incarnate in one of the most precious of my contemporaries.

'Like that of St Francis of Assisi, Thomas Berry's life testifies to the indestructible human spirit, the surviving triumph of human wisdom over all the follies and cruelties of our generation.'

Then we left single file once more and filed into the monastery for the Eucharist Celebration and Burial Mass, whose celebrants were The Entire Earth Community.

In the center of the room, surrounded by the people that loved him, lay Thomas's casket with a single lit candle placed upon it.

Musician Paul Winter pierced the silence with a prelude that was part lament, leading participants into a state of presence and contemplation. Then sister Gail came to the podium and welcomed us and spoke of the meadow that had been such a formative experience in Thomas's life when at the age of 11 he gazed upon a meadow across the creek from his childhood home in Greensboro, North Carolina to experience 'a geophany' of white lilies, a symphony of crickets and a palpable, numinous presence. How fitting it is that he would be laid to rest, she told us, in a meadow, with a massive rock emerging from a hill as his headstone. She spoke of the mystery that has had many names throughout the centuries, among them Lover, Beloved and Love and Thomas's Differentiation, Interiority and Communion.

When Gail's welcome was at an end, the response of 'O Thou who Clothes the Lilies' was sung by Sr Kathleen Deignan.

We were then graced with the recorded voice of Thomas reflecting in anticipation of when we would all be gathered together for this moment:

'It is a touching moment, a poignant moment a person might say. Together with you all here, in a sense for the last time that we would meet in such a large assembly with those of us who have been associated with each other over all these many years.

'I came across something not long ago, it was a story of an Indian whose name was Rubin Snake, a rather large person, he did so much for his tribe. I'm not sure exactly what tribe?

'He was talking with someone and they were venturing on something of monumental importance. The other person was reflecting on it and said, 'dear, this is something awesome to try to do., There's you and me, and we are nothing. and we must be very foolish to even think of such a thing.

'The old Indian, in a gruff voice said, 'Yea, but we'll find good companions along the way.

'And so in my own life venture, I've found good companions along the way. And from moment to moment the number has gathered until it seems almost limitless the number of good companions.'

Moments of silence followed in which we marveled at the truth and goodness of Thomas's comforting words to us.

The mass proceeded with a call to prayer by Fr Steve Dunn, CP and three verses of a Song of Blessing by Coleen Fulmer that began:

'The whole of the Earth will be blessed by you; in God you have made your home. The stars will dance as they call out your name; your heart always laughing with joy, your heart always laughing with joy.'

The Gloria was from the Mass in the Ecozoic by Jan Novotka and the first reading was done by Kaulani Lee from the Gospel of Thomas:

'Jesus said to his disciples, 'Compare me to something and tell me what I am like.'

'Simon Peter said to him, 'You are like a righteous angel.'

'Matthew said to him, 'You are like a wise philosopher.'

'Thomas said to him, 'Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like.'

'Jesus said, 'I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.'

Following was the Psalm 'The Ways of the Universe' also by Jan Novotka, and the Psalm reader was Brian Brown.

Then came the Alleluia 'Journey's Ended, Journey's Begun' from the recording Spirit Alive,

'Journey's Ended, Journey's Begun to go where we have never been, to go beyond our past, moments of lifting up transcending death, rising in transparent light to the fullness of God's presence.'

The Gospel Reading was Matthew 6: 26-28, when Jesus asks us to consider the lilies of the field.

Ann Berry Somers, the niece of Thomas Berry then gave the reflection and homily. Her homily was filled with warmth and humor and the reflection from a close family member, someone who met with Thomas weekly once

he came home to North Carolina after his years of teaching and directing in New York City, was heartwarming and informative to the many present who had not participated in this aspect of Thomas's' life.

Though her whole talk will be on the Thomas Berry website shortly, one story stands out in this writer's mind:

Ann told us that she was on numerous occasions able to press Thomas on some of the utterances he would make that begged elaboration. One instance was about the small self (each individual component of the Universe) and the Great Self -- the Universe in its wholeness. Thomas mentioned the meaning of it all.

"Well, what does it mean?" she asked her "uncle Brother" point blank.

In time Thomas replied that the meaning is in "the attraction between the small self and the Great Self," a theme that underlies his often quoted statement that the Universe is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects and one of the great mysteries of existence.

She also told some humorous tales from Thomas's life: Once as the family was gathered around -- nieces and nephews and their children -- as he celebrated mass, he became "so animated by his own words" that he almost went up in flames as he gesticulated and his sleeve ignited from the flame of a nearby candle!

When Ann stepped down, we then rose to recite the Litany of the Saints written by John Becker in 1987. This special Litany was recited at the Dedication and Blessing of the Monastery not long ago and it goes so deeply to the core of the human struggle that many people around the room were moved to tears. This recitation lists the growing number of saints including now Thomas himself and his contemporary, Ewert Cousins who passed away two days before Thomas. Many of us who had been mentored by Dr. Cousins shed an extra tear of joy and sorrow to see his name so tenderly added to this list that began with the Holy Family, all the archangels, continuing through the martyrs, reformers and leaders of the Church throughout the centuries, to holy men and women outside Church canon: Black Elk, Rachel Carson, Albert Einstein, to victims of violence, genocide and environmental (natural and manmade) disasters, and ended with this prayer:

God give new life
To this planet
To the Earth Community
To all children of the future
Send your spirit
In its fullness
That we may awaken
As one planetary body

The mass continued with more pieces from Mass in the Ecozoic and communion was accompanied with more music from Paul Winter who was stationed in the rafters above the congregation with all the other musicians and singers. A beautiful a capella piece sung by Elizabeth Thompson and Amity Baker and the closing song (Song of the Angels by Bob Dufford) ended the service before a few moments of silent prayer.

Sister Gail then invited everyone to anoint Thomas's casket with pine infused oil that lay in a small bowl to one side of the casket. But first she laid upon the coffin three objects sweet with symbolic and ordinary significance: a vase of white lilies, his well-worn navy blue jacket and black penny loafers (minus any pennies). I had a sense of both history and the future, where his items of dress, so familiar to those who knew Thomas, would become treasures in the years and centuries to follow. Each person dipped a finger into the scented oil and drew close to the casket, marking their own glyphs of love and farewell onto the simple wooden box: hearts, spirals, crosses within circles. It was a deeply fulfilling and meaningful gesture. Then Gail asked for women in the room who had had a heart connection with Thomas to come up, surround the casket and walk in a circle. We danced, hands

clasped together, walking to the right and then to the left, swaying for a moment and then back in the other direction. Another simple gesture of embrace and tenderness.

Then Gail asked for some able bodied men to come up and carry the casket to Thomas's final resting spot in the upper meadow. Outside the monastery, at the foot of the ascent, Sister Bernadette sounded the Ram's horn to initiate the final climb. The women whom Thomas was closest to also helped carry him. At the summit, Paul Winter played his solo clarinet as people prepared to lower Thomas into the Earth. The monastery bell tolled, one that is only rung when someone has died, and he was lowered in.

To the side of the gravesite was a large bowl of red earth from Thomas's birthplace -- the red earth of Greensboro. Once the casket had been lowered, Sister Gail invited everyone to toss a bit of this earth from Greensboro South to mingle with that of Greensboro North. Red roses were present so that we could also bid farewell with delicate rose petals. Shovels were ready for those who wanted to help fill up the grave. This went on for a long while, as people shed tears and said their final good-byes.

A final song was sung,

Our brother is here; we give him your hand
Bathe him in your love
Clothe him in your care
Send him along
With the wind and a song
And the rains of the earth in his hair.

from Bathe Him in Your Love, by Joe & Maleita Wise

Slowly people gave their leave and made their way down to the tent for the sharing of food.

The day honored the spirit of Thomas in every way and allowed those who loved him to participate intimately in committing him to the final embrace of his beloved meadow.

Angela Manno, June 9, 2009

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