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Essay

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Essay

# A Commentary on Thomas Berry's *Befriending the Earth*, 33 Years on

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**Abstract:** The author was approached by the Passionists in the United Kingdom, a Roman Catholic order in which the ecological theologian Thomas Berry had been a priest, to seek an opinion on the continuing significance of his book, *Befriending the Earth*. Published in 1991, it was written in dialogue with a Jesuit colleague, Thomas Clarke. This article shares that opinion with a wider readership. Parts of it are written in a first-person manner, illustratively journeying on from where Berry left off. Thirty-three years (counted inclusively) is a generous generational span; symbolically, it is equivalent to the life of Christ, a kairos time of transition. Most notably, what has changed over that period is that climate change has landed firmly onto the environmental agenda. Significantly, Berry hardly mentioned it in this work, but in an era of *Laudato Si* his message of “befriending the Earth” speaks louder than ever, with prophetic poignancy.

**Keywords:** ecotheology; climate change; Ecozoic; spirituality; Cosmic Christ; *Laudato Si*; *Laudate Deum*; integral human development; Passionists; human ecology

## 1. Introduction

When the Passionists in the UK asked for an opinion, I replied that *Befriending the Earth* was a prophetic book, ahead of its time and for our times (Berry et al. 1991).<sup>1</sup> It rises above its 1991 date of first publication, most of all because Thomas Berry extends our understanding of the natural environment. He does so, as he puts it in one of his fine turns of phrase, by opening out “‘the compassionate curve’ of the universe” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 14). This leads the arc of his “new story”, deepening it to a consciousness of the Cosmic Christ.

I remember some years ago an elderly friend, Sr Catherine Brennan, called me up from a Dublin hospital bed. A nun of the Sisters of St Louis, a Roman Catholic teaching order, she had devoted her recent years to raising environmental consciousness through groups such as Eco-Congregation Ireland. Her respiratory illness was very serious. Over the phone, I could hardly make out the words as she struggled to catch breath. The gist was that she wanted to send her blessing for a conference that she had been arranging where I was due to speak the following week. She had a message that she felt to be of burning urgency, which she croaked out: “Tell them about the Cosmic Christ”.

This commentary on Fr Thomas Berry’s book gives an opportunity by which to expand that commission and to do so, vicariously, through his insights. *First*, I will set the book in the context of the time when it was written and as integral to the story of our time. *Second*, I will attempt a chapter summary to chart a roadmap. *And third*, in recognition that Berry was a priest within the Passionist religious order, I will reflect upon the “passion” or suffering of Christ, of humankind, and of the Earth itself. I aim to do this in a manner that might both honor Sr Catherine’s commission and the prayer with which Pope Francis ends his ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si*: “Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined/to everything that is” (Pope Francis 2015, sec. 246).



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## 2. The Context of *Befriending* in 1991

Berry published *Befriending the Earth* in 1991,<sup>2</sup> before climate change had become a generally accepted fact. Whilst the United Nations' Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Association (WMO) established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), endorsed at the UN's general assembly in December 1988, the emergent reality and consciousness of it were still contested and, beyond specialist and "informed lay-person" interests, not widely known about in the public domain.

This noted, but given where science stood at the time, Berry set out "to situate theology in terms of understanding the meaning of science" (Berry et al. 1991, p. 26) and to seek "new ways of understanding the divine manifestation in the natural world" (Berry et al. 1991, p. 54). He did so acknowledging that he especially stood on the shoulders of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 1, 23–28) The job of science is to seek out facts about the nature of physical reality and to test them as well as the hypotheses that might explain them. Such is the *Logos* of logical structure and rationality. The job, or one of the jobs, of theology, on the other hand, is to relate these insights into how we see the world and experience our humanity. Such is the *Mythos* that carries and reveals meaning, typically through image, story, poetry, music, and the other arts that connect through to archetypal motifs in the collective unconscious.

Set in this historical and epistemological context, it may therefore surprise the reader that *Befriending* says virtually nothing about climate change. The closest Berry comes to it is in his chapter on the Ecozoic Age:

We are beginning to be concerned by the possibilities of the greenhouse effect, which would change the temperature of the northern hemisphere possibly up to 6° Fahrenheit within the next century (Berry et al. 1991, p. 95).

Six Fahrenheit degrees (3.33 centigrade degrees) is a pretty smack on estimate for the pace of global warming in the absence of mitigating emission cuts. However, why just "beginning"? The 33 years that have passed since his book was published represent a generously apportioned "generation", the same length of time as Christ's life on Earth.<sup>3</sup> The scantness of Berry's attention to what is now such an overwhelming issue shows how far the science and experience of changes in the natural environment have shifted in that time. Those who were around then might recall where climate science stood in 1991. At the time, I, with a more senior colleague, Dr Ulrich E. Loening, was just launching the UK's first master's degree course on human ecology. Our tiny futures unit, the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE), sat anomalously within the Faculty of Science and Engineering of the University of Edinburgh.

I vividly remember the care with which we were required to speak about climate change. It was acceptable in general discourse in faculty meetings only to mention "possible" climate change, and not until the later 1990s was this upgraded to "probable" climate change. As Martin Robra, who led the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation team at the World Council of Churches in this era, has written: "It was prophetic for the WCC to focus on climate change already in 1990 although critical questions were raised: the focus on climate change should not weaken the commitment to struggle against poverty and injustice" (Robra 2020). Not only was the science yet to become "settled", there was a concern within both science and the humanities that, if it settled, it would overwhelm and perhaps squeeze out other concerns in the competition for attention and funding.

In 1989, to promote the public understanding of science and technology, the City of Edinburgh had staged the world's first Science Festival.<sup>4</sup> A year later, possibly as *Befriending the Earth* was being written, the university's Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Smith, took a bold stand and launched a university-wide Environmental Initiative. He expressed concern that many university students "remain ill-informed and confused", and this prompted "the need to explore the extent to which treatment of environmental issues could become part of general undergraduate teaching in every discipline, and not just restricted to obviously relevant subjects".<sup>5</sup> At the CHE, we were commissioned to

interview every head of department across all eight faculties and report on the educational possibilities for such transdisciplinarity. Then, before a modernizing reorganization took place, the Faculty of Divinity was listed in the university's annual calendar explicitly as first, "in order of precedence". Thomas Aquinas' designation of theology as "the Queen of Sciences" is a point that Fr. Berry would well have appreciated.

Our report, *Environmental Education for Adaptation*, had a seminal influence (Loening et al. 1991). Those were heady days across the 1991–92 academic session as we mailed out orders for copies from universities around the world. But... and here is the rub... in common with Berry's book, when I re-read today what otherwise remains a deeply relevant study, I am astonished to see that we made just four passing references to global warming, and none at all to greenhouse gases, to CO<sub>2</sub>, or to climate change!

Why such omissions? Why, in both Berry's work and ours? Looking back now, it is not like we at the CHE were laggards. As an entry by the theologian and sociologist of religion, Professor Richard Roberts, generously described it in *The Encyclopedia of Nature and Religion*: "The role of the CHE as a pioneering organization is indisputable; many of its original analytical insights and practices have become part of the widely distributed armory of the informed environmental movement" (Taylor and Kaplan 2005, vol. 1, pp. 284–85). Rather, retrospect suggests that the emergent reality of climate change was putting us all through what Thomas Khun, the philosopher of scientific revolutions, called a paradigm shift. We were in a period of mental adjustment. A new reality was dawning, and we wanted it not to be true. I can remember thinking "Yet, another bloody thing!"

That granted, very quickly over the course of about a year the wheel turned. In June 1992 the Earth Summit, the United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development, took place in Rio. The convergence that it brought about of world leaders, diplomats, scientists, and citizens' groups from 179 countries went far to legitimize the new and uncomfortable paradigm. Its 27 principles recognized "the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home", called for the eradication of poverty, urged that a precautionary approach be widely applied, called for citizen participation, especially of women and indigenous people, and noted that "warfare is inherently destructive of sustainable development" in stressing that "peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible" (UN General Assembly 1992). As practical measures, Rio cemented agreements on biodiversity conservation, forest management, and "Agenda 21" to advance sustainable development; however, of greatest significance, it established the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and this with the objective to bring about the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" (UNFCCC 1992).

From here, starting in 1995 with COP 1 in Berlin, the UNFCCC set in train the ongoing series of "Conference of the Parties", the "parties" to these annual "COP" gatherings being the governments of the world that are signatories to the UNFCCC. The UN's earlier World Commission on Environment and Development had already, in 1987, set the paradigm of "sustainable development" with the following declaration: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 1987). That had to mesh with climate change, and so the social and political challenges of our time were tabled. Whilst the climate dynamic was too premature for Berry to have amplified it, the relevance of his vision of the way ahead is amplified retrospectively. As such, *Befriending the Earth* is not just a historical snapshot of the time; it is also a roadmap for which, perhaps, humankind is only now getting ready. Let me sketch that map.

### 3. A Roadmap of Berry's Thought

The following chapter summaries are not comprehensive. I have limited this outline to some key waymarks, selected according to what might speak most loudly to us now.

In chapter 1, “*The Divine and Our Present Revelatory Moment*”, Berry presents his view that we are at the end of the Cenozoic period in geological time, and are entering what he calls the “Ecozoic Age”, which responds to the need for a renewed set of relationships between humankind and the Earth. We must recover (or perhaps, discover for the first time) our sense of the divine, of humanity, and of redemption in the world around us. This is the revelation (or apocalypse) of our time. It invites reconstituting science around its “ultimates [that] are trans-scientific”, these being “within a religious perspective and relating this to a new, larger, more expansive dimension of Christianity”. This is “the theological role of our time” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 8).

In chapter 2, “*Sacred Community, Spiritual Discipline, and Ritual*”, Berry highlights the Biblical *exodus* as a symbol of transformation. Exodus is the primary Hebraic liberation theology, the mythic history of the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt. I say “mythic”, because spiritually it is the activated archetypal principle that both counts and carries meaning. Berry suggests that the exodus that can liberate in our times demands a re-Earthing of that which had been rendered transcendent and thereby separated from the world. To do this, we need to get to grips with our addictive relationship to what, in a later chapter, he encapsulates as a “transcendent technology, which enables us to evade the basic biological laws of the natural world” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 115). It requires a reconstitution of ecology as the study and practice of *community*. In other words, to double translate (as it were) from the Lord’s Prayer, translating not just into *English* but into contemporary *meaning*: “Thy *community* come, thine *opening of the way* be done, on Earth as is in Heaven”.<sup>6</sup>

This demands a restored *discipline* with the Earth—a way, a truth, and a life that we follow, as disciples, because:

... we are involved in a profound cultural pathology. Because we refuse to deal with this cultural pathology, we are in a state of denial. What is needed is a deep cultural therapy. It is like addiction. We are not going to get out of this until we undertake the agonies that drug addicts have to undergo ... There is death without renewal (Berry et al. 1991, p. 46).

Such a pathway opens to a new sense of ritual, of sacrament, at which point a powerful passage from his Jesuit interlocuter Thomas Clarke explicitly brings in liberation theology. This, not just for its “option for the poor” which is “God’s option” (and as Gutiérrez (Gutiérrez [1971] 1974, p. xxix) emphasizes, “by the irruption of the poor into our history”), but also as an emergent “option for the Earth” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 60). Clarke thereby builds a bridge from social liberation theology to ecotheology, and so the “wretched” of the Earth might find both an aetiological diagnosis and common cause with the roots of ecocide. Today, continues Berry, we are all Dives “being asked to reflect on whether we want to continue to be Dives or not” (Berry et al. 1991). Dives, it may be remembered, was the rich man in Hades or “Hell” who was beyond the reach of Lazarus in heaven to receive the succor of a drop of water.<sup>7</sup>

In chapter 3, “*Christology*”, Fr Berry charts the part of theology, articulating his “compassionate curve” as a process that is driven from within itself, much as the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky saw the sacred in art as emerging from “inner necessity”.<sup>8</sup> For Berry, bygone generations of Christians have overlooked the fullness of divine revelation through the natural world—a truth that is more true of the Western church than that of the Orthodox East (Chryssavgis and Foltz 2013). With a nod towards the medieval Celtic scholar Duns Scotus, he suggests that “the primordial purpose of there being anything at all [rather than mere nothingness] is divine goodness, and the basic principle of goodness is that it tends to diffuse itself ... a sharing, a giving of a person’s self in an expansive way to others” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 68). Accordingly, and as he leads into this chapter from the previous one:

If God is speaking to us through the universe, and if we are now seeing that the universe functions differently from what earlier Christians thought, then we must have a different way of articulating our Christian belief. We have, in our new understanding of the universe, new ways of understanding the divine

manifestation in the natural world. We have a new type of revelation (Berry et al. 1991, p. 54).

Early Christianity, he suggests, shaped a theology that went beyond the gospels, and we must do the same today. With nods to both Indian and Chinese indigenous spirituality, he notes that the deeper name of the game is *moksha*, liberation, and this is what an incarnational mystical Christianity points towards. In Europe, however, we lost that “cosmic dimension” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 71). Saint Paul had deepened the notion of original sin and redemption to a cosmic level, “extend[ing] the Christ reality not simply from the personal Christ story to the community story, but to the whole of civilization, even to the story of the universe itself” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 71). However, Berry suggests, the Black Death in the 14th century and later developments in Western thought pushed aside this earlier understanding of an implicit and integral benign ordering. In consequence, “the cosmic dimension of Christianity . . . began to disappear”, and the emphasis on redemption of the individual human soul became so overwhelming, “that the natural world was ignored and the cosmic Christ became less prominent in Christian consciousness”. The endpoint was that “even with theologians, the cosmic Christ became a very marginal concern” (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 71–72). The contemporary reader at this juncture might be tempted to suggest that the self-seeking privatization of salvation paved the way for the privatization of the planet, and, therefore, its extremes of exploitation.

However, he continues: “one of the best ways to discover the deep meaning of things is to give them up for awhile” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 76). I find it striking that liberation theology speaks of the experience of the Paraclete as an “irruption” (or breaking in) of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Berry affirms the insights of other great faiths. All flowers are qualitatively different, but all relate to the lily, and while the Christian understanding of incarnation “fulfils a unique role . . . there are other incarnations” (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 78–79).

As Berry nods here to the Buddhist understanding of reality, I could not help but think (with a sideways tilt towards the Vedic mysticism) of the Canadian psychiatrist R.M. Bucke’s pioneering study, *Cosmic Consciousness*, and its case studies not just from literature, but also, from his own spontaneous mystical experience whilst riding through London in a carriage at the end of the 19th century. Bucke described feeling uplifted in the bliss of “the Brahmic splendour” that poured spontaneously into his being with “the taste of heaven”. It left him knowing, “that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence” (Bucke [1901] 1961, pp. 7–8). Yet, Berry’s chapter is no feel-good platitude; it ends with a sharp warning. Yes, Christianity is about redemption, yet we have our part to play in “responsibility for the temporal and eternal processes. That is the paradox in Christianity. We can do temporal damage that is also, in a sense, eternal damage”, and understanding this paradox “is an ultimate challenge to religious understanding” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 82).

In chapter 4, “*The Conditions for the Ecozoic Age*”, Berry argues that to overcome the alienation between the human and the natural world we must move beyond the Cenozoic era. The Cenozoic is the geological age of mammalian evolution that has spanned the past 66 million years since the dinosaurs died out. We are now in a fresh wave of plant and animal extinctions. Some dub this “the Anthropocene” (because it is shaped by the *anthropo-*, the human), but Berry, originally in collaboration with the cosmologist Brian Swimme, suggested the name the Ecozoic. *Eco-* is from the Greek meaning “home”, and *zoic-* meaning animal life, originally from a Proto-Indo-European root that meant “to live”. The Ecozoic therefore implies the imperative to obtain and to sustain a home worth living in. This is why, towards the end of the previous chapter, he called for “a new story”, a story that has a “numinous” or mystical aspect, that can provide us with “a feeling for this account of the universe” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 77).

The conditions for this to unfold involve mustering the human energy, the “psychic energy”, necessary to tackle the “deep cultural therapy” demanded by our “deep cultural pathology” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 94) He outlines six conditions: (i) the “universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects”; (ii) the Earth must not be approached in a fragmentary manner, but in an “integral” or holistic manner, as “a single reality”;

(iii) we only get one chance because “if we kill the earth, it is all over”; (iv) the human is derivative of the Earth, which is primary, and while “there is a difference between approaching the biosystems of the earth in terms of human ecology and in terms of nature ecology”, eventually, “of course, they must be one”; (v) this demands a new ethics to circumvent ecocide “in the transition from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic”; and finally, (vi) this reframing will entail the development of new ethical, legal, and educational systems with which to tackle “biocide or geocide”, and this in ways that integrate “the religious dimension . . . into every phase” so as to “foster a definition of the universe as a community of subjects” (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 96–100). In moving on to unfold these six points, he especially emphasizes women’s struggle against the patriarchy; this, to the point of describing “four great patriarchal establishments of the Western world [that have] led to the ruinous situation at the present . . . that women have had to endure as well as they were able”, these being the ancient empires, the ecclesiastical establishment, the nation state, and the modern corporation (Berry et al. 1991, p. 104). He draws on Australian Aboriginal insights that every person has art, music, and poetry inside them, and part of the antidote to the condition of our times is that “all children should write poetry”, and that “our glorification of specialization has led to an impossible situation” where these essentials have been neglected (Berry et al. 1991, p. 105). His ecological heroines include Charlene Sptetnak and Joanna Macy, leading to the ecofeminist proposition that “in the union of these two forces, ecology and feminism, lies much of the future” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 105).

Taking us back to the first chapter, we have become “locked up” in ourselves, “We are talking to ourselves. We are not talking to the river, we are not listening to the river. We have broken the great conversation [and] shattered the universe” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 20). However, for all the heaviness of the diagnosis, in all of this “a sense of joy in the world is primary. We cannot live without joy, and that is why I consider life, the universe and the planet earth, all as a single, multiform, celebratory event” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 110). For “the inner life of the divine is community”. Such “community is at the heart of the ultimate simplicity” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 15), and in a word of practical advice that has strong Jungian undertones, he suggests that we might think back to our childhoods, “go back to the dreams that you had when you were excited by life”, and “consider those dreams as your basic guide”. This, so that “the great archetypal motivations come into being [and] we begin to think of ourselves in a more fulfilling role” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 110).

Finally, to chapter 5, “Sacrifice and Grace”, a short chapter on great transition moments being great sacrificial moments, but these “in order that everything afterward could come into existence” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 132). So often our endeavors in life fail because of an inner emptiness, meaning that “there is no capacity to give or receive” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 137). As the previous chapter had it, “at the present time a new relationship between humans and the earth is being fashioned. The basic reality is that the earth exists and can survive only in its integral functioning” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 96). That capacity is *grace*, the complement of sacrifice. Grace requires Tillich’s “courage to be”, it requires us to become whole people in a whole world. We might say that “grace” is more than a pattern of words that might be said; grace, and the imperative to complete its cycles, is the mode of being to which the Cosmic Christ, incarnate in the universe, is calling us.

#### 4. Widening the Context—Integral Human Development and the Encyclicals

*Befriending’s* final chapter repeated the “integral” theme, its second sentence affirming, “This transition is an integral part of the great journey of the universe . . .” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 131). Note the resonance there with liberation theology’s “integral human development”, a concept that is seen as having been introduced by Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* in 1967, and brought into plain sight from out of specialist use as “collaboration in the development of the whole person and of every human being” in Pope John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Heinrich et al. 2008, p. 2). Again, Berry is explicit that we do not get a second chance. “If we kill the earth, it is all over”, because the human

“is derivative, the earth is primary”, therefore: “I include human ecology within nature ecology, rather than the other way around” (Berry et al. 1991, p. 97).

I find it especially noteworthy that *Befriending the Earth* was published in December 1991. It was in May of that eventful year that John Paul II issued his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Was there a direct connection, or was just something in the air, a sign of the times? Either way, in discussing “the ecological question” and the spiritual harm of consumerism John Paul II called for safeguarding “the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’”. However, as a conservative pope he stopped short of the Cosmic Christ, and instead put to bed his discussion of human ecology by situating it firmly within the anthropocentric realm of “the family founded on marriage” (Pope John Paul II 1991, sec. 36–39).

His successor Pope Benedict, though more conservative, ironically came closer to Berry’s position. In a passage that has been seen as prefiguring *Laudato Si*, his 2009 encyclical *Caritas In Veritate* recognized that (and the italics are his): “*The Church has a responsibility towards creation and . . . when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits*” (Pope Benedict XVI 2009, sec. 51). However, it is to Pope Francis and his papal signature piece, the ecological encyclical *Laudato Si* (“Praise be to You”) of 2015, that Thomas Berry would have had to wait to see the blossoming of so many of the principles to which he bore witness. For here:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. . . . In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: ‘Yes, cosmic! . . .’ (Pope Francis 2015, sec. 233 & 236)<sup>10</sup>

An indication of Berry’s influence on Pope Francis is given in a detailed commentary on *Laudato Si* and its Vatican antecedents by his biographers, the wife-and-husband team Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who also serve as the Managing Trustees of the Thomas Berry Foundation that maintains the legacy website, “Thomas Berry and the Great Work” (Thomas Berry Foundation 2023). Notably, too, Dr Tucker currently sits on the Ecology Working Group of the Vatican Covid-19 Commission of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (Tucker 2023, p. 7). Tucker’s and Grim’s commentary concludes:

“It is this evolutionary understanding of Earth’s systems, so central to Teilhard de Chardin and Berry, that provides a broad context for the pope’s own revolutionary thinking. . . . This integration resituates the human as part of the vast unfolding universe, and [is] thus responsible for the continuity of the life systems on the planet” (Tucker and Grim 2016, p. 269).

As this paper was going to press, Pope Francis (on 4 October 2023) issued *Laudate Deum* (“Praise God”). As an “apostolic exhortation”, a personal teaching statement, it carries less authority than an encyclical, which expresses the Church’s formal position on matters. Nevertheless, and orientated explicitly towards the IPCC’s COP 28 gathering of heads of state scheduled to take place in Dubai at the end of the following month, it upacks his concern that, “with the passage of time” eight years on from *Laudato Si*, “I have realized that our responses have not been adequate”. In forthright language it warns that “the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point”; that “what happens in one part of the world has repercussions on the entire planet [because as] I repeat over and over again: ‘Everything is connected’ and ‘No one is saved alone’”; that “the greater problem is the ideology underlying an obsession: to increase human power beyond anything imaginable, before which nonhuman reality is a mere resource at its disposal”; and that we must therefore tackle “the ethical decadence of real power” that perpetuates itself through such means as marketing, false information, unequal meritocracy and weak multilateral capacity between nation states. However, to “say there is nothing to hope for



... would mean exposing humanity, especially the poorest, to the worst impacts of climate change" (Pope Francis 2023, sec. 2, 19, 22, 29, 54).

In words that would have delighted Thomas Berry, Francis concludes:

The Judeo-Christian vision of the cosmos defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvellous concert of all God's creatures. . . . I ask everyone to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful, because that commitment has to do with our personal dignity and highest values. At the same time, I cannot deny that it is necessary to be honest and recognize that the most effective solutions will not come from individual efforts alone, but above all from major political decisions on the national and international level (Pope Francis 2023, sec. 67, 69).

What we see in these recent Vatican documents is that the writings of such prophetic if sometimes turbulent priests for our time, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox, and Seán McDonagh (of the Columban Irish missionary order) have come of age. Even such a former practicing Roman Catholic feminist theologian as the late Mary Daly, the author of such a denouncing denouement as *Gyn/Ecology* with its "Positively Revolting" (her capitalization) "New Intergalactic Introduction" to the 1991 edition (Daly [1978] 1991, p. xiii), might have found satisfaction in parts of Fr Berry's recognition that "the terminal Cenozoic has been characterized by patriarchal oppression [and] that in the union of these two forces, ecology and feminism, lies much of the future" (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 96–100). As the Easter hymn has it, "Now the green shoot rises".

Today, as we stand where evolution brings us to in this stage of its journey, we might contemplate Maxim Gorky's phrase in *The Lower Depths*: "All of us are pilgrims on this earth, I have even heard people say that the earth itself is a pilgrim in the heavens". As such, Berry concludes that we have entered into a phase of midwifery, by which "we ourselves need to be reborn [and] the earth needs to be reborn" (Berry et al. 1991, p. 136).

*Befriending the Earth* is not a perfect book. It is a late-life convocation, a drawing together, at the age of 77, of a life's penetrating work. Sometimes his arguments are less crisp than in his earlier writings. Notwithstanding its heading, in the final chapter Berry does not mention "grace", except in a lengthy quotation; but in mitigation, this book is itself the charism, the gift of grace. Thomas Clarke, whose rich insights are threaded through the volume (though not our focus here), suitably rounds it off. He reflects on three stories about grace, ending with Gustavo Gutiérrez's study *On Job* and the movie "Babette's Feast". We imagine divine grace to be finite. In fact, it is infinite. Our times are an invitation in our lives for truth and grace to join hands (Berry et al. 1991, pp. 140–41).

## 5. The Passionist Charism and the Future of Christianity

Berry prefigured many of the themes developed in *Befriending the Earth* in a concise paragraph in his 1978 essay, "The New Story", in *Teilhard Studies*:

The third determining theme of the New Story is the intercommunion of the universe within itself and of each part with the whole. Each atomic particle is in communion with every other atom in the vast web of the universe. This web of relationships throughout the universe is what first impinges on the waking consciousness of the human from the beginning. If the larger story of the world process is the account of differentiation and subjectivity it is also the account of deepening communion at every level of reality. It is a more intense communion within the material world that enables life to emerge into being. The living form is more differentiated, with greater subjectivity and more intensive communion within itself and within its environment. All these factors are multiplied on a new scale of magnitude in the realm of consciousness. There a supreme mode of communion exists within the individual, within the human community, within the Earth-human complex. Increased capacity for differentiation is inseparable from this capacity for communion. Together this distance and this intimacy establish the basic norms of being, of life, of value. It is the destiny of our present

and all future generations to develop this capacity for communion on new and more comprehensive levels (Berry 1978).

This points to an understanding or a reminder that the “God-human” hypostasis—the underlying unity of divinity and humanity that Jesus Christ embodies—finds articulation in relationship with the creation, our world. It resonates with what the Spanish-Indian theologian, Raimon Panikkar, who came at it from the richness of a Hindu–Catholic position, called the *cosmotheandric* mystery, or intuition, or reality. This “trailokya” (as he described it, from the Sanskrit) is the triple interweave of *kosmos* (world), *anthrōos* (humanity), and *theos* (God), “with one Spirit seeing and recreating all hearts and renewing the face of the earth” (Panikkar [1964] 1981, p. 20; 2010, pp. 276–318). This is not God in the abstract. This is transcendence hand-in-hand with immanence, at the nexus of time and eternity, where “I am with you always” in “a very flesh-and-blood love” (as a 1980s sermon in Iona Abbey had it).<sup>11</sup>

In one of the most important passages in *Befriending the Earth*, right at the beginning, Berry speaks of rising to our destiny in these times and understanding that our lives are held within a greater hand. For:

Even as we reflect on what is happening, we need to reflect also on who we are and why we are faced with such a momentous issue [as the ruination of the Earth]. All indications suggest that we are, in a sense, a chosen group, a chosen generation, or a chosen human community. We did not ask to be here at this time. We were destined to be here at this time in the sense that the time of our lives is determined for us. Some of the prophets, when asked to undertake certain missions, said, “Don’t choose me; that’s too much for me”. God says: “You are going anyway”. We are not asked whether we wish to live at this particular time. We are here. The inescapable is before us (Berry et al. 1991, p. 5).

If we do not “honor our incarnation”, as the late Jewish–Hindu teacher Ram Dass put it; if we do not heed our destiny, as Carl Jung saw it; then we succumb to fate. Spiritually, we become a victim of the times and lost in meaninglessness. In contrast, the “irruption” or breaking in of the Holy Spirit that stirs the soul to destiny provides a wellspring even in adversity of meaning, and so the antidote to despair. Therefore, it is not “my kingdom come (or community, as we might better hear it today)”, but “thy community come”. The prophets and true poets know the urgency of such a way of seeing and being. Adrienne Rich, of Southern Protestant and Jewish heritage, therefore recognized a world in which “so much has been destroyed”, and yet, “I have to cast my lot with those/who age after age, perversely/with no extraordinary power/reconstitute the world” (Rich 1978, p. 67).

At this juncture, let me conclude with the significance of Thomas Berry having been a *Passionist* religious and priest, a member of The Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ (CP). “Passion” in the Christian sense is precisely that “very flesh-and-blood love” that refuses to avert its gaze or experience from suffering as that which must be endured. The “passion” of Christ was the suffering of Christ from in and out of love. Accordingly, the *Passionist* religious order was founded as a worldwide community in the 18th century by the Italian mystic, St. Paul of the Cross, who is said to have seen “the name of Jesus written on the forehead of the poor”. Those who work in solidarity with the poor learn how to read that alphabet. So it is that *Passionists* in England and Wales state that their charism, or “gift” of calling, is “the crucified God in the crucified people of this age, and the crucified Earth”.<sup>12</sup>

Why is this, in all its seeming “perversity” relative to the ways of the world, so important in our times? It is important because, if our actions for change are not spiritually based activism, we will so easily burn out, sell out, or wallow in the despair of compassion fatigue: for as Rich wrote elsewhere, “It’s possible that our national despair is by now too intricate and interwoven for disentangling”. Therefore, surrounded by “devastating levels of superficiality and self-trivialization”, we see despair even “in the political activist who doggedly goes on and on, turning in the ashes of the same burnt-out rhetoric, the same

gestures, all imagination spent" (Rich 1993, pp. 16–17). Yet, while such will always be specific to the contexts of a given place and time, and while ecocide and climate change are global, there is nothing new in this experience. Jesus in his age addressed an "unbelieving and perverse generation", of which, "because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matthew 17:17; 24:12 NIV). Without spiritual passion, the birthright oil in the lamps of our lives runs dry. When this happened, the five wise virgins who waited on the bridegroom in the parable knew that they could not just donate some oil to their five foolish companions. You can help another to do their spiritual work, but you cannot do it for them. (Matthew 25:1–13; McIntosh 2022) As an old Quaker woman told me, "It is perilous to neglect your spiritual work". To respond to destiny's calling is a discipline, a discipleship, a lifelong following, and hence the "order" of a religious order.

The spirituality that our lives and times invite cannot be lived only at the level of bells and smells and all things bright and beautiful. A theology that faces up to cosmotheandric crucifixion can only find its realization from the depth of the second day on the cross, when, as it is expressed in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into hell". Ergo, Rich's "perversely/with no extraordinary power".

We might be mindful that, as Orthodox tradition has it, Christ said to the staretz (holy man) Silvanus of Mount Athos: "Keep your spirit in hell and despair not" (Clément 1993, p. 302). As activists, as "passionists" if not fully signed-up Passionists, we work on a long front with many positions. None of us has a God's-eye-view. Again, "We are here. The inescapable is before us" (Berry et al. 1991, p. 5). And yet, as George Fox the Quaker recommended: "Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one" (Religious Society of Friends 1994, sec. 19:32).

"Cheerfully"! How is good cheer possible, if we survey the Passionists' "crucified God in the crucified people of this age, and the crucified Earth"? How is it possible to not despair if our spirit attends the gates of hell? Because, suggests the French-exiled Russian Orthodox Paul Evdokimov in an astonishing denouement: "The only message which could reach atheism today is that of Christ descending into hell. As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us" (Evdokimov 2001, p. 191). Moreover, he nods to the patristic tradition that even Judas went to hell with the crust from the Last Supper still in his pocket. Therefore: "Hell holds in its very heart a fragment of the light, thus comes true the saying: 'The light shone in the darkness'". Moreover (and the italics are his own): we glimpse the cosmic paradox that "the doors of hell have again become the doors of the Church" (Evdokimov 2001, pp. 32–33).

Such is the passion; such is the Cosmic Christ—*Pantocrator*—"almighty". So it is that Orthodox churches have a tradition of painting a large icon of Christ Pantocrator inside the dome of their houses of worship. It reminds that "God is with us". At such a level of real presence, the English community activist and teacher Helena Kettleborough sums up the influence of Berry's cosmology in her life by emphasizing *faithfulness*. This, she says, is the key to "the constant challenge and messiness in managing service delivery, staff . . . together with juggling home and family life" (Kettleborough 2023, p. 375).

It is "very flesh-and-blood", this love. That is what I hear in *Befriending the Earth*. That would seem to be the charism of the Passionists, the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

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## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Chis Donald, the Media and Communications officer of the Passionists in England for encouraging me in writing this piece.
- 2 Although it was written with Thomas Clarke S.J., my spotlight is primarily on Berry's passages as the book's main focus.
- 3 From online publishing data, it appears that the date of first publication was 1 December 1991. My "33 years" was based on having expected this article to appear in 2024. Its faster appearance is why I have caveated the abstract, "counted inclusively". Sometimes, in the name of angels, might we be allowed to "wing it"?
- 4 Science Festivals: [https://jcom.sissa.it/archive/20/07/JCOM\\_2007\\_2021\\_A01](https://jcom.sissa.it/archive/20/07/JCOM_2007_2021_A01) (accessed on 11 October 2023).
- 5 Reported in *The Scotsman*, 12 December 1990, as cited in Loening and McIntosh, 1991, p. 7.
- 6 Matthew 6:10, MOT (My Own Translation).
- 7 Luke 16:19–31.
- 8 See (Kandinsky 2012). This is Hilla Rebay's translation. Michael Sadler's renders it, less powerfully, as "inner need".
- 9 See Gutiérrez (Gutiérrez [1971] 1974, p. xxix), and specifically, "the important role played in Christian consciousness by the irruption of the poor into our history"
- 10 The quoted emphasis cites an Encyclical Letter of John Paul II in 2003.
- 11 Matthew 28:20; and a phrase used in a 1980s sermon delivered by the Rev Ron Ferguson in Iona Abbey, Scotland.
- 12 What is a Passionist? Available online: <https://passionists.org.uk/explained/2021/05/what-is-a-passionist/> (accessed on 11 October 2023).

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