

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
Scientist Priest

In a graveyard on the banks of the Hudson River, among the rows of identical gravestones of forgotten Jesuits, I found the one inscribed:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
Born 1 May 1881
Died 10 April 1955

He had lived under a ban. His critics had turned him out of his beloved France. He died suddenly of a heart attack at teatime in a friend's apartment in New York on Easter day. A mere handful of people had been at his funeral.

Yet since his death his books have sold by the hundreds of thousands.

Pierre came from a family of eleven children at the Chateau of Sarcenet in the Auvergne, France. His father was a gentleman-farmer and an antiquarian. His mother used to walk two miles across fields and back every day to early mass. She implanted in him a strong traditional faith. This nugget of pure gold which was the piety and faith of his childhood Teilhard retained to the end. The family entertained a good deal but almost entirely their innumerable cousins and their families. It was a devout, closed society.

He was sent to a Jesuit boarding school. One of his masters noted that Pierre was "very intelligent and first in every subject." But "transposing his mind far away from us was a jealous and absorbing passion—rocks." At eighteen he entered the Jesuit novitiate, where his traditional religious convictions were deepened. In 1902 an anti-clerical government expelled the religious orders from France. This Jesuit community went incognito to the island of Jersey in borrowed civilian clothes. After his novitiate he was sent for three years to teach physics in Cairo. He then went to England to a Jesuit house at Hastings to finish his last four years of study.

All this time he had been living in another closed society—this one all-male, Jesuit-dominated, reacting against French anti-clericalism, suspicious of anything which smelt of any kind of modernism. Brought up on the old view of creation, he now read Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. The liberating word "evolution" would continue to ring in his ears "like a refrain, a taste, a promise, and an appeal." It would be the dominant factor in all his thinking—and also all his praying.

Then the first world war broke out. Teilhard, now thirty-three, was called up and became a stretcher bearer with a crack Moroccan regiment. He was in the front line through most of the great battles. He won France's highest military and civil awards for his service. He called the war his "baptism into reality." "Fundamentally," he wrote, "I'm glad to have been at Ypres. I hope to emerge more of a man and more of a priest." In fact, *something new was released within him*. Later he would describe these years as "his intellectual honeymoon." Reflections—seminal reflections—poured off his pen. He filled notebook after

notebook in his neat hand writing—I cannot think how—in the blood and mire of dug-outs. In a real sense *all* that came later was the working out of insights received in the trenches.

Also, during that war his genius for friendship developed. He discovered how close he was to his cousin, Marguerite. His stream of letters to her from the front makes this clear. “Our friendship is precious,” he told her, and compared it to “a note of music, which gives tone to our whole life.” For Teilhard, man’s speculation had to be balanced by woman’s intuition. Toward the end of his life he could write, “Nothing developed in me which was not under a woman’s gaze or a woman’s influence.” All of this was within the loyalty of his calling. “Love is a three-term function,” he maintained, “man, woman and God. Its whole perfection and success are bound up with the harmonious balance of these three elements.”

After the war he went to Paris to study geology seriously. He received his doctorate in 1922 and then a professorial chair at the Institut Catholique. The next year he was invited to go to China for field-work.

When he returned trouble started. He wrote a private, speculative paper on original sin in the light of evolution. This paper somehow got to Rome. Some think it was stolen from his desk. Pressure was at once put by Rome on the Jesuit superiors that he should publish nothing but scientific papers. Teilhard wrote a friend, “I’ve put a good face on it outwardly, but within it is something resembling an agony or storm....” Loyal he remained, faithful to God, meticulous in his prayers, his breviary, his mass, his annual Ignatian retreats.

His next departure for the East was a kind of an exile just when his influence was beginning to tell in France. Back in the “brooding old China” he took part in the discovery of the skull of *Sinanthropus*—the so-called “Peking man”—an important link in the chain of human evolution. And it was now that he had time to write *Le Milieu Divin*, which he described as “an essay on the interior life.” But for years he was immersed in his scientific work, deep in China and in other countries.

Often traveling by mule for days on end, he could not say mass but prayed:

I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it all the labors and sufferings of the world...One by one, Lord, I see and I love all those you have given me to sustain and charm my life...I call before me the whole vast anonymous army of living humanity.

For the whole of the second world war there was no more field-work. He was interned at Peking, so it was there that he wrote his key work, *The Phenomenon of Man*.

The ground of the book—if I dare to summarize it—is the belief in the spiritual future of the earth. Man is not complete. He must become conscious of a greater cosmic process of which he is the most responsible part. The world is still unfolding in the direction of ever greater order and consciousness. We must strive in the direction of this great unifying thrust. All matter can give way to Spirit, by our knowledge and right use of it. The medium is love and faith. Under their influence the world yields and grows warm. The vehicle is the Christian church reborn, bearing humanity *onwards* toward a great universal center, a supreme center of love and personality, which is Christ.

As soon as the war was over Teilhard managed to get back to France. A great welcome awaited him. He went to Rome himself with revised transcripts of his works to ask for an imprimatur. On return home, he said to a friend, "Its 'No' to everything." So once again he left Paris. His last years were at the Werner-Green Foundation—but virtually another exile.

The best way to understand Teilhard de Chardin and his life of prayer is to turn to *Le Milieu Divin*. It is a personal book. "I want to write slowly, quietly—living it and meditating on it like a prayer," he wrote.

Significantly it is dedicated to "those who love the world." From that view point Teilhard saw two evils that might follow. First, many Christians might live narrow, impoverished lives—and the more vast the universe was discovered to be, the more fearful and withdrawn the world would become. Secondly, this narrowness might repel further from the church many modern people, whose outlook is being shaped by evolution and modern science; they already have "the suspicion that our religion makes its followers inhuman." Teilhard is aiming to show how "the love of God and the healthy love of the world "should nourish one another.

So next he shows how *all our actions*, secular as well as religious might be consecrated—and this, because according to the New Testament we can "put on Christ" and so our world lives in union with him. This we can do by uniting our intention in every task to the divine will—as tradition has always taught. But Teilhard went a step further and said that every work of ours could have value in itself and become part of God's great reintegration of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). This can give us *élan*, "a certain passionate delight in the work to be done."

But to live and work in this way we need those "cherished moments" when we give ourselves to prayer and receive the sacraments, "for without these times we should soon forget this ever-present tide of divine omnipresence." These times set apart for prayer can in fact become a spring "of immense power which bestows significance and beauty and new lightness on what we are already doing."

To work in this spirit can itself unite us with God by detaching us from our lower selves. We experience "the painful pangs of birth" in creative action. We jettison outworn ways of expression as we search for new forms. It is through all these actions that "the Christian knows that his function is to consecrate the world in Jesus Christ.

Then Teilhard goes on to show that it is also through the hardships we endure that the world is consecrated. He speaks of injustices that come to us from others, of tears that well up from within us, of accidents and illnesses. We have to learn, he says, how to cope with these; and even if we seem to be getting off more lightly than other people, we know we all have to face the inevitability of our own death.

When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more my mind) ...in those dark moments,
O

God, grant that I may understand that it is you... Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.

Always in the Christian life there is the rhythmic alternation of actions to do and hardships to cope with—attachment and detachment. Detachment is no good for detachment's sake, but only for further growth. So the Cross remains fundamental to the Christian life. It is the essential place for renunciation. But it is also the beacon to direct us along the sacrificial road which expresses love—a road steeply climbing upward. Never in the steepness of this climb must we fall into the crude error of thinking that the spirit and matter stand in opposition to one another like good and evil. On the contrary, matter, the tangible setting of our lives, is holy matter and it gives us footholds in our ascent.

But we are not climbing to a remote God. He is here. He touches us within, especially through or fellow men and women. We come to God Teilhard reminds us, not as mere individuals, but as a church, that mystical body of Christ, with her sacraments. He means not only the sacrament at the altar, but also “the sacramental species formed by the totality of the world,” and sees “the duration of the creation as the time for its consecration.” All of this finds its focus for him in profound and passionate adoration of God, which he believes is the fundamental need of man fully awakened to reality.

And Teilhard follows the gospel in looking forward to the *parousia*, the unpredictable second coming of Christ, and he affirms, “We have to *expect* it.”

Mark Gibbard, *Twelve Who Prayed: 20th Century Models of Prayer*, Augsburg, 1977.