

Teilhard de Chardin, Consecration and the Cosmos:

We celebrate this year the centenary of one of the best-known texts of the French Jesuit and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It was written as a prayer at two crucial moments in his life, and we know that in 1951 he was already projecting a third version. He called it *The Mass on the World* (*La Messe sur le Monde*), and it was collected successively in two of his works: *The Priest* and *Hymn of the Universe*. It is undoubtedly one of the 20th century's most striking pieces of mystical literature.

The first version was written on the battlefield of Verdun during World War I, where Teilhard worked as a stretcher-bearer, providing wounded soldiers with physical and spiritual first aid and referring them to the field hospital—or perhaps to the cemetery. That was, in his own words, “a baptism of reality” in the mud of the trenches and raised a pressing question about the meaning we can give to suffering and death.

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The second version of the text was written in 1923 in China, in the Ordos Desert, near the northern border with Mongolia. Teilhard was participating in a scientific expedition to study the geological characteristics of the ravines and the more arid steppes of Asia.

A European war and a period of isolation in a Chinese desert were the two landscapes of desolation that marked his writing of *The Mass on the World*. But between the lines of

the text, one might also recognize visual cues from other locales in Teilhard's life: the freshness of the poplar forests bordering the Aisne River, near Verdun, the yellowish chestnut trees in Sussex, the cliffs of the island of Jersey.

All these landscapes were for the Jesuit scientist part of a “composition of place,” a prayerful consideration of a religious theme; in this case, that leads us to the ineffable presence of God in the wildest of nature and in the rough nakedness of the rocks, images that speak unfailingly to a paleontologist about the long and mysterious history of the Earth and the unfathomable extension of geological time, which far exceeds the narrow life of a person.

Both at Verdun and in the deserts of China, Teilhard was immersed in the severe precariousness of a nomad; and as a priest, he was deprived of the possibility of celebrating the Eucharist. Instead, he tried to celebrate it inside his heart, setting as an altar the very landscape that appeared before his eyes at the first light of the day before he was absorbed by the tasks of a scientific journey.

The Mass on the World is a reminder to us that the sacrifice of the Mass extends far beyond the churches where it is usually celebrated. And it extends, moreover, in all the senses of existence. It extends in space to encompass the entire cosmos and it extends in time to reach past and future generations, by virtue of what the church has long called the “communion of saints.”



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How a Jesuit Mystic Expanded the Scope of Theology

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Teilhard's Traditional Devotions

It is not difficult to guess the weight that the domestic catechesis that Pierre Teilhard and his brothers received very early from their mother could have in this Teilhardian devotion. Under the gentle yoke of his own example, Teilhard's mother, Berthe de Dompierre, instilled in her children two particular pious practices: "spiritual communion" (a devotional formula that could be said in case of material or moral limitations on receiving the Eucharist) and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Though Teilhard would later be accused of heterodoxy and of stretching Catholic doctrines and practices too far, his spirituality was based on these two ancient Catholic devotions.

Since the Council of Trent, the most pious tradition of Christianity recommended the practice of spiritual communion. St. Alphonsus Liguori had popularized one of the most well-known prayers used for spiritual communion in the 18th century, expressing fervently and plainly the desire to receive Jesus with a willing heart. Teilhard built the devotional text of his *The Mass on the World* on the same idea.

For a mystic like Teilhard, able to feel the presence of God in such vivid ways, the absence of bread or wine could not prevent a priest from celebrating God's presence in matter, in his heart, in the historical events, in the creatures, in the neighbor and in the interior of each one of us, reviving and tasting inwardly his sense of offering, consecration and communion.

Similarly, Teilhard's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is clearly present in the images and metaphors used in *The Mass on the World*. Widely spread by the Society of Jesus, this popular devotion stressed the heart of Jesus as the seat of his feelings and the fire in which it burns as an expression of his love. That is an extreme love, as the Gospel of John points out, and "a

devotion with which my mother never stopped nourishing me," as Teilhard states in *The Heart of Matter*.

These devotional foundations of Teilhard's eucharistic vision have moved many readers, including three popes: Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The first two quoted his words in various public addresses but expressly avoided mentioning the name of the author, who was then under the long shadow of Vatican theological investigations of his works.

Four Characteristics of Teilhard's Theological Vision

One of the characteristics of a sublime text is that it is capable of taking root in a different way in the mind of each reader, fulfilling different needs, arousing suggestions and different connotations in each person and in each moment. As a result, no individual summary or analysis can exhaust the possibilities of so suggestive a text as *The Mass on the World*. Nevertheless, below I offer four suggestions of how *The Mass on the World* illuminates Teilhard's theological vision.

In order to be able to appreciate the degree to which Teilhard's ideas were prophetic, we should remember that these writings were largely composed in the pontificate of Benedict XV, a pope fearful of modernity and science, and that the church was still half a century away from experiencing the revitalizing breath of the Second Vatican Council.

Teilhard dissolves old scholastic dichotomies. His theological vision seeks to harmonize a world convulsed by hatreds with the divine invitation to fraternal unity. He does so primarily by dissolving or discarding many of the Platonic dualities that church scholars never quite knew how to solve: body and soul, matter and spirit, the mud of the earthly reality and the angelic and celestial world.

Teilhard, who considered himself a son of the ground more than a son of heaven, reconciles us with matter, proclaiming its natural goodness and its evolutionary mystery, and does not hesitate to give it the rank of sacredness, reminding us of the

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manifest acceptance of God contained in the Book of Genesis: “And God saw that it was good.” He comes to call that divine acceptance “the hand of God and the flesh of Christ” by tangibly supporting God’s presence in the world.

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He reconciles science and theology. In his book *Man’s Place in Nature: The Human Zoological Group* tried to walk a bridge between theology, biology and physics, in *The Mass on the World*, a very short text full of poetry and mysticism, Teilhard incorporates the intuitions of three scientific paradigms that the church still looked upon with the suspicion of novelty. The first is evolutionary theory, stretching from the insights of Darwin all the way to contemporary formulations arising from biology, anthropology and genetics. Second, the notion of an expanding universe that began with an initial explosion of energy that created everything that exists, a “Big Bang,” can clearly be seen in his theological vision as expressed in *The Mass on the World*. Third, the text outlines an idea that was beginning to be glimpsed in scientific circles: the insight to interpret the biosphere as a living entity, a superorganism in which all processes are connected to ensure their self-regulation. It would later find in James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis its best formulation: the *Gaia hypothesis*.

He unifies disparate strands of theology. While the Pauline epistolary tradition and medieval scholastic reflection showed a par-

tially unconnected mosaic of independent and well-differentiated truths of faith, Teilhard succeeds in connecting them as the coherent totality of a single truth, expanding their meaning and theological relevance. We discover with him that the concepts of creation, incarnation, redemption, consecration, the centrality of the Eucharist, providence, the communion of saints, the presence of God in the world or the commandment of love are not distinct realities but indissoluble and necessary aspects of the same vision. In turn, we see that this vision is not discordant with cosmic and biological evolution, the historical genesis of religions, the mystery of death and human suffering or any scientific research or human work. All can be a free and creative extension of God’s innovative power. Few authors possess this ability of Teilhard to generate integrative models of thought or formulate such unified explanations.

He expands the scope of theology. In addition to unifying the theological concepts mentioned above, Teilhard delves into the idea that these realities (and their theological interpretation) are not specific moments in the history of salvation; nor are they limited to the spatial realm of the biosphere. They overflow that space to become cosmic processes and go beyond time to become continually updated.

For example, the Pauline metaphor of the church as the mystical body of Christ, in which the various anatomical parts cannot do without each other, is extended by Teilhard to the whole of creation. The biosphere, as a material body, at the same time diverse and coordinated, absolutely needs a soul to give it consistency and meaning.

Similarly, for Teilhard the eucharistic matter of bread and wine also extend beyond their condition as fruits of the earth, beyond their presence at that Passover dinner of more than two millennia ago, and are charged with a broader meaning. Bread becomes for him a representation of all that painstakingly germinates, grows, blossoms, matures and multiplies in the world.

So too, wine can be a representation of everything that diminishes or decreases; of blood shed; of whatever causes us pain

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and suffering; of sickness, decrepitude, disappointment, betrayal and death. Such a plenitude of meaning comes to us in a chalice that we would sometimes like to set aside, but of which we partake following the example of Jesus.

The Consecration and the Cosmos

These and other brilliant conceptual extensions of Teilhard not only expand the horizons of faith in God but also remove them from the angelic context in which medieval theology placed them and plant them in the tangible reality of matter.

Thus, for example, the sacramental consecration of bread and wine is incardinated in a much broader interpretation that reflects the way in which the supernatural dimension connects with natural reality and illuminates it. That is, it speaks to us about the definitive consecration of the entire creation, which

will meet God on the evolutionary path to what Teilhard called the Omega Point.

In this way, the risen Christ will end up being the soul of the great mystical body that is the universal reality. Our study of what we might call cosmogenesis, biogenesis and the history of the human being are nothing more than the evolutionary steps before Christogenesis, the great consecration in which we are all immersed.

For Teilhard, we live in the bosom of a great cosmic Eucharist that will culminate in each of us when, at the Omega Point of our individual history, we approach a definitive communion. At that moment, our physical disintegration will not be the end. It will be only the requirement to be able to lose ourselves, already without the heavy opposition of our atoms, in the immense horizon of God's mercy and to be one with him.

