

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in 1881 into a large, close-knit, religiously-devout family in central France. (His family name was Teilhard de Chardin [pronounced “TAY-har day char-DAN”], although he is often referred to simply as Teilhard.) From his earliest youth he was drawn to the mysteries of nature, especially geology. But this attraction to the ‘world of matter’ soon led him to something far more than what we might think of as simply a probing of rocks and fossils. It led him to search for the essence, or what he later called the “heart” of matter, which led him into the deepest part of himself, and eventually into the very heart of God.

When he was eleven years old, he enrolled at the nearby Jesuit boarding school, a school renowned for its teaching of the natural sciences. Teilhard was an excellent student and soon gained wide respect for his academic and spiritual leadership. Shortly after graduation, sensing God’s call to be a Jesuit, he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Aix-en-Provence.

Upon completing his novitiate, he moved to Laval in northwest France to begin his college studies. But he had hardly arrived there when the French government, during a period of heightened anticlericalism, passed laws that made life very difficult for the Jesuits in France. His community soon relocated to the island of Jersey in the English Channel. His studies focused almost exclusively on philosophy, yet he used any time he could spare from his studies in scientific excursions on the island. During these years, his inner attraction to the great forces of nature, so deeply rooted in earlier childhood experiences, grew to such intensity that he gradually came to sense God’s presence pulsating in the world of matter. It was no coincidence that his essay “The Spiritual Power of Matter,” which ends with its stirring “Hymn to Matter,” was written on Jersey, when he returned there for a vacation in 1919. It opens with the lines:

Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock...

Bless be you, perilous matter, violent sea, untamable passion...

In 1905 he left Jersey for Cairo, where for the next three years, as part of his Jesuit formation, he taught physics at the Collège de la Sainte Famille. He was an enthusiastic teacher who loved his students and, in turn, was much loved by them. He fell in love with Egypt and hoped that he might be able to return there. In 1908, however, he left to study theology at Hastings in the South of England. By inclination and temperament, biblical studies held little interest for him, yet in his study of the Pauline writings he found that Paul’s cosmic hymns resonated with him: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together...” (Colossians 1:15-20). He sensed life in all its diversity stretching out from its fossil forms in the distant past through the present toward some future point of maturation. It seemed as if all creation existed as a continuous stream of living matter, energy, and spirit, animated by the divine life itself. This divine life, moreover, revealed itself to him as a personal presence: the person of Christ Jesus. Thus there slowly emerged as the center of all things that which he would later call the Cosmic Christ, which embraced all matter, all life and all creation.

He had long sought to synthesize the world of science with his faith. He had become increasingly aware of a deep-running ‘current’ embracing the entire universe. Suddenly, his thinking coalesced in reading the recently-published *Creative Evolution* by Henri Bergson. The book brought into focus the dynamic pattern he saw running through the entire universe. He understood the entire cosmos to be in a process of evolutionary creation, a process he called Cosmogogenesis. This meant that the entire cosmos was, in effect, alive! Evolution was the key he had been looking for.¹ He now understood matter and spirit, not as two separate realities, but as “two aspects of one and the same cosmic Stuff.” The apparent dualism

1 Evolution can be defined as any change across successive generations in the inheritable characteristics of biological populations. From a spiritual perspective, however, evolution is simply God’s creative action expressed in time.

of matter and spirit, of body and soul, vanished, he later wrote, “like mist before the rising sun.” He had come to understand spirit, which he later identified as consciousness, as slowly emerging from matter. Creation, he had come to understand, was slowly yet inextricably evolving toward consciousness. God, he realized, was present and active everywhere.

Teilhard was ordained a priest in August 1911, but remained at Hastings until the middle of 1912 while he continued his theology studies. During the summer of 1912, increasingly drawn to the field of paleontology, the study of prehistoric life, he moved to Paris for studies. There he made many important personal connections and quickly immersed himself in research – but in August 1914 the Great War began and all his plans changed. In December he joined the French army as a medical orderly and, at his own request, was posted at the front as a stretcher-bearer. He was quickly hurled into a very different world, but there he experienced a sense of being one with his fellow man and discovered more and more the meaning of all human reality. The soldiers greatly appreciated his presence and help and were much encouraged by his strength of faith. Although often in great peril, he discharged his duties as stretcher-bearer seemingly without fear, yet he emerged unscathed from the war. His time at the front, however, proved to be more than simply battles, dangers, and hardships; it was also a time of profound personal reflection and spiritual transformation. Although signs of this can be seen in his letters from this time, it is more clearly seen in many of the scientific essays he wrote. Their very number, astonishing when one considers the frightful conditions in which they were written, and the lyricism in which they were often expressed, give ample witness to the passion for God that was now stirring within him.

In early 1919 he returned to Paris to complete his studies and within a year had passed his certificate examinations and begun working on his dissertation. In the spring of 1922 he defended his dissertation and was awarded the doctorate. His success was crowned by his being elected president of the Société Géologique de France and promoted to adjunct professorship at the Institut Catholique. He was now an acknowledged master of his profession and was recognized and widely consulted by his peers.

His career as a brilliant research scientist and much sought-after lecturer might have continued for years had he not received an invitation to go to China. It came from one of his Jesuit confreres, Emile Licent, who had explored the Yellow River Basin and assembled a substantial natural history collection. Since Fr. Licent was an explorer not a paleontologist, he was not able to analyze all the finds himself. So he sent the most significant specimens to Paris, where Teilhard was entrusted with analyzing them. The two corresponded, but Teilhard realized that to assess the scientific value of Licent’s finds, he needed more information: he had to go to China himself. As events unfolded, he would spend much of the next twenty-five years in China. His early travels with Fr. Licent were the setting for one of his best-known essays, “The Mass on the World.”

Teilhard greatly desired to be united with Christ through all things. As a dedicated priest passionately devoted to the science of the earth, its life, and that of human beings, he wanted to offer not only bread and wine, but the whole of creation to God. He first began this kind of spiritual offering when he lived in the trenches. Often with no place or time to offer Mass, he composed himself and offered a Mass ‘in spirit.’ This gradually became what he called his “Mass on Things,” which during his first expedition to China, he renamed “The Mass on the World.” In his essay, he wrote that, having neither bread nor wine nor altar, he was taking the whole universe as the matter of his sacrifice:

“Since again, Lord – though this time not in the forest of Aisne but in the steppes of Asia – I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar; I will raise myself beyond these symbols up to the pure majesty of the real itself. I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar, and on it I will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world.”

And as Teilhard continues, he describes the setting in which all this unfolds:

“Over there, on the horizon, the sun has just touched with light the outermost fringe of the eastern sky. Once again, beneath this moving sheet of fire, the living surface of the earth awakes and trembles, and once again begins its fearful travail. I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won by this renewal of labor. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth’s fruits. My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converse upon the Spirit.”

For Teilhard, God is energy, fire, and power. God is blazing Spirit that molds every living thing. God is the heart of the world, the innermost depth of all that is. God is the milieu in which we live and breathe, and in which all is made one.

By October 1924 Teilhard was back in Paris, teaching at the Institut Catholique, giving talks, visiting friends and meeting new ones. He was becoming increasingly aware, however, of living in two worlds: the world of his Catholic faith and that of his scientific research. He thus sought to reconcile the latest discoveries about human origins with the traditional Catholic doctrine of original sin.² Sometime in 1922 a colleague had asked him to write a brief explanatory paper on original sin for the benefit of qualified theologians. It is unclear how a copy of this paper got to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, but it did. In November 1924, his provincial summoned him to explain the paper. Nothing was settled at the meeting, but his license to teach at the Institut Catholique was permanently revoked, and he never taught there again. There was nowhere for him to go but to return to China.

Shortly after returning to China, he began writing *The Divine Milieu*. Since the focus of the book was his own spiritual vision, his writing it was a creative way of working through his inner pain. When he completed the book, in the hope that it might be published, he sent the manuscript to his provincial. His provincial passed it to two censors and, upon receiving their positive assessments, gave it his approval. A church official, however, who was to issue the church’s *imprimatur* (literally, ‘let it be printed’) on behalf of the local bishop, sent the manuscript to Rome. There the authorities, for reasons known only to themselves and in spite of the book’s acknowledged orthodoxy, forbade its publication. It was not until 1957, two years after Teilhard’s death, that *The Divine Milieu* was published.

Teilhard spent much of the 1930s involved in geological expeditions – including playing a major role in finding and interpreting “Peking Man,” an early human, at Zhóu-Kóu-Tien, about thirty miles southwest of Peking. However, toward the end of that decade he spent a year writing the book for which he is best known, *The Phenomenon of Man*. He had long pondered the significance of the human within the vast process of evolution. What was the meaning of the human phenomenon? How did human life begin? How did it grow? What was its future and ultimate purpose? The book is addressed primarily to those with a scientific background. It demonstrates how evolution is a gradual movement through time from the development of the atom to the molecule and cell to different forms of life, and eventually to human beings. The movement exemplifies how the development of ever greater structural complexity leads, in turn, to what Teilhard called “an ever greater ‘within’ of things,” that is, an increase of consciousness and reflection. The book was published only after Teilhard’s death.

“A prophet is not without honor except in his own country” (Mark 6:4). In truth, these words could be said of the entire life of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but they are particularly true of his last ten years. In 1946 he had returned to France to almost universal honor and acclaim – except from the Church, which continued to block the publication of any of his writings. His ability to teach was also severely restricted – he could speak only before small, confined audiences – as were the topics he could address. He was nominated for the chair in Prehistory at the Collège de France – an acknowledgement of his great stature

2 “Why is it that, with the best of intentions, we find it so difficult to do what is right? We can look for an explanation in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. Here the seemingly endless struggle between good and evil is described in the imagery of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit.” (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], 68)

in the world of science – but he was not permitted to accept it. In spite of this, his reputation continued to spread. In 1947 he was made a member of the Légion d’Honneur and a short time later was elected a member of the prestigious Institut de France. He was a prophet. Within the reality of evolution, he had discovered the dynamism of God’s creative love and a God who was actively engaged not only in the life of each and every person but also in all creation. Late in his life he observed that “a whole lifetime of continual hard work would be as nothing to me, if only for a moment, I could give a true picture of what I see.”

In 1923 he had gone to China when the doors in France seemed increasingly closed to him. On occasion he would return to France, but his stays were always short-lived, and he would soon return to China. In May 1946 he had again returned from China, but the situation in China was changing, and that door, too, would soon be closed to him. He needed to find another ‘milieu’ for his work. In late 1951 that need was resolved when he joined a Jesuit community in Manhattan, a fifteen-minute walk from the research institution where he would be working in New York. In sharing the news about this move with a friend, he observed that “Paris has become too hot for me these days, so I must try to find a shelter here for the time being. I may be here for months.” As events unfolded, he would reside there for the remainder of his life, because on the afternoon of April 10, 1955, Easter Sunday, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in the 73rd year of his life, suffered a massive heart attack and died. He was buried in the Jesuit cemetery in Poughkeepsie, New York.³

In his recent book, *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential in Science’s Greatest Idea*, Carter Phipps tells a charming story about the last living person who knew Teilhard. He described Jean Houston as a global teacher, author, storyteller, and ‘evolutionary’ all wrapped up into one, and the story she told of her initiation into an evolutionary worldview as truly mythic.

“At the age of fourteen she was living in Manhattan... One day, while running to school, she accidentally stumbled headlong into an elderly gentleman, who asked her in a thick French accent, ‘Are you planning to run like that for the rest of your life?’ ‘Yes.’ she managed to reply as she ran off down Park Avenue. ‘*Bon voyage!*’ shouted her new acquaintance.

That accidental collision would prove to be a decisive moment in the young woman’s life, and set the stage for an unlikely friendship. The next time she ran into this man was the following week, while walking her dog. He recognized her immediately, and they struck up a conversation. It didn’t take long for her to realize that this man was no ordinary adult. He had ‘no self-consciousness,’ she remembers, and seemed to be ‘always in a state of wonder and astonishment.’ Unable to grasp his complex French name, she simply called him ‘Mr. Tayer.’ But somehow her fourteen-year-old mind was perceptive enough to appreciate that she was in the presence of greatness, and the conversations with ‘Mr. Tayer’ were worth remembering and writing down.

He taught her many things in their rambles to Central Park over the next couple of years. She recalls how he filled her young mind with visions of ‘spirals and nature and art, snail shells and galaxies, the labyrinth on the floor of Chartres Cathedral and the Rose Window, the convolutions of the brain, the whirl of flowers, and the circulation of the heart’s blood. It was all taken up in a great hymn to the spiraling evolution of spirit and matter.’

The last time she saw him was in the spring of 1955, the Sunday before Easter. At one point during the conversation, she worked up the courage to ask him a question about himself. His answer would remain permanently etched on her mind: ‘I believe that I am a pilgrim of the future,’ he told her. ‘Jean, the people of your time, toward the end of this century, will be taking the tiller of this world. Remain always true to yourself, but move ever-upward toward greater consciousness and greater love.’

3 As soon as Teilhard had died, it was possible to publish his works. Jeanne Mortier, whom Teilhard had named his literary executrix in 1951, had made all the necessary preparations to do so. Between 1955 and 1976 all the books and essays of Teilhard de Chardin were published, first in their original French and later in English translation.

‘Those were the last words that he said to me,’ she recalls. ‘Then he said, *Au revoir!*’

For weeks, she returned to Central Park and waited for him, to no avail. Only years later, when someone gave her a book entitled *The Phenomenon of Man*, did all the pieces fall into place. There on the back cover was the unmistakable face of Mr. Tayer. Teilhard de Chardin had been her mentor, and he had died Easter Sunday in 1955. She went on to build a remarkable life commensurate with the lessons she learned on those magical walks in Central Park.”

The Divine Milieu

Teilhard seems to have been graced with the ability to see God in all creation. This grace found some parallel in his life of scientific inquiry and his experience with the Spiritual Exercises, yet ultimately it seems to have been a gift of God. In the introduction to *The Divine Milieu*, he wrote: “Throughout my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight until, aflame all around me, it has become almost completely luminous from within.” It seems that Teilhard had been graced in being able to see not only the outer reality of things, but also that divine light that illuminates all things from within. He had been graced to see the divine ‘fire’ within things, a fire that penetrated and burned, yet did not consume or destroy. His words are reminiscent of those that described the burning bush that Moses saw (Exodus 3:2) or the lines with which fellow-Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins begins his poem, ‘God’s Grandeur’: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil...”

The French word ‘milieu’ calls for some explanation. Although ‘milieu’ embraces both our English words ‘atmosphere’ and ‘environment,’ for Teilhard it also connoted something that he tried to capture in images of light, inner luminosity, and fire. A milieu is as penetrating and omnipresent as the air we breathe, or as the water in which fish swim. For Teilhard, God is not only transcendent (utterly beyond his understanding and even his imagining) and immanent (deep within all things). God is also the very milieu in which all that lives and moves and has being is said to exist. From Teilhard’s perspective, all reality exists, quite literally, in God. For Teilhard, all reality exists in a divine milieu.

I believe a point of clarification is called for: Teilhard’s belief that all reality exists, quite literally, in God is called ‘panentheism’ (from the Greek meaning ‘all-in-God’), a belief system which posits that God interpenetrates every part of nature and timelessly extends beyond it. This is quite different from pantheism, which posits that nature and God are identical.

Teilhard de Chardin, like Paul the Apostle, rarely made reference to Jesus of Nazareth. His focus, like that of Paul, was rather on the risen and glorified Christ. Moreover, when both spoke of Christ, they were invariably referring to the Total Christ, of whose body we are all members (Romans 12:5, 14:7; Colossians 2:19, 3:3, etc.). Both understood this Christ Body, not as something static or complete, but as something alive and growing, but which has not yet reached maturity. We note, moreover, that both understood the Total Christ, head and body, as a being that is both spiritual and physical: a being that is striving toward its fulfillment and completion as a body (Ephesians 1:10, 1:23; 2:21). For Teilhard, as for Paul, Christ is the divine milieu. It is in Christ that we live and move and have our being.

As a scientist, Teilhard had come to realize that we as humans can never separate ourselves from the oceans, the atmosphere, the animals, plants, and other living creatures that populate our world. In brief, he saw that we humans are inextricably bound up with all creation. Moreover, since we humans cannot be separated from the rest of creation and cannot remain alive without it, Teilhard envisioned the divine milieu as embracing the entire cosmos. He thus envisioned the Cosmic Christ as embracing the entire cosmos in a sea of divine love. Moreover, as a scientist, he understood the Cosmic Christ not simply as evolving, but as evolving toward something or, more correctly, Someone – a divine, immense, complex, personal, loving Whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Teilhard called this culminating ultimate moment of evolution the Omega Point.

For Teilhard, the true identity of the Total Christ is continually being revealed to us anew through the evolutionary process. Teilhard understood evolution as happening continually on every level of being. Moreover, he believed that, from the dawn of creation, all created reality has been following a certain upward trajectory – that is to say, it has a direction – that is governed by what we can call the law of attraction-connection-complexity-consciousness. For example, as elemental things are attracted to each other, they combine to form connections. These connections are always more complex than the separate parts. Thus atoms of hydrogen and oxygen combine to form molecules of water that are more complex than the atoms of which they are formed. Since things never stop connecting, because of attraction, the complexity of unions being created keeps growing. Following the law of connection, molecules of water find their way into living plants, which find their way into animals, which find their way into humans. When animals develop sufficient complexity to have a nervous system, following this fundamental law, they develop sensory awareness. Complexity is thus understood as leading creation into consciousness.⁴

In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard divides all human experience into what we do through our own effort and what we endure or undergo. He calls these our ‘activities’ (what we do through our own effort) and ‘passivities’ (what we endure or undergo). But the truth of the matter is that most of what we experience is the result of both our activities and passivities. For example, I might be busy typing a letter (activity), but find myself distracted by the noise of a dog barking across the street (passivity).

Teilhard observes that both our activities and our passivities can promote the growth and development of the Body of Christ (making it better, wiser, more complex, more conscious, more effective, and more efficient) or, on the other hand, result in its diminishment. In Part One of *The Divine Milieu*, he wants to show how all our human activities – all that we do through our own effort – can promote the growth and development of the Body of Christ. In Part Two, he wants to show how all our human passivities – all that we endure or undergo – can accomplish this. Allow me to offer some examples of each:

Activities of Growth: raising a family, running a business, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, preparing a meal, writing a letter, etc.

Activities of Diminishment: intending to cheat your company or your customers, to sell illicit drugs, to use someone simply as a sexual object, etc.

Passivities of Growth: being born into a family that values education, being a talented athlete, having an aptitude for languages, having a compassionate nature, having friends who truly care for you, etc.

Passivities of Diminishment: being born into a family that values greed, laziness and selfishness, having a congenital disease or weakness of intellect, living in a poverty-stricken nation, etc.

Teilhard introduces Part One by observing that nothing happens in the divine milieu apart from God, not even ordinary activities like brushing one’s teeth, combing one’s hair and eating breakfast. God’s grace fills everything and everyone. He then proceeds to state that Christian tradition has always believed that we can do everything, as St. Paul says, “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” or simply, “in Christ.” Christians have always understood this life in Christ literally. It is not simply a metaphor. Christ is a real presence who is with us and in us. It is in Christ that we live and act.

Teilhard agrees that having good intentions is an essential foundation of everything we do. But he asks: How can our joy at the things we accomplish in life – our achievements, the beautiful things we make, and all that we bring into being – be complete unless these things are somehow made sacred and saved? And he answers that question by observing that we humans exist for and find our fulfillment in God, and

4 Teilhard was a proponent of ‘orthogenesis,’ the belief that evolution occurs in a directional, goal-driven way. His view, however, did not deny the capacity of evolutionary processes to explain complexity. It thus differs from what is known as ‘intelligent design.’

everything else exists for and finds its fulfillment in us. He thus concludes that everything exists for and finds its fulfillment, through us, in God.

Teilhard answers this question in the form of a classic syllogism that seems almost like a paraphrase of the Principle and Foundation with which Ignatius Loyola began his *Spiritual Exercises*:

- We humans exist for and find our fulfillment in God.
- Everything else exists for and finds its fulfillment in us.
- Hence, everything exists for and finds its fulfillment, through us, in God.

We may like to think of ourselves as autonomous beings, but as John Donne and so many others have so eloquently pointed out, “no man is an island entire of itself.” Each and every one of us is indebted for every aspect of our being to all the energies and resources of the earth. We simply cannot separate ourselves from the rest of creation. All creation is inextricably intertwined. All creation is, in Teilhard’s understanding, part of the Body of Christ. All creation is caught up in Christ, with Christ its center, its head, its heart. In the Body of Christ, all reality finds its ultimate purpose.

What all of this meant to Teilhard is that each of us, each in his or her own unique way, contributes in some small way to the completion of the Cosmic Christ. Each of us is called to accomplish something that no one else can do, just as each cell, organ, bone, and limb in our physical body contributes something unique to our personal development. In other words, each of us contributes in some small way to the larger salvation process, when “everything will be brought together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth” (Eph. 1:10). As Teilhard expressed it, each of us contributes to the completion of the Cosmic Christ by our “activities of growth.”

It is important to understand, however, that we can also hinder in small part the salvation process by our “activities of diminishment.” So what we do or don’t do is important, since it can affect that special part of creation whose salvation we can uniquely influence during our life. Yet it goes without saying that our inner selves must be developed over time (“May your inner selves grow strong,” Ephesians.3:16). Each of us, through all we do, works to develop our inner selves. But all this unfolds slowly. Bishop Ken Untener’s reflection expresses it beautifully: “We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. ... We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. ... We cannot do everything, [but] this enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. ... We are prophets of a future not our own.”

Teilhard now asks: How can we see God in all our activities? And he answers that we could not find a more appropriate setting for “seeing” God than in our activities. In our activities, he tells us, we are co-creators with God: we coincide with the creative power of God. We become not only the instrument of God’s creative power, but its living extension. In our actions, those things we do of our own free will, we merge through our heart and intention with the very heart and intention of God. This merging never stops; it is continuous, since we are always acting. No activity of ours happens outside the divine milieu. God’s activity and our activity are always merging. We can be reading the newspaper, walking the dog, playing with our children, preparing a meal. Whatever we are doing, we can connect with God in that action. Once we realize this, we can read the paper with fidelity, scanning the paper for news of goodness and growth in the world and being grateful for them. We can walk the dog, telling the dog what a wonderful world God has created. We can play with our children with a child’s delight. And so on.

For centuries, Christian spirituality had stressed detachment and urged people to rise above the world of matter. People wishing to be truly Christian were told to leave the world and its pursuits. Life as a nun

or monk was proposed as a way of life that was higher or better than that of a layperson. Human activity was considered a simply a distraction from the Christian life. But in *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard showed that such an understanding was false. He proposed, rather, a spirituality of passionate involvement in the world: a spirituality that plunged the Christian into the realities of the physical and social world to labor with Christ so that God might be all in all.

Teilhard concludes Part One by paraphrasing a maxim attributed to Ignatius Loyola: “Put your trust in God as though the success of your endeavor depended entirely on yourself, and not on God; but at the same time do everything in your power as though you had nothing to contribute, but as though God alone would do everything.” Our unbounded confidence in God should urge toward our greatest personal effort, yet in making this effort we should remain interiorly free. We must surrender everything, even the success of our venture, into God’s hands. God alone can provide the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Passivities embrace a much broader range of experience than activities, since passivities can come from within us (being born with perfect musical pitch, being born with cerebral palsy) as well as outside us (being born in the United States, being born into a selfish family). Passivities can come from the present (winning the lottery today, being in an auto accident on the way to work today) or the past (inheriting the good looks of one’s mother, being susceptible to allergies). Some passivities can foster our growth and development (having a family that values education), whereas others seem to diminish us (living in a dysfunctional family).

In Part Two, Teilhard continues his presentation by showing how all our human passivities can promote the growth and development of the Body of Christ. Teilhard observes that our growth seems so natural that we seldom pause to distinguish between what we do by our own effort (our activities) and what we simply endure or undergo (our passivities) to promote this growth. To pursue this point, he invites us to pause and reflect on the almost innumerable forces to which we were subjected that enabled us to grow as persons and to develop the skills and capacities we now enjoy.

Teilhard now speaks of doing this exercise himself. It seems that he traced his ancestry back for many generations and explored the geography of the place where he had been born and grew up and saw how his surroundings had affected him, but the deeper he delved, the more hesitant he was to claim his life as his own, and he could only conclude that “my life is given to me more than it is formed by me.” But he was not finished with his pursuit. He began to explore what he called “the innumerable strands which form the web of chance” surrounding his life: the millions upon millions of apparently random strands – millions upon millions of passivities – that had come together perfectly to create and form precisely who he was. He realized that he could hardly “complete” himself by himself. In fact, instead of taking the lead in his life, he realized that he could do was follow and allow it to happen.

God, Teilhard says, is weaving our lives by two different threads: the thread of inward development and the thread of outward success. He calls these two threads, the Within and the Without, “the two hands of God.” Our inward development is the shaping of our ideas, beliefs, emotions, tendencies and the like. Our outward success is grounded in the belief that we always seem to find ourselves “at the exact point where the forces of the entire universe converge to accomplish in us the effect that God desires.” These are the “passivities of growth.”

When Teilhard moves on to discuss the “passivities of diminishment,” we might expect him to focus on sin. But he explains that our passivities of diminishment are more than simply moral evils; they include physical and emotional evils as well. Such forces of diminishment would include internal ones, such as physical and mental illness or limitations, addictions, social and cultural biases, and external ones that in any way wound or hinder us, such as the lying, cruelty, or violence of others, or those caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods or fires.

It is in this context that Teilhard quotes Paul: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). But how, he wonders, can these forces of diminishment be transformed into good? And Teilhard answers this question by outlining three steps or stages in this transformation: our struggle against evil, our defeat of evil, and our eventual “transformation” of evil.

Teilhard develops his response by pointing out that God wants to free us from this evil. This belief is an essential first step. But God wants our cooperation in the struggle against the evil. We cannot simply sit back and say “I am a victim. There is nothing I can do.” We must struggle with all that is in our power, but we must do so without bitterness or resentment or hope for speedy victory. We must recognize that we and all creation are, of our very nature, simply in the process of becoming what God intends us to be. God is capable of making good out of evil by making evil itself serve a higher good, but we might not be able to see how this is achieved until God’s work is completed. God transfigures our diminishments, our partial deaths, and even our final death by integrating them into a better plan, provided we lovingly trust him.

In concluding this section, showing how the diminishments of our lives can become transformed into the Body of Christ, Teilhard summarizes what he has said in the form of a prayer. As he ponders his future death, he does not wish simply to die while communicating with God – i.e., praying to God as someone apart from himself. He desires his death to be an act of communion with God, in which he becomes one with God, spirit to spirit.

“When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at the last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself.”

Note: For the purposes of this paper, I am indebted to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: HarperCollins, 1965); Louis M. Savary, *The Divine Milieu Explained: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007); Kathleen Duffy, *Teilhard’s Mysticism: Seeing the Inner Face of Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), Ursula King, *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Selected Writings*, introduction by Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential in Science’s Greatest Idea* (New York: Harper, 2012), and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter* (New York: Harcourt, 1978)