

**From the editors of *America* magazine comes the following article, entitled “Teilhard at Vespers.”**

August 17, 2009

The church seems forever to be embracing those she once held in suspicion. Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer, is the most famous among them. But there are others, too, like Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc and Ignatius Loyola. The most recent candidate for rehabilitation is the Jesuit paleontologist, evolutionary philosopher and spiritual writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Vatican watchers have taken note of Pope Benedict XVI's appeal to Teilhard during an evening prayer service he celebrated July 24 in Aosta, Italy, as a sign of re-appraisal of the priest and his thought. Citing Teilhard's "great vision," Pope Benedict urged that "we consecrate the world, so it may become a living host," a phrase reminiscent of the French Jesuit's eucharistic theology, in which all creation becomes an offering to God.

Teilhard articulated his vision during an expedition to the Ordos Desert of Inner Mongolia in 1923. Lacking the elements of unleavened bread and wine to celebrate Mass, he composed a poetic prayer, "Mass on the World" (published in *Hymn of the Universe*; Harper, 1961), offering the whole of creation in its evolutionary history as a host to God. Pope Benedict has previously praised the sense of cosmic liturgy in the Eastern church. His appeal to Teilhard adds the distinctive resonances of the Frenchman's vision: a cosmos evolved over time and increasingly known by scientific investigation; a spiritual process that comes to consciousness in humanity, a humanity whose spirituality is found in activity as well as passivity; and a humanity called not only to live in the world but also to transform it.

The pope's prayer in fact puts emphasis on our obligation to "transform the world." In adopting this theme, his thinking seems to have developed along the same trajectory as that of Pope John Paul II. After the Second Vatican Council, both expressed dismay at the optimistic, Teilhardian tone of the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," with its focus on the cosmic Christ and its affirmation of the transformative power of the resurrection in history. Then-Bishop Karol Wojtyla complained that Christ the redeemer had been eclipsed by Christ in glory. As Pope John Paul II, he revised his opinion in his encyclical *On Social Concern* (1987). Likewise, Pope Benedict has come to write increasingly of the transformation of the earth as a Christian vocation. He writes in *Charity in Truth*, for example, "Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity contributes to the building of the universal city of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family" (No. 7). The pope appears to acknowledge that the kind of sensibility Teilhard possessed belongs to the full flowering of our human nature. To an unexpected degree, he voices trust in the graced capacity of human beings to transform the world and in so doing make it a more fitting offering to God.

Like Teilhard, Pope Benedict reminds us that the world we transform by our labor, our learning and our ingenuity contributes to Christ's great offering of the world to God. The pope has pointed to an array of problems awaiting solution and transformation: the protection of human life and the environment, the expansion of the "responsibility to protect" to include provision of food and water for needy populations, and the creation of international structures to regulate speculation in financial markets and govern a global economy. Will American Catholics rise to the occasion, leading our fellow citizens to meet these challenges by taking new initiatives on behalf of the human family? Or will

we allow ourselves to fall back, enthralled by the idols of self-aggrandizement and self-amusement that so captivate our culture?

Decline is our civilization's future if recovery from the global fiscal crisis returns to the consumerist pattern of the late 20th-century America. Consumption has its place in creating a floor of material well-being. But after a point it becomes debilitating to the soul and to society. The transformation of the world certainly involves the expansion of markets—not primarily among the affluent, however, but rather among the poor. Furthermore, human creativity needs to be directed by fuller aspirations than improvements in material welfare alone, because human beings are more and desire more: aesthetically, intellectually, athletically, ecologically, religiously. In whatever field we endeavor to transform the world—science, engineering, communications, business, the arts—we must aim at promoting sustainable, fully human development at rising levels of well-being for all and for everyone. At the end, when this transformation has reached its fullness, as Teilhard wrote, “the presence of Christ, which has been silently accruing in things, will suddenly be revealed—like a flash of light from pole to pole.”

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