

Tues., 24th March 2020

To all members of our International English-Speaking Community of the Parish of Luxembourg Notre-Dame

As announced last Thursday, this is the first post I am sending to you with a view to help you while “Facing Unusual Times”.

This week, I suggest to discover step by step, day after day, an almost century-old piece of ‘mystic’ literature, written by a renowned scientist, a palaeontologist, who was also a Jesuit, a theologian and a priest: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).

We will read step by step “*The Mass on the World*” which he wrote in 1923 whilst he was working as part of a team in palaeontological fieldwork in the Ordos desert, a barren landscape, west of Peking, near the border with Inner Mongolia.

Short Biography

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born on May, 1st 1881 in Sarcenat, in the so-called *Massif Central*, a mountainous region situated in the Centre of France.

Raised in a family of deep Catholic faith, in his tender childhood he felt a unique and specific attraction for what he will always write with a capital M in French: ‘Matter’ (*la Matière*):

“I was certainly not more than six or seven years old when I began to feel myself drawn by Matter – or, more correctly, by something which ‘shone’ at the heart of Matter...”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also felt called very early to religious life. In March 1899, hardly aged 18, he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Mongrée (North of Lyons), pursued his studies, partly in France, partly in Jersey, and partly in Hastings (Sussex), following the expulsion of all clerics, which was decided by the French Third Republic in 1901.

From 1905 until 1908, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin completed his so-called ‘Regency’ – something comparable to “*sandwich years*” in an academic cursus - in Cairo, Egypt, where he taught physics and chemistry in a Jesuit school. He took advantage of these years to go to the countryside and he studied local flora and fauna, as well as fossils, developing and deepening his extraordinary observational skills by the same token.

Those years were most probably the starting point of what would later become his very personal, intellectual and spiritual synthesis of both his scientific and theological ideas – one might even write ‘intuition’.

But in the context of the Anti-Modernist movement that was sweeping the Roman Catholic Church at that time, his views were bound to hit a wall. Among his most contentious intuitions, Teilhard progressively got the inner conviction that the universe, created by God, was in evolution, but an evolution with a cosmic and spiritual significance...

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was ordained a priest in 1911.

One year later, in 1912, he joined the palaeontology laboratory of the *Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle*, in Paris, under the direction of Prof. Marcellin Boule.

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Only two years later, in 1914, his nascent scientific “career” was abruptly stopped by the outbreak of World War I. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was assigned as a stretcher bearer from January 1915 onwards and sent to various frontlines in Northern France (Marne, Verdun and finally in 1918 Château-Thierry in the district of Aisne). He had refused to be a chaplain, in order not to be considered as an officer, but to remain closer to the soldiers. He was deeply appreciated by his fellowmen for his friendship, his courage, and his reliability even in the most perilous situations. He himself described that period as his “Baptism in the Real”. His “[*Writings in Time of War*](#)” give us a vivid testimony of his experience and his slowly emerging inner philosophical and theological maturation during that trying and testing time.

After World War I, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin went back to Paris, to the Sorbonne, to get three licentiate degrees in natural science: geology, botanic, and zoology, before accomplishing his PhD thesis in 1922.

1923 marked a turning point in his life. He travelled to China – a place where he would later live from 1926 until 1946 – where he joined a fellow Jesuit scientist, Emile Licent, to be part of a paleontological team sent to the Ordos desert, west of Peking, near the border with Inner Mongolia.

It is during that fieldwork that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote his mystical masterpiece: “*The Mass on the World*”.

To be continued...

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth” (Ps 123 (124), v. 8)

Fr HP