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## BODY OF CHRIST IN ST. PAUL AND IN TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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*One of the most influential writers attempting to fuse science and religion in the mid-twentieth century was the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). His numerous works have stirred much controversy and merited a “monitum” or cautionary warning from the Holy See, something which in today’s ecclesiastical world might well be taken as a condemnation. Theologians and scientists have both raised serious objections to Teilhard’s use of the data and methods of their respective fields. Nonetheless, his theories have often been popularly seized as a means by which the paradise of heaven and the garden of earthly delights may be fused into one easily achievable reality. In the article which follows, Sr. Isabel Mary Griffin identifies the concept of the “Body of Christ” as a central point of Teilhard’s teaching. In comparing this concept with St. Paul’s views on the same subject, however, the author finds the Jesuit’s ideas wanting, for they cannot be reconciled with the evidence of Scripture.*

**I**NSERTED INTO THE TRADITIONAL SETTING OF THE PASCHAL CELEBRATION WAS the utterance of words, not only of incredible import, but also of inconceivable consequences. Christ predicted that he would die, yet live; that he would leave this world, yet remain in it; that he would surrender to human hands the power to perpetuate his presence. In the resurrection, in the sacraments of Orders and Eucharist, and in the Holy Mass he fulfilled his promises. As theologian Pierre Benoit has said, the mystery of the Christian Pasch:

brings about a presence in time, namely ... between the past of the Cross and the future of our heavenly glory; a presence in space ... which affects our bodily senses; a physical and real presence whereby we receive the Lord’s body itself; a permanent presence prolonged upon our altars . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Such forms of presence are discussed in the writings of both St. Paul and Teilhard de Chardin. In both writers, however, there is special emphasis on the Body-Person of Jesus as a key to His presence, a concept upon which they build their systems. Since both Paul and Teilhard were writers influential in their respective times (and since one was an apostle, the other not), they are worth comparing to determine whether or not the latter’s modern statement is compatible with the former’s apostolic faith.

### BODY OF CHRIST IN SAINT PAUL

Paul’s mind operated at the deepest levels of awareness of Christ’s presence when he declared that he came to know Christ “and the power of his resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> With the first words he addressed to Christ, “Who are you,

Lord?”<sup>3</sup>, the divinity of the Lord Jesus was revealed and witnessed by Paul in one blinding intuition. With the answer, “I am Jesus, the Nazarene, and you are persecuting me,”<sup>4</sup> Paul’s natural and connatural knowledge, ignited by the gratuitous gift of faith, discerned the resurrected Body of Christ and in that Body, the individual Christian he had previously intended to harm. The years intervening between the Damascus event and the penning of his letters allowed Paul to grow in “the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.”<sup>5</sup> After prayerful preparation for his special mission, Paul could summarize his relation to the living Christ: “To me, to live is Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul’s teaching is Christocentric; for him Christ is always the “image of God.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the *Kvrios* became for Paul the incarnation of the nearness of God.<sup>8</sup> How radically his views concerning the God of Israel changed with the disclosure that this same God was the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had always been present to Paul in an experiential manner, that is, His power, presence and intervention throughout Hebrew history had been personally felt. The God of his past is “Father” and Paul, who coined the title “Old Testament”, sees himself as a pioneer of the New, and as one born in sonship “when no one expected it.”<sup>10</sup> The Son of God who was crucified and whose followers Saul the Rabbi had persecuted, the risen Christ, showed Himself to Saul and there was born Paul. Faith, bestowed undeservedly and ineffably, effected in Saul a rebirth. As David Stanley suggested, “That Paul, as a result of his conversion, found himself united to Christ means that the risen Lord became and remained the embodiment of God’s dynamic presence.”<sup>11</sup>

No less than three times is the unprecedented story of Paul’s conversion related in Acts. The memory of that searing phenomenon was ever new, ever vivid. Fourteen years after the event Paul could recollect the poignancy of that moment:

[I had been] caught up-whether still in the body or out of the body, [I] did not know; God knows-caught up into paradise-and heard things which must not and cannot be put into human language.<sup>12</sup>

How eloquent are the unspeakable thoughts. That Christ had manifested himself bodily to Paul we are certain: “I have seen Jesus Christ our Lord,”<sup>13</sup> and again, “last of all he appeared to me too.”<sup>14</sup> Although even Paul could neither conceptualize nor verbalize what transpired be-

tween them, we may be sure that it involved the unique bodily presence of the Risen Lord. Obviously it was not the body of the pre-resurrected Christ before whom Paul fell, but rather: “Jesus Christ our Lord, who, in the order of the spirit ... was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> It is both consoling and beneficial to envision man’s rising in the truth of Christ’s resurrection; inversely man contemplates Christ rising in Paul’s response to the Corinthians: “we shall all be changed ... in a twinkling of the eye ... our present perishable nature must put on imperishability and this mortal nature put, on immortality.”<sup>16</sup> It must be deduced that Paul was reflecting here upon the bodily appearance that stunned him on the Damascus road. An important additional point is made by Frederick Bruce: Paul “could not contemplate immortality, apart from resurrection; for him a body of some kind was essential to personality.”<sup>17</sup> Contrary to the prevailing Gnostic dualism which regarded the body as the soul’s prison, it was unthinkable to the Hebrew mentality of Paul that the whole Christ-body and soul-was not totally regenerated in His glorious state: “If Christ [body and soul] has not been raised ... you are still in your sins. .. but Christ in fact has been raised ... the first fruits of all ....”<sup>18</sup> The Pauline epistles abound with relevant testimony, e.g., in Colossians: “all perfection [is] to be found in him ... in his body lives the fullness of divinity ... the reality is Christ .... It is the Lord.”

“Body of Christ” in Paul thus indicates Jesus who after death was raised to life and appeared physically, i.e., in a real and personal presence (to the Twelve, to others, and lastly to Paul) within human history:

He is the radiant light of God’s glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command ... he has destroyed sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of divine majesty.<sup>19</sup>

Because Christ identified himself with the individual Christian persecuted by Paul, Paul could not regard his fellow men in merely human terms thereafter. His mission would be to assure his listeners of the presence of the risen Lord within them. Having himself responded to divine initiative, he would endeavor through preaching and ministry “. . . to bring those whom God has chosen to faith and to the knowledge of the truth.”<sup>20</sup>

By the time of Paul’s captivity, it had become evident that not only did Christ dwell in the individual (“you are Christ’s body”)<sup>21</sup> but that collectively all constitute his

body. The development of Paul's understanding of the equal treatment due the individual and the communities as the body of Christ can, perhaps, be examined in setting the ecclesiology of Ephesians against the background of the Christology of Colossians. Paul had been informed that certain heretical teachings were being propagated among the Colossae Christians. Because of the erroneous speculations (veneration of worldly elements and worship of heavenly powers), Christ's unique position in creation and in redemption was being questioned. To accentuate the supremacy of the risen Lord as Head, not only of the whole human race, but also of the entire created universe, Paul composed the magnificent Christological hymn: "He is the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation ...."<sup>22</sup> The features of the invisible God are visible in Christ, who, in imaging God, renews the splendor of creation and the miracle of the Incarnation: "All things were created through him and for him."<sup>23</sup> Paul was not explaining to the Colossians that everything simply exists in Christ; he was declaring that everything was created (*ex nihilo*) by him, thus distinguishing between the Creator and what He creates:

"Before anything was created, he existed ...."<sup>24</sup> Not only is Christ's precedence over all stressed, but most importantly, his superiority over the created order: "Now the Church is his body, he is the head ...."<sup>25</sup>

From the mystery of Christ and creation, Paul guided his flock at Colossae to the mystery of the Church. The body of Christ mirrored in the Church exemplifies the deep interior union between it as Body, and Christ as Head. In Colossians the Church is depicted in her subordinate role, i.e., in emphasizing Christ's superiority as Head. Paul was at the same time underscoring the dependence of the members of his body, the Church. Looking upward, so to speak, Paul's vision in Ephesians is focused more and more on the Church as the intimate and vital bond between Christ and the individual Christian, and correlatively, as the collective unity between the head and the members. The body-theme is profoundly rendered as unitive. In Christopher Mooney's words:

.. through physical contact with the physical Body-Person of Christ through Baptism and the Eucharist, the Christian receives as through a channel the new life of the Spirit, and so, in a very real sense becomes Christ, his members, his body.<sup>26</sup>

St. Paul in a most marvelous fashion shed light upon "the mystery: Christ among [and in] you."<sup>27</sup> The humble carpenter of Nazareth, through his death and resurrection, lives everlastingly in his glorified existence, and still graces this earth with his presence through the faithful, and in the Church through sacramentality and the unity among the members with him the Kyrios as head. Though veiled in mystery, this wondrous presence of the Body of Christ emerges as the central reality of Pauline theology.

## BODY OF CHRIST IN TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Teilhard de Chardin's life has been described as a "search for unity between God and the world."<sup>28</sup> His longing to be a child of this world, and, as a Christian, a child of the next, was brought to rest in what he entitled omega. Ultimately for Teilhard the Christ of revelation coincides with Omega of evolution. Oddly enough, the world was of such inestimable worth for him, that along with his unwavering faith in God, he could sacralize it (The Divine Milieu), indeed, kneel before it (The Mass on the World). He wrote that: "Religion and science are the two conjugated faces or phases of the one act of knowledge-the only one that can embrace the past and the future of evolution so as to contemplate, measure and fulfill them."<sup>29</sup> According to Teilhard, evolution is vested with the extraordinary task of bearing matter, energized by a center of consciousness, the "within", across numerous thresholds ranging from subatomic particles to the cosmic Incarnate God. His modern world of science and religion includes:



*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

1. the fact of its immensity;
2. the way it all holds together as an organism by which everything works together and all things are connected;
3. a dynamism moving and developing by an internal force.

As coherent, organic and evolving, this world gradually embarked billions of years ago from the level of the inorganic to the organic stage of plants and animals (the final leap to the organic state is ascribed to the ever growing consciousness or interiority within all matter); then, perhaps about five or six hundred thousand years ago, an amazing creature came into being,

man, and “the universe found its soul.”<sup>30</sup> Evolutionary theory postulates that as greater complexity occurred, so did greater consciousness. This law is such that a higher degree of interior consciousness will always correspond in the experimental order to a higher degree of organic complexity. It is noteworthy that reflective consciousness, a property of the soul, is for Teilhard a product of the most intricate organ, the human brain. In the future he envisioned for the world this law of complexity/ consciousness paved the way to Omega:

Is it not conceivable that mankind, at the end of its totalization, its folding-in upon itself, may reach a critical level of maturity where, leaving Earth and stars to lapse slowly back into the dwindling mass of primordial energy, it will ... join the one true irreversible essence of things, the Omega Point?<sup>31</sup>

Teilhard believed that man must be aware of a terminal point where organically he can develop no further in complexity, and therefore, in consciousness. Initially, Omega consisted in a hypothesis of probability and was marked as a product of evolution; the Omega of a later hypothesis converged into the “real Omega”, already existent and transcending natural evolution. The divine Omega is “. . . here and now engaged in drawing human persons to himself by radiating and activating the love energy of the world.”<sup>32</sup> For Teilhard the divine Omega was the font of coherence and the “ultimate source”<sup>33</sup> of being: “Once it is admitted that being is better than its opposite, it is difficult to stop short of God; if it is not admitted, discussion ceases to be possible.”<sup>34</sup> The visible manifestation of God as the ultimate source of being, and of his union with mankind and the material world, was realized in the Incarnation. In Teilhard’s theory of convergence, the lines of revelation and evolution meet in the person of Jesus Christ.

“And the Word was made flesh”: for Teilhard, God the Son, uniting to his divinity a human nature, entered the world of men. This body “forms in nature a world which is new, an organism moving and alive, in which we are all united physically, biologically ....”<sup>35</sup> Teilhard’s principal assertions relative to this Body-Person can be summarized as follows:

1. It is the Body-Person of Jesus of Nazareth;
2. It here and now forms a personal Center for mankind and the material world;
3. It is a physical center.

In Teilhard’s theory, the body of Christ is the body-person of Jesus of Nazareth; in practice, the Christ of the synoptics and even of the post-resurrection accounts is rarely alluded to. Countless pages, however, are devoted to Christ as cosmic. This is perhaps because in revelation Teilhard perceived a correspondence to his all important theory of convergence. Thus, he employed Pauline passages to support his idea of the cosmic Christ: “He [who] holds all things in unity” (Col. 1:17) is the “‘Super-Christ’ because in the fullness of his grandeur he is the cause, center, issue and motor-force of the cosmos.”<sup>36</sup> Christ becomes Omega continuing the perfecting of the universe. “In him you too find your own fulfillment” (Co. 2:10) since “Both in nature and in function, Christ gathers up in himself and consummates the totality and fulness of humanity” (Teilhard).<sup>37</sup> Thus, Christogenesis replaces cosmogenesis. The statement that “There is only one Christ: he is everything and he is in everything” (Col. 3:11) is regarded as “the final definition of the Omega Point.”<sup>38</sup>

Can the Body-Person of Christ be conceptualized as the cosmic Christ? Teilhard admitted that “my body-an entity that is so clear when we remain in the practical sphere-is, when we come to theory, extremely difficult to define.”<sup>39</sup> But he maintained that body, whether Christ’s, yours or mine, extends and continues into space and is co-extensive with the universe since:

My body ... is ‘what’ in these cells ‘and’ in the rest of the world, feels my influence and reacts against me. My matter is not a ‘part’ of the universe that I possess totaliter: it is the totality of the universe possessed by me partialiter.<sup>40</sup>

Did not Teilhard, in effect, separate person from body? A body-person without that unity of body and soul which constitutes humanity is clearly distorted.

In reflecting on his evolutionary presumptions, reason directed Teilhard to formulate an hypothesis of a converging universe which of necessity depended on a transcendent (outside and independent), personal (love energizing) center to draw evolution to its final end. Curiously enough, Teilhard, in his search for the personal center, relied on revelation. While acknowledging that the data of natural reason is in an order eminently removed from supernatural revelation, he, nevertheless, remained convinced that the two lines of thought ultimately deal with the same reality,<sup>41</sup> viz., the cosmic Christ. As per-

sonal center, Christ simultaneously activates man and all creation to the greatest possible consciousness, and draws man (and all creation?) to the highest degree of sanctity. But it is obvious from sheer logic that the fusion of two radically distinct orders is a metaphysical impossibility. Nonetheless, Teilhard insistently proclaimed the cosmic Christ as the organic center for both the natural and supernatural planes:

The universal Christic center, determined by theology, and the universal cosmic center postulated by anthropogenesis ... coincide in the historical setting in which we are contained .... Christ should have been physipon himself if it had not provided the Incarnation with a specially favored point at which all the strands of the cosmos ... tend to meet together.<sup>42</sup>

In the developing thought of Teilhard cosmogenesis is absorbed into Christogenesis in the Incarnate Word as personal center.

Since Omega performs the function of personal center for all creation, however, it must be a physical center. "Physicality" is attributed by reason of the following:

1. Tangibility, in the order of experience, through Christ's historic entry into the actual process of evolution;
2. Expandibility, universal in order, given to the Christic center as an effect of 'resurrection';
3. Power of assimilation, organic in order, potentially integrating in the unity of a single 'body' the totality of human kind.<sup>43</sup>

Christopher Mooney noted Teilhard's "difficulty in giving [physical] a positive content when he applied it to the relationship between the universe and the Body of Christ."<sup>44</sup> Teilhard himself admitted this weakness in replying to Bondel's objection when he said that "A purely physical supernaturalism makes no sense whatever,"<sup>45</sup> but he adhered to some semblance of reality of the center as physical:

There is nothing strange about there being a universal physical element in Christ .... [The] interaction of monads would be incomprehensible if an 'aura' did not extend from one to the other ... imagine the constitution of Christ as cosmic Centre ... as an extension, a transformation, brought about in the humanity of Jesus, of that

'aura' which surrounds every human monad.<sup>46</sup>

As a dimension of the Incarnation, the force of physical is assumed to be real, as opposed to chimerical. Hailing the Incarnation as "a prodigious biological operation" Teilhard underscored tangibility, expandibility and the power of assimilation in asserting that when Christ "finished growing and died and rose again everything has continued to move because Christ has not yet completed His own Forming."<sup>48</sup> Thus is Christ's completion realized through the consummation of the world; and the world's through Christ's fulfillment. Such a body is, at best, nebulous, impersonal and immersed in the vast expanses of the universe. The Teilhardian Body-Person of Jesus is a far cry from the Body-Person of St. Paul. Yet as for Paul, this Body-Person is the very center of Teilhard's system-a lynchpin upon which the entire system hangs.



#### OPPOSITION BETWEEN PAUL AND TEILHARD

Because Paul knew Christ only in the power of his resurrection, he was enabled, through a deepening of faith and reason, to bequeathe the eyewitness report of the Kyrios meeting. Christ is himself the "first fruits" (I Cor. 15:23), that is, just as a seed passes into a tree and inherits a totally new existence, so, in his resurrection Christ entered into a condition infinitely greater than his pre-resurrected state. He is himself also the "first to be born from the dead" (Col. 1:8), that is, his was the first body to pass from death to an exalted and different existence. Paul's "Body of Christ" defies articulation. Must it not be admitted that although the human mind is capable of comprehending a multitude of corporal realities, it cannot and does not exhaust the creative power of God? Paul's teaching that "You .., are Christ's Body ... each of you is a different part of it" (I Cor. 12:27) reveals humanity in its varying functions to be the mystical Body-another mystery of His presence faithfully transmitted.

Unlike the singleminded Paul who regarded "all as loss in the light of the unsurpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ" (Ph. 3:8), Teilhard was driven by the necessity of uniting the two loves of his life, religion and science. In according primacy to science (the apparent

science. In according primacy to science (the apparent resolution of the dilemma), God's free, creative activity was nullified, the obvious distinction between the natural and supernatural orders was sacrificed, revelation was used in an accommodated sense, and the unity of man's wholeness was jeopardized. Teilhard's world, "dynamic, moving and developing from an internal force" belies a power and growth all its own. Its lack of dependence on the Creator contrasts sharply with Paul's teaching regarding the Creator and that which is created. Teilhard gazed on the universe and beheld Omega in it; it is but the design of the Divine Maker for Paul. The natural and supernatural planes fuse into one center for Teilhard. But for Paul, the passage from the imperfection of the natural to the perfection and fulfillment of the supernatural is inherent in the victory of the resurrected body of Christ. We might say quite frankly that if "the universe provided the Incarnation with [its] privileged position" there is no need of God or divine intervention. Teilhard, in tune with the world, became enamored of the power

of the universe; Paul, stirred by the peerless gift of divine revelation, could but worship the Revealer. Is the Lord's body to be divided? For Teilhard to suggest that "man possesses in his body the whole of the universe partially" was to categorize the body as non-human. To thus regard it as spirit is to destroy the unity of body and soul.

These and other Teilhardian features are blatantly incompatible with Pauline doctrines of the universe's contingency, of the eternal Son-of-God's pre-existence, and of man's supernatural elevation through grace. Entranced with the world, Teilhard found God in the "heart of matter". His body of Christ is the cosmic Christ, and correlatively, all creation subsumed in Point Omega. For Paul, the Body of Christ is both Alpha and Omega, the world's salvation, the Kyrios "whom we are awaiting ... he will transfigure these bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body. He will do that by the same power with which he can subdue the whole universe."<sup>49</sup>



## NOTES

- 1 Pierre Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel*, trans. Benet Weatherhead (New York, Seabury Press, 1973) pp. 107, 108.
- 2 Ph. 3:10. All Scriptural references are from The Jerusalem Bible.
- 3 Acts 22:8.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ph. 3:8.
- 6 Ph. 1:21.
- 7 II Cor. 4:5.
- 8 David Stanley, *Boasting in the Lord* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973) p.20.
- 9 II Cor. 1:13.
- 10 I Cor. 15:8.
- 11 Stanley, 17.
- 12 II Cor. 12:2-5.
- 13 I Cor. 9:1.
- 14 I Cor. 15:8.
- 15 Rm. 1:4-5.
- 16 I Cor. 15:52-3.
- 17 Frederick F. Bruce, *The Idea of Immortality in Paul* in *A Companion to Paul*, ed. Michael Taylor (New York: Alba House, 1975), p. 131.
- 18 I Cor. 15:17-21.
- 19 Hebrews 1:3.
- 20 Titus 1:1.
- 21 I Cor. 12:27.
- 22 Col. 1:15.
- 23 Col. 1:16.

- 24 Col. 1:17.  
25 Col. 1:18.  
26 Christopher Mooney, *Paul's Vision of the Church in 'Ephesians'* in *Scripture* 15 (1963), pp. 33-42.  
27 Col. 1:27.  
28 Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 13.  
29 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (trans. Bernard Wall) (New York: Harper Torchbooks Ed., Harper and Row, 1961) p. 285.  
30 Ibid., p. 183.  
31 Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1964) pp. 122-3.  
32 Mooney, *Teilhard-Mystery*, p.68.  
33 Mooney, *Teilhard on Man's Search for God in Continuum* 5(Winter 1968) p.649.  
34 Teilhard, *Letters from a Traveller*, trans. William Collins Sons and Co., (New York: Harper and Brothers Pubs., 1962) pp. 70-71.  
35 Mooney, *Teilhard-Mystery*, p. 231, note 4.  
36 Francisco Bravo, *Christ in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. Cathryn B. Larme (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1967) p. 46.  
37 Teilhard, Super-Humanity, *Super-Christ and Super-Charity* in *Critic* (December 1968 - January 1969) p.61.  
38 Mooney, *Teilhard-Man's Search*, p. 653.  
39 Quoted in Donald Goergen, *The Eucharistic Presence: A Perspective* in *Teilhard Review* 9 (Feb. 1974), p. 16.  
40 Quoted in Ibid., p. 17.  
41 Mooney, *Teilhard-Mystery*, p. 74.  
42 Teilhard, p. 62 (see note 37).  
43 Emile Rideau, *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. Rene Hague (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1965) p. 164.  
44 Mooney, pp. 78-79.  
45 Teilhard, *Maurice Blondel, Correspondence*, trans. William Whitman (N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1967) p. 25.  
46 Mooney, p. 79 (quoted from Teilhard de Chardin, *Forma Christi in Escrips du temps de la guerre*, 1918, p. 239).  
47 Teilhard, *Phenomenon*, p. 293.  
48 Teilhard, *Future*, p. 305. 49 Ph. 3:20-1.