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# The FURROW

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Hilda Geraghty

Time to celebrate  
Jesus the Worker?:  
*The mega-power  
of a unified vision*

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# Time to celebrate Jesus the Worker?: *The mega-power of a unified vision*

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Of late I have wondered why, when it wanted to give a Christian character to Labour Day, 1st May, the Church named the day as the *Feast of St Joseph the Worker*? Not in the least begrudging a second feast day to the great St Joseph, it nonetheless raises the question in my mind, why was it not dedicated to *Jesus the Worker*?

When God came on earth as a human being in Jesus the Christ, his first concern was to fulfill his human duty, namely, *to work*. He worked at a job for ninety per cent of his short life. Yet this has attracted relatively little commentary, celebration and praise. It must be because the remaining three years of Jesus' public life were so dramatic that everything else paled into the background. His earlier private life, except for a three-day disappearance, seemed too normal for comment.

However, hidden in plain sight, could there be a huge message in the overall pattern of this precious life? God came on earth to work. We know his great purpose, his great work, was to redeem us and lead us to a new destiny of eternal, risen life. However, Jesus first took his human duty seriously, and was human for a very long time before anyone learned to believe that he was divine. And he wanted it that way. Whatever about his divine credentials, no one can deny him his human ones, 'the son of the carpenter.' Was *Jesus the Worker* somehow too lowly a title for the *King of Kings*?

In choosing to take a human body and live in 'our world' Jesus was recognising, celebrating, and indirectly teaching the value of the ordinary human condition, and the value of human work, human effort. To earn your bread day by day and contribute to life around you. To bring your little part to the greater whole of human society and its advancement.

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To get real about this: compose your own figures for the work of a strong young man working full-time for eighteen years in a carpenter's shop, from the age of twelve to thirty. Jesus could have made something like twenty-two tables, nineteen beds, thirty cupboards, fifteen cradles, eighteen doors, forty-three stools ... (Imagine rocking a cradle made by him! Or sleeping in a bed made by him!) Perhaps he also worked on building projects in the nearby town of Sephoris. Thousands of hours of designing, measuring, marking, sawing, hammering, smoothing, testing, varnishing ... I like to think of him doing it willingly, skillfully, lovingly, taking pride in his workmanship. The Human God first contributed to human life not with his teaching, but *with his hands*. He made a possible one hundred-and-seven families more comfortable in their homes. He did good work for an honest wage, putting his heart into it, and received payment. *The labourer is worthy of his hire*. Could we celebrate all this more?

## THE PROBLEM

What has set me thinking along these lines? It is the influence of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ. He was convinced that the Church for a long time had made Christianity over-spiritual, other-worldly and individualistic, as if the value lay only in the intention with which we do our work, but not in the work *in its own right*. This is part of Teilhard's thesis in *The Divine Milieu*.

Summarising this approach, he puts the following words into the mouth of a spiritual director,

*Certainly, the material side of your actions has no definitive value. Whether men discover one truth or one fact more or less, whether or not they make beautiful music or beautiful pictures, whether their organisation of the world is more or less successful - all that has no direct importance for heaven.*

*None of these discoveries or creations will become one of the stones of which the new Jerusalem is built. But what will count, up there, what will always endure, is this: that you have acted in all things according to the will of God...The only thing that concerns him, the only thing he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom, and how you give him preference over the things around you...*

*It matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have used them to learn how to obey and how to love.... If worldly aims have no value in themselves, you can love them for the opportunity they give you to prove faithful to God.<sup>1</sup>*

1 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, Harper Torchbooks, the Cathedral Library, Harper and Row, New York 1965, p 54.

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An approach of this kind *separates* reality into matter and spirit, higher and lower categories. It is dualistic. How does it contribute to the zest for life, the will to work, to learn, explore and create, *to be fully human*, that Teilhard felt the Christian faith should bring? Teilhard goes on to fully recognise the need for traditional Christian detachment and asceticism, lest we be owned by our ambitions, achievements or possessions. However, he sets them in the larger context of the goodness of reality. Christians had not been taught *how* to love the world but rather to suspect it, with its pits, traps and temptations. The more seriously you took your faith, the more dualistic you tended to be. Indeed, the classical expression ‘world’ as used by the older spiritual writers has often been tinged with negativity. ‘The world’ covered both all of creation and human society for the literal-minded, (which included my seventeen-year-old self, sitting in front of my Leaving Cert books in 1966 and thinking, ‘What’s the point of all this studying? All that matters is loving God’).

Both Vatican II in the sixties<sup>2</sup> and Pope St. John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, sought to correct this attitude and stressed a more human spirituality of work:

The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one .... Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

### THE MEANING OF LIFE?

You may have seen the wonderful series on RTE, *The Meaning of Life*, pioneered by Gay Byrne and then continued by Joe Duffy. What is striking is that most of the people interviewed (of those I have seen) said in so many words that the meaning of their lives was what they achieved in their work or career, whatever form it took, and in their family. So many had drifted away from practicing the Catholic faith they had been brought up in. They were living for very good human values, *but they did not particularly relate them to the faith in which they had been brought up*.

This is an example of what Teilhard meant when he spoke of a new form of religion he was intuiting, a ‘*religion of the earth*’ he called it, that was quietly rising and taking over minds and hearts everywhere, a religion simply of human values, a new humanism.

2 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, 39: AAS 58, (1966), p 1057. As quoted in *Laborem Exercens*, ch. 27.

3 *Ibid*, p 1055-56. As quoted in *Laborem Exercens*, Ch 27.

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*‘...Within a few generations humankind has been literally and spontaneously converted to a kind of religion of the world, vague in its dogmas yet quite clear in its moral values:*

*These are:*

*that the whole predominates over the individual;*

*that we passionately believe in the worth and potential of human effort;*

*that scientific enquiry in all fields is sacred to us.*

*Precisely because science has discovered the natural unity of the world – and just how vast it is – modern man can no longer easily see God, except in the guise of a universal progress or maturing.’<sup>4</sup>*

### NOT HUMAN ENOUGH?

A certain lack of enthusiasm in Christian theology for celebrating the value of this material world comes from a long tradition of Greek and Roman philosophy, which split reality into two, matter and spirit, body and soul. During the Renaissance, when humanism re-emerged, a tacit understanding formed between the Church and the new humanists: you take the body, we’ll take the soul. Teilhard would say that Christian theology on the whole hasn’t been human enough, because of this dualism. For a religion based on a Human God who spent ninety per cent of his short life working and sweating at a carpenter’s bench, it has lacked sympathy and warmth for the human vocation to build the earth. It has become too narrowly focused on the soul, sin, individual salvation and getting safely into heaven in the next life.

*The best ... of the anti-Christians keep away from Christianity, not because it is too hard for them but because it seems to them not exalted enough. If they don’t accept Christ, it is because they don’t find in him the feature they reverence and look for. An earth-centred religion is pitting itself against the heavenly one. That is the real situation- in all its gravity, yet also in its hopeful aspect.’<sup>5</sup>*

Christians themselves are not impervious to these tensions. Teilhard saw that the human sap was draining out of the Church as human progress advanced to astonishing levels. In Teilhard’s view, if the Church were to adapt its doctrines to a modern evolutionary view

4 As quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, p 113, Collins Sons & Co Ltd. London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968.

5 *Quelques Reflections sur la Conversion du Monde*, p 3. As quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, p 117, Collins Sons & Co Ltd. London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968.

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of reality, it would find those doctrines exploding to fill the space of the 'secular' world with fresh new meaning and relevance. The Church would regain credibility once its approach took account of Modernity, to where the majority have mentally migrated. 'What Teilhard desires ... is simply that theology remain true to a centuries-old tradition by expressing Christian doctrine in a language likely to be understood by men and women of today.'<sup>6</sup>

### A HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY

A glance at history confirms that human progress mattered to God's plan. Apart from a universe formed for him, in order to fruitfully incarnate the Divine Human needed sophisticated development on our part. It mattered to God's plan that we had invented alphabets, the technology of papyrus scrolls and quills, that a papyrus trade with Egypt operated, that a certain percentage of his Chosen People were literate. Jesus too had to be taught to read, so he could read his destiny in the scriptures before it took place. His life, death and resurrection would soon have been mere legend if his memory could not have been written down.

Imagine if we were building skyscrapers, ships, houses, railways, rockets and satellites, doing our work in wards, offices, homes, classrooms, factory floors, laboratories, nurseries, studios, imagine if we did all this work in the conviction that my small *material* effort was actually contributing to building the Whole, God's reign of Love on earth, here and now around me! That it mattered to God whether I did a good job or not! That in all humility I was co-creating with the Divine Human who spent his days at a carpenter's bench, 'whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe.' How empowering that would be! Mega-power.

### UNCLAIMED CHRISTIAN TERRITORY

The 'secular' domain of human progress can be seen in this lens as unclaimed Christian territory. Secularism looks askance at Christianity's traditional ambiguity towards the legitimate pride and passion humans have for their work and achievements. But if the unified vision of Teilhard were the belief of millions working in the 'secular' domains of life, would there be a secular domain at all? *'By virtue of Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.'*

Perhaps we have not fully accepted that God actually became human, that he shares in the very best of our enthusiasms. Dualism

6 N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, p 122, Collins Sons & Co Ltd. London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968.

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dies hard. I have a scenario in the back of my mind, that I am in the classroom and Jesus is there. And he asks ‘How is their French coming along?’ And I say, ‘You’re interested in their *French*, not just their souls?’ And he just smiles ... I might have been a better teacher had I *believed* that the human task matters for the Kingdom. To my mind, Teilhard’s vision is the first truly *lay* spirituality, because it approaches God not above and beyond the world, but through the world. It was science shot through with faith that made him see the world as whole, the world that he loved so much, right down to its very rocks and stones. The dedication of *The Divine Milieu* is significant:

SIC DEUS DILEXIT MUNDUM<sup>7</sup>

*For those who love the world.*

Teilhard tells us there is a huge positive untapped value within Christianity. *‘The most traditional Christianity can be interpreted so as to embrace all that is best in the aspirations of our times ... The traditional view of ... creation, spirit, evil ... (and more specifically, original sin, the cross, the resurrection, the Parousia, charity ...) all these notions, once they are transposed to a ‘genesis’ [becoming] dimension, become amazingly clear and coherent.’*

Teilhard takes the very symbol of Christianity, the Cross, and locates it at the centre of the human journey upwards.

*‘... To sum up, Jesus on the Cross is both the symbol and the reality of the immense labour of the centuries which has, little by little, raised up the created spirit and brought it back to the depths of the divine milieu ...’<sup>8</sup>*

## NEW MEANINGS

In this holistic vision the concept of sin, for example, takes on new meaning. When I’m behaving sinfully, I’m not just blotting my own record. In failing to love I’m letting down *the Whole* in my local patch of reality, and holding others back. In failing to evolve spiritually I’m slowing down the universe in its upward journey, and failing the Reign of God around me.

By the same token, to be *holy* is to have greatly evolved, to be allowing love, the Christ-energy, to flow freely through me into my local patch, transforming it. To be deeply cooperative with the Whole. *‘In a universe where everything contributes to the gradual*

7 ‘God so loved the world [that he gave his only Son so that all who believe in him might be saved...]’ John 3:16.

8 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 1965, Harper Torchbooks, the Cathedral Library, Harper and Row, New York, pp 103-4.

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*formation of spirit- which is uplifted by God into final union- every kind of work, in its palpable reality, becomes a path to holiness and communion.*'<sup>9</sup>

Teilhard goes on to expand his faith vision *ad infinitum*:

*'As our humanity takes in the material world, and as the Host takes in our humanity, the Eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. Step by step the Eucharistic transformation irresistibly invades the universe. It is the fire that sweeps over the heath; the stroke that vibrates through the bronze.*

*In a secondary and generalised sense, but in a true sense, the sacramental Species are formed by the totality of the world, and the duration of the creation is the time needed for its consecration. In Christo vivimus, movemur et sumus'.*<sup>10</sup>

Human evolution is proceeding at dizzying speed. The Church needs to claim evolution as integral, not only to the universe and life, but also to itself, by seeing itself as the unfinished evolving Christ, needing completion in this world in every new generation.

*"By showing clearly the splendours of the universal Christ, Christianity ... acquires a new value. By the very fact that it gives the earth's aspirations a goal that is at once immense, concrete and assured, it rescues the earth from the disorder, the uncertainty, and the nausea that are the worst of tomorrow's dangers. It provides the fire that inspires human effort."*<sup>11</sup>

And at the end of *My Universe*, having commented on the Christian who is torn between renouncing the World and passion for the Earth, Teilhard writes,

*... and this dualism in action has its source in ... a much more serious dualism of religious feeling. The soul feels itself caught, in no metaphorical sense, between two absolutes: that of experience (the Universe) and that of Revelation (transcendent God).*

*Judging by my own case, I would say that the great temptation of*

9 L'Énergie Humaine, (Oeuvres VI) pp 221-2, as quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, p 117, Collins Sons & Co Ltd. London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968.

10 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 1965, Harper Torchbooks, 1965, the Cathedral Library, Harper and Row, New York, p 125-6. *In Christ we live and move and have our being.* (St Paul).

11 *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, N.M. Wildiers, Fontana Books, 1968 Collins Sons & Co Ltd. London, and Harper & Row, New York.



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*this century (and of the present moment) is (and will increasingly be) that we find the World of nature, of life and of humankind greater, closer, more mysterious, more alive, than the God of Scripture.*

*For the glory of Our Lord and the triumph of his Truth, for the peace of many people of good will, I therefore cry out with all my strength for the moment when the age-old rules of Christian asceticism and direction ... will be brought together into a more organic and more rational code.*<sup>12</sup>

## CHANGE TAKES OPENNESS AND COURAGE

The Vatican theologians were failing to cope with the rising challenge to the Christian worldview in the new science-based culture. New generations were more hesitant to opt in, despite being initiated. The faith was becoming harder to hand on. The absence of the younger generations in the Western Church is now a huge crisis.

Although coming after his time, Teilhard (d. 1955) would not have been surprised at the growth of New Age, the ever-growing ranks of the ‘spiritual but not religious’. An answer to this faith crisis, sketched out in Teilhard’s thinking, had been put into the hands of the Vatican theologians, but they failed to recognise it. The Risen Christ can be hard to recognise at times. They wouldn’t be the first not to do so.

It’s not easy to go about healing a two-thousand-year-old rift between matter and spirit, body and soul, static and dynamic, old cosmos and new cosmos, between older, smaller Christ and new cosmic Christ. To heal it would take seismic energy on the Church’s part, a heaving of mental tectonic plates. To adopt Teilhard’s approach, to start using a different language, re-interpret dogmas from static to dynamic, rewrite liturgical texts – that would take huge courage and work. It would doubtless provoke mighty controversies. But it would be a sign of life! For such an ancient institution it would be an impressive sign that it was moving with the Spirit, that it was breaking out in green buds, that it could have a third millennium, that it was, after all, perennial. Is this the intention of Pope Francis in calling a world-wide synod of the Church, trusting only in the Holy Spirit?

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, in the life and example of Jesus, working long hours at his carpenter’s bench, we have the key to the holistic spirituality

<sup>12</sup> *My Universe, in The Heart of Matter*, p 207-8, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc, San Diego, New York, London

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that can fully embrace the human vocation to be masters of the world and everything in it (Genesis 1, 28). This is the spirituality that can help the modern world to find its soul again. This is the spirituality the Church should be offering, and Teilhard has put it into our hands.

(For a quick easy introduction to Teilhard's thinking, google my website Seeing whole with Teilhard de Chardin @ teilharddechardinforall.com where there are four PowerPoints and a number of articles).

**A Graced and Human Church.** Grace is the vascular system of the church. As such, grace enlivens every aspect of the ecclesial community and orients the church to the fullness of life in Christ. The members of the church can neither instigate nor cancel grace, but are free to accept its call or close themselves to its summons. The fulfilment of God's life-giving grace extends beyond human history, beyond any vulnerability to human rebellion. Within history, however, human action, including its mode as inaction, can shroud the efficacy of grace, a fact that reinforces humanity's need for conversion. The relationship between grace and humanity that is the heart of the church establishes the church as "tillable", as a project in need of actions that mirror the "cultivation, plowing, or working" necessary for the care of the earth.

– RICHARD LENNAN, *Tilling the Church*, Liturgical Press, 2022, p. xvi.