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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Hilda Geraghty

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February 2023

Is the Christian story big enough to capture the modern imagination? *Only if it spreads its cosmic wings*

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In today's Ireland we live in a culture where a child will probably grow to lose whatever Christian faith was imparted to it by older generations. Somehow the story of Jesus, and the whole biblical perspective around him, are no longer what they were for older generations: a picture of reality, a world view on which to build their lives. "It is now seen as archaic to hold Catholic values among the student body." These are the words of one teacher who voiced concern during a survey on bullying in Irish schools.¹

Archaic. The word stings. *Of the past.* Is this why it has got harder to transmit faith *per se* as the future unfolds? If it has become archaic to many, the reason, to my mind, is that *the Christian faith is in a crisis of the imagination.* (Not at all 'an imaginary crisis,' I hasten to add, – it is all too real.)

By imagination I don't mean fantasy, a power to conjure up what is unreal. I mean the vital faculty that creates images leading to our dreams, and then drives us to pursue them. Could we ever climb a mountain, become a doctor, or take to the air, if we didn't first imagine ourselves doing it? "Imagination is everything," said Einstein, "it is the preview of life's coming attractions." It is what makes things real to us, and we operate from there.

IMAGINATION AND THE FORMATION OF FAITH

However, it was St John Henry Newman who pointed out how critically important the *imagination* is to the formation of faith.

1 *The Furrow*, December 2021, *Difficult times for Catholic students in second Level Schools? The voices of RE teachers.* p 698.

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IS THE CHRISTIAN STORY BIG ENOUGH?

Terrence Merrigan writes:

‘In the Grammar of Assent, Newman claims that “the original instrument” of conversion and the “principle of fellowship” among the first Christians was the “Thought or Image of Christ.” Moreover, this “central Image” continues to serve as the “vivifying idea both of the Christian body and of individuals in it.” The image of Christ is the principal of Christian fraternity, and the source and soul of Christian “moral life”. It “both creates faith, and then rewards it.” The whole life of the Church can be conceived as the endeavour to promote and perpetuate this image. Indeed, the whole life of the Church, its narrative tradition, its ethics, and its spirituality can be regarded as – ideally- the objectification of this image in history.’²

What, then, is the image of Christ that the official Church offers today? The low figures for religious practice would suggest that this central, all-important image needs a whole new interpretation if the Church is to inspire people once again to follow Jesus.

Merrigan continues:

‘Newman’s decision to explore religious faith in terms of the imagination was born of his conviction that “all beliefs-religious, secular and political-must first be credible to the imagination, the faculty which enables us to relate to an object as a ‘whole’, that is to say, as something with a claim on us.” Indeed, for Newman, the entire religious history of humankind might be said to have its roots in an act of the imagination that shapes both our self-understanding, and our image of the Divine. Newman went on to make the very interesting point: the Christian faith “appeals to the imagination, as a great fact, wherever it comes; it strikes the imagination.” Those who would do battle with it “must find some idea equally vivid ..., something fascinating, something capable of possessing, engrossing and overwhelming; their cause is lost, unless they can do this.”’³

But isn’t this just what has happened to faith today? – An ‘equally vivid idea,’ has taken hold of the modern imagination, not caused by any ‘who would do battle with it’ but rather by the startling increase in human scientific knowledge over the last three centuries. Teilhard de Chardin wondered, *‘Is the world not in the*

2 Terrence Merrigan & Ian.T. Ker [eds], John Newman and The Word, *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs* 27 [2000], P.6

3 Quotations by Terrence Merrigan sourced on the internet which gave no reference, but are probably from Merrigan’s book *The Imagination in the Life and Thought of John Henry Newman*.

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process of becoming more vast, more close, more dazzling ...? Will it not burst our religion asunder? Eclipse our God?'

He was convinced that the Church was now offering 'too small a Christ' to people living in the modern/postmodern world. This is dangerous, because, as Leonard Sweet writes, 'If something doesn't capture the imagination, it doesn't survive.'⁴

KNOCKED FOR SIX

The reality is that the Christian imagination has been suffering seismic shocks one after the other since the 17th century when modernity dawned. Until that point the dramatic narrative of Genesis 1-3 at the opening of the Bible had gripped the western imagination with unparalleled power. It just explained so much! It revealed the nature of reality, the world as the creation of a good, unique, personal God, who gave the highest place in it to us humans, made in God's image and likeness; it explained the problems of life as originating in our choosing self over God, with the ensuing loss of paradise and death. Then in the New Testament Jesus, Son of God, is presented as saving the human race from this fatal predicament it finds itself in.

For sixteen centuries the *Genesis* narrative functioned to all intents and purposes not only as a faith document but also as history and science. It was the only source of information about our remote past and origins, and people accepted it literally, given its credentials as Scripture, the revealed Word of God. We knew what life was all about, and western civilisation built itself on this foundation. And we were commissioned to spread this knowledge to the whole world.

The *first* seismic shock was when Copernicus and Galileo between them proved that the sun, moon and stars did not revolve around our planet, but the other way round. This news so dismayed the Church (and everyone else) that Galileo was forced to recant and put under house arrest until his death. When he was proved correct, our self-importance as humans was dealt a blow: the sun, moon and stars didn't all revolve around us!

Human knowledge had developed the scientific method. Modernity had taken its baby steps, soon to grow into gigantic leaps. Of these, the *next* seismic shock to the religious imagination was, of course, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Was God the Creator needed any more, if life evolved and somehow created itself through continually adapting and perfecting itself? While not condemning Darwin, the Church quietly disapproved,

4 Leonard Sweet, *VIRAL :How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*, USA: Waterbrook Press, 2014, p 81.

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and many 19th and 20th century theologians rejected the notion of evolution (though interestingly Newman thought it made sense). To this day many American theologians and churchgoers hold to the Intelligent Design theory which rejects evolution. However, the Church has since accepted it officially, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms. While not naming evolution as such, it states that

Creation ‘did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created ‘in a state of journeying’ (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it.’⁵

This is a dynamic interpretation of the universe, helpfully drawing *Genesis* closer to the evolutionary worldview. However, *it does not go on to claim any cosmic role for Christ in this*, but leaves the universe journey to God’s providence generally, as if it were a separate story from the salvation of human souls.

We can add in all that has happened since, as we explore the truly awesome macro and micro dimensions of the world, with ever more powerful instruments. So, we now know that we live on a tiny planet in a universe of billions of galaxies, while beneath us the depths of matter descend to the quantum level. If considered as a rival to faith, (however incorrectly), the world has definitely become “*something fascinating, something capable of possessing, engrossing and overwhelming.*”

HOW IS OUR FAITH TO COPE?

Who are we now? Do we matter in this vast universe? Or only to ourselves? And if we are believers, *who is Christ now* in this cosmic setting?

Since Teilhard’s time the cosmos has loomed ever larger in our culture. To imaginations brought up on dinosaurs and *Star Wars*, to humans who have walked on the moon and now peer at the earliest universe, can the Church offer a less-than-cosmic Christ? Not if the Christian faith is to seriously capture imaginations today.

So, what *is* the role and function of Christ in this evolving cosmos? This is the urgent question that Teilhard de Chardin set himself to address, throughout a lifetime of work, reflection and writing, because it was the key issue in his own personal life.

He lamented that in recent centuries the study of Christ, Christology, had not developed in tandem with human knowledge, hardly going beyond the definitions drawn up in the earliest centuries of the Church.

5 Catechism of the Catholic Church, p 71

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“In a sense, Christ is in the Church in the same way as the sun is before our eyes. We see the same sun as our fathers saw, and yet we understand it in a much more magnificent way. I believe that the Church is still a child. Christ, by whom she lives, is immeasurably greater than she imagines. And yet, when thousands of years have gone by and Christ’s true face is a little more plainly seen, the Christians of those days will still, without any reservations, recite the Apostles’ Creed.”⁶

In another writing he goes on to explain,

“If we want to achieve the synthesis, so badly needed, between faith in God and faith in the world, then the best thing for us to do is to dogmatically present, in the person of Christ, the cosmic aspect and cosmic function which make him organically the principle and controlling force, the very soul of evolution.”⁷

HAND IN GLOVE

It is a great pity that Vatican theologians were so resistant to Teilhard’s views that they forbade him to publish his writing at all. He was offering a totally renewed vision of what Christ’s incarnation means, by showing how it fits hand in glove with the magnificent universe story. The great purpose of the universe is to bring forth the fully evolved Christ as a single humanity, holy and whole, united to him, finally raised to eternal life, to the glory of God. *“The whole future of the earth, as of religion, it seems to me, depends on awakening our faith in the future.”* For this it is imperative that the Christian worldview become dynamic, interpreting reality as a journey and a process, and renew its dogmas, theology, language and imagery in that new light. Teilhard writes,

“My compelling tendency is to universalise what I love, because otherwise I cannot love it. Now, a Christ who extended to only a part of the Universe, a Christ who did not in some way encompass the world in himself, would seem to me a Christ smaller than the Real... The God of our Faith would appear to me less grand, less dominant, than the Universe of our experience!”⁸

6 5 January 1921, in a letter to a friend. *The Heart of Matter*, Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, San Diego, New York, London, p117-8.

7 From *Christianisme et Évolution*, 1945, p3, as quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p.133.

8 *My Universe*, in *The Heart of Matter*, p 201, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc, San Diego, New York, London

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So, without including the universe as integral to the Christ event, the image of Christ loses out, and pales in significance. But likewise, without renewed Christian thinking to guide it, the amazing universe story floats adrift in a vacuum of meaning. Its evolution has no apparent destiny or goal greater than well-being for all humans, while they live, at the very best. However, the gravitational pull on our imaginations exerted by the planet in space-time is so great that that the scientific side of the equation is proving stronger. People are abandoning the Christian story for the *new* story, whatever it might be. These are the ever-growing ranks of the 'spiritual but not religious'.

THE BONE OF CONTENTION

While the Church has now quietly accepted the reality of evolution, it would not allow Teilhard to reinterpret the doctrine of original sin in a cosmic setting, and it was this that led to his exile in China for the greater part of his life, forbidden to publish anything.

The Catechism, compiled in 1994 almost forty years after his death, still warns, "The Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ."⁹

That logic works both ways, Teilhard would say: if we develop a deeper, dynamic, cosmic understanding of Christ as Saviour, we would need to correspondingly develop a deeper, cosmic and more credible understanding of sin and its origins. That issue, however, cannot be developed here.

EMPOWERING CHRISTIANS

To *conclude*, Teilhard unveils the cosmic dimensions of love, and of the Incarnation of God into matter. As such it has extraordinary new power to attract and inspire the imagination. It reveals the cosmic wings of the Christian faith, and thanks to him some people are happily flying, confident in a faith that is not afraid to come to terms with today's culture. This is vitally important because, as Newman said, the imagination is where faith first forms in us. It makes faith real, and that is what galvanises us. A worldview based on the cosmic Christ gives Christians the happiness of *a totally meaningful reality* in which to live their lives.

If taught dogmatically by the Church, and properly communicated, this cosmic interpretation of Christ would empower and energise Christians *for their task in the world*, as Teilhard felt they needed to be. For him, it is an energy the Christian faith owes

9 Catechism of the Catholic Church, Veritas, 1994, Dublin, p 87.

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to the world, because Jesus the Christ came to transform it. To transform the world through a cosmic understanding of love, and to ‘save souls’, are two sides of the same coin.

Teilhard’s genius is to uncover *the oneness of the new cosmic reality in Christ*. In this way he lights up the cosmic dimensions of the final words at the Last Supper, where Jesus points towards the future he longed for, and for which he gave his life:

“May they all be one.

Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.”

(Jn 17:21-22)

Pope Benedict. Pope Benedict was the teaching pope, in contrast with his successor Pope Francis, who is the pastoral pope. Both men have brought differing skills and a unique style of their own to the papacy. Yet, they shared a fundamental belief in the vital witness of the Church to the truth of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospels. Pope Benedict XVI’s enduring influence and his lasting legacy lie in the intellectual realm, having spent his adult life as a Church theologian. He applied his great intelligence to fathoming the depths of the Christian faith as expressed and professed by Catholicism. His mental prowess enabled him to deepen and finely hone his own spirituality as well as increasing his knowledge of and insight into the theology of the Church. Pope Francis, speaking in June 2021 on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of Benedict XVI’s priestly ordination, described the Pope Emeritus as ‘the contemplative of the Vatican’.

– BISHOP FINTAN MONAHAN, *His Homeward Journey: The Life and Works of Pope Benedict XVI*, Dublin: Veritas, 2023, p. 17.