



The Vineyard: Scientists in the Church

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Chapter III: Theological Considerations

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Chapter III: Theological Considerations

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water.... (Gen. 1:1-2)

And God saw that it was good.... (Gen. 1:10)

God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.... God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good.... (Gen. 1: 27-30)

God of our ancestors, Lord of mercy, who by your word have made all things, and in your wisdom have fitted man to rule the creatures that have come from you, to govern the world in holiness and justice and in honesty of soul to wield authority, grant me Wisdom, consort of your throne, and do not reject me from the number of your children.... (Wis. 9:1-4)

And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. (Jn. 1:14)

The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. (Rom. 8:19-23)

We have gone deeply into these new perspectives: the progress of the universe, and in particular of the human universe, does not take place in competition with God, nor does it squander energies that we rightly owe to Him. The greater man becomes, the more humanity becomes united, with consciousness of, and mastery of, its potentialities, the more beautiful creation will be, the more perfect adoration will become, and the more Christ will find, for mystical extensions, a body worthy of resurrection. The world can no more have two summits than a circumference can have two centres (sic). The star for which the world is waiting, without yet being able to give it a name, or rightly appreciate its transcendence, or even recognize the most spiritual and divine of its rays, is, necessarily, Christ Himself, in whom we hope. To desire the Parousia, all we have to do is let the very heart of the earth, as we Christianise it, beat within us....(1)

Throughout my life, through my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight until, aflame all around me, it has become almost completely luminous from within.... Such has been my experience, in contact with the earth -- the diaphany of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire... Christ; His heart; a fire; capable of penetrating elsewhere and, gradually, spreading everywhere....(2)

This chapter assumes that the moment of the creation *ex nihilo* from God's hand is not the appropriate place from which to begin the elaboration of a theology of creation. The empirical, physical world of the first moments after the creation has passed away, and not merely just because of the passage of time. Even the creation from nothing, however, is a graced creation in Christ, the dimensions of which can be understood only in the light of the Incarnation. The creation from nothing is a creation in Christ, the Son of God and son of Mary, the "one and the same" of the definition of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.(3) We assume in these pages that the life of Christ, culminating in Christ's presence to us in the Eucharist, has radically (in the fullest meaning of that word) transformed the world. In brief, the world is no longer the same as it was before the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It has been transformed, redeemed, made ready to share in the "freedom of the sons of God." We see this transfiguring now in sacrament, in sign and not in its full reality. We shall see it in its integrity, in its full reality, when Christ finally and definitively returns to us.

We post-Enlightenment Christians seem to have a very diminished sense of a sacramental world. We have lost a vital sense of Christ's Eucharistic presence in the universe slowly transfiguring us and also the stuff of creation into "the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). Somehow, somewhere that faith which sees the vital covenantal relation between God and creation has grown faint. [Cf. Appendix 1 for a brief consideration of the historical development of the covenant and of its nature and place in Christian belief. An understanding of covenant is necessary for a fuller understanding of the nature and richness of Christianity.] If we think about it at all, we tend to consider God's Kingdom as something we will encounter only later, when the world has been judged. But our world is a sacramental world, one in which the physical is a sign of the *spiritual* world. We do not mean by this a nebulous, immaterial world. Rather, we use it to designate a world of matter guided by and alive with the Spirit. Scripture certainly reveals to us the Risen Christ as solidly bodied: "Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have" (Lk 24:39). St. Paul tells us that the final state of creation, the *spiritual* state, will be enlivened with the spirit, not with the soul:

If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment. The first man, Adam, as scripture says, became a living soul; but the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. . . (1 Cor 15:45).

By and large we are losing, if we have not already lost, our sense of the spiritual value of matter. As we will mention more explicitly later, in this world redeemed by Christ, the *physical* points to a spiritual reality. In a sacrament, for instance, the external sign (physical) points to a further reality that transcends the physical. As a group we are losing the sense of the sacramental *connection*. Because all we can *see* and measure quantitatively is the physical, many of us have come to think that the physical is all that there is. We have come to consider the material merely as a substrate with no value beyond what can be measured and manipulated.

As scientists and technologists we tend to see the physical creation merely as some kind of clay to be shaped and pounded and reshaped according to whatever whim strikes us at the time. We tend to consider it merely to be at our imaginative disposal, for whatever purpose we would pursue, without any dignity beyond what we impose upon it. Yet, St. Paul assures us that this physical universe, together with us, is groaning to be liberated from decay -- a statement that is folly to many of our contemporaries as it was to his.

Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man* sets up a distinction between *process* and *event*. We would like to adapt this distinction in discussing the creation. Teilhard used *process* to designate what he called *cosmogenesis* (the world as a mass in the process of transformation). This would include, for instance, all of the development of the universe until the coming and developing of life (*biogenesis*). Teilhard himself, we believe, would tend to lump *biogenesis* together with *cosmogenesis* into process. Then, with the coming of humans with self-consciousness we begin to see *event* (*anthropogenesis*, *noögenesis*, and *Christogenesis*). Stripped of its idiosyncratic vocabulary this distinction suggests that with the coming of self-conscious human beings, the evolutionary process comes under the spell of the human mind and eventually of love. *Event* plays back on process, altering it, redirecting it, transforming it. For a Christian the supreme *Event* is the Incarnation, the radical alteration and transformation of the fallen cosmic process by the physical presence of God within it as a man. We do not intend to use Teilhard's distinction in a strict way. We merely wish to use it to stress that *event* (in Christ) alters *process*. This would include creation as well, since creation is *in Christ*.

This cuts to the heart of (and radically denies) any understanding of the universe that is necessary, subject to some principle of absolute unity. This is an important expression of the Good News: creation is free in Christ and is not determined by any necessary process. This, of course, is the assumption on which all true experimental science is built, namely, the intelligibility of the physical creation as a free (as opposed to necessary) intelligibility. This is also the basis for a humanly creative technology. There certainly is order (another assumption of science) but there is no deterministic necessity. The universe is free in Christ. Multiple futures are possible:

This tension [between the defenders of an Aristotelian quasi-animism and the Franciscan-Augustinian emphasis upon the novel implications of a truly contingent creation] persists to our own time. On the

one hand, there is effective in many academic disciplines, including physics and theology, the hardy conviction that whatever is objectively true can be shown to be necessarily true; on the other there is a common-sense, commonplace and communally lived commitment to a host of realities whose objectivity is vital to us, and which are very clearly free, neither necessary nor random.(4)

For a Christian, Christ is, as we read in the Book of Revelation, “the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.” Any theological consideration of creation, therefore, should begin, not with the “creation from nothing” but with the Incarnation. As we believe, the coming of Christ radically changed fallen creation. God is now immanent in (physically present within) creation in a radically decisive way. It is a universe different in kind from what it was before he was conceived in Mary’s womb. This is not to be taken in a solely empirical way. The dielectric constant of boron, for instance, almost certainly was not different before the Incarnation than it is now. But, on a deeper and more important level, the relationships of all things to each other and to God have changed. Everything that now occurs in the cosmos is directed sacramentally to the building of the Kingdom of Christ, to the development of a covenanted (therefore free) community.

In the Old Testament God erupts into history and into the lives of his people Israel unexpectedly and seemingly to us arbitrarily. Who could have predicted that he would choose Abraham or Moses or Samson or Gideon to lead his chosen people? Who could have predicted the deliverance of the Exodus or the return from the Babylonian exile? Even more, who could possibly have foreseen the appearance of the angel to Mary with his breathtaking proclamation: “you shall bear a son and you must name him Jesus”? But with that message and its acceptance, God enters into both the *process* and *event* of creation’s growth as a part of it. Wondrously the God who created the universe as a place of evolutionary process entered it as one of its events. Process is not informed either by some necessitarian force or by Chance “from without.” It is guided, swelling with new life, new meaning, new possibilities and a new direction and destiny “from within.” It is in this context that we can begin to plumb the richness of Paul’s vision in his Colossian hymn to which we have already alluded:

He is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers -- all things were created through him and in him. Before anything was created, he existed, and he holds all things in unity. Now the Church is his body, he is its head.

As he is the beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be first in every way; because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross.... (Col. 1: 15-20)

The whole theme of this hymn is unity, the unity of creation in Christ, the Son of God *and* the son of Mary, from the beginning and the unity of redemption which arises from Christ from within the creation itself. To try better to understand this unity and to at least ponder the mystery of this unity now inevitably welling up through creation in and through and for Christ, it is necessary to look at some aspects of this becoming-flesh of the second Person of the Trinity, remembering that now creation grows in unity, both the unity of *process* and *event*, from within, from the immanent presence of Christ himself and from us whose life is in his.

This tradition on unity might best be summed up in a beautiful passage from St. Athanasius in the 4th century:

Like a musician who has attuned his lyre, and by the artistic blending of low and high and medium tones produces a single melody, so the Wisdom of God, holding the universe like a lyre, adapting things heavenly to things earthly, and earthly things to heavenly, harmonizes them all, and, leading them by His will, makes one world and one world-order in beauty and harmony (Contra Gentes, 41, p. 26).(5)

How is this to be accomplished? We believe that we can achieve it by following out the idea of another ancient (early third century) witness:

This tree, wide as the heavens itself, has grown up into heaven from the earth. It is an immortal growth and towers twixt heaven and earth. It is the fulcrum of all things and the place where they are at rest. It is the foundation of the round world, the centre (sic) of the cosmos. In it all the diversities in our human nature are formed into a unity. It is held together by invisible nails of the Spirit so that it may not break loose from the divine. It touches the highest summits of heaven and makes the earth firm beneath its foot, and it grasps the middle regions between them with its immeasurable arms. . . .

O crucified One, thou leader of the mystical dances! O this spiritual wedding feast! O this divine Pasch that passes from heaven to earth and rises up again to heaven! O this new feast of all things! O cosmic festal gathering! O joy of the universe, honour, ecstasy, exquisite delight by which dark death is destroyed, life returns to all and the gates of heaven are opened. God appeared as a man and man rose up as God when he shattered the gates of Hell and burst the iron bolts thereof. And the people that were in the depths arise from the dead and announce to all the hosts of heaven: 'The thronging choir from earth is coming home'.(6)

In speaking of this unity, symbolized by the Cross and the resurrection of Christ, we might quote Pope John Paul II:

There is, of course, the vision of unity of all things and all peoples in Christ, who is active and present with us in our daily lives -- in our struggles, our sufferings, our joys and in our searching -- and who is the focus of the Church's life and witness. This vision carries with it into the larger community a deep reverence for all that is, a hope and assurance that the fragile goodness, beauty and life we see in the universe is moving toward a completion and fulfillment which will not be overwhelmed by the forces of dissolution and death. This vision also provides a strong support for the values which are emerging from our knowledge and appreciation of creation and of ourselves as the products, knowers and stewards of creation.(7)

Besides excellence in our scientific and technical work, Christians in science especially can bring this love of creation and its processes into the church in their own lives. A Christian is united to the church in Christ and Christ in the church. This is inherent in Christ's covenantal relation to, his union with, the church. As will be discussed later, the Christian in union with Christ through baptism, by which he or she is incorporated into the church, lives Christ's life, thinks Christ's thoughts, loves with Christ's love. Christ really lives in us. Consider St. Paul's statement in 2 Cor 13, 5-6: "Examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is really in you? If not, you have failed the test,..." In bringing Christ's presence into the scientific world, we bring his presence in the scientific world into the church. This is a marvelous gift of his to us and to the church. There is a significant need for us to be conscious of this and to bring Christ in and with us into today's world. We must band together in the church to develop ways to pursue this baptismal mandate. We'll return to this theme in a more practical way in Chapter 5. The church must live in the world that really is, although she must attempt on a communal level to permeate that world with the love of Christ who lives in her.

Also, we Christians in science are really the especially chosen ones who can bring the fullest possible expression of the real love Christians should have for the creation to the scientific and technical communities. We would be totally naive to believe that the church has demonstrated to the scientific community that Christians really care for the creation. (We are not implying that the scientific community has always shown such care either.) It is our task to demonstrate it in our lives, in our enthusiasm for understanding the creation and for appreciating the appropriate products of human curiosity and genius. We believe that only in Christ is there a meaning and a coherence to the world. It is our task to develop this meaning and coherence more maturely personally (and communally in the church) and profoundly and present that worldview to the scientific community. We scientists have a double task here, namely, to prod the theological and ecclesial community into such a development of our doctrine and to take that development into the scientific/technical community as a coherent worldview to help in the future directing of our sciences. This is a simply enormous task, but we must start now, even if haltingly. If we dwell only on the enormity of the task we shall never begin to accomplish it.

This vision of which the Pope speaks is clearly an *event*, in the sense we have been using it above. It is both a discovery and an imposition on the cosmos of conscious thought and love on the part of all Christians, but maybe especially on the part of those of us who have been trained to observe it systematically and, we hope, appreciate and love it more fully. The Pope's accents are in their own way similar to those of Teilhard de Chardin in his stress on the unity and mutual interaction of nature and history. Teilhard, as we mentioned earlier, distinguished between *process* and *event*. *Process* (the determinate and determined, the unconscious, the impersonal) is not the sole operating principle in the evolutionary growth of the universe and not even the most important principle; it is continually yielding primacy to *event* (the conscious, the personal, the free), to the coming of humanity, of consciousness, of freedom, and of love, most especially in Christ. In Christ we find the model and meaning of *process*, *event* and their relationships. As Teilhard has written:

In a pluralistic and static Nature, the universal domination of Christ could, strictly speaking, still be regarded as an extrinsic and super-imposed power. In a spiritually converging world this 'Christic' energy acquires an urgency and intention of another order altogether. If the world is convergent and if Christ occupies its centre, the Christogenesis of St. Paul and St. John is nothing else than the extension both awaited and un hoped for, of that noögenesis in which cosmogenesis -- as regards our experience -- culminates. Christ invests himself organically with the very majesty of his creation. And it is in no way metaphorical to say that man finds himself capable of experiencing and discovering his God in the whole length, breadth and depth of the world in movement. To be able to say literally to God that one loves him, not only with all one's body, all one's heart and all one's soul, but with every fibre of the unifying universe -- that is a prayer that can only be made in space-time.(8)

Actually, in this sacramental world, the case is far more significant than Teilhard states. We do more than discover God in the whole length, breadth and depth of the world in movement. Our life in the Eucharistic Lord allows us to direct, to form and to implement the movement of the world in the church. If we care to use the terminology, we Christians are in Christ the final culmination of evolution, its summit. Only we, as members of Christ's Body, are enabled to be the presence of Christ in the world. Only we can in Christ consciously and "graciously" direct all things back to him. We are called are in the divine nature (Cf. 2 Pet 1:4). The culture, of course, will reject this notion. Even some Christians would reject it as *triumphal*. It is, however, the simple truth. In Christ, we are the co-creators of the *heavenly Jerusalem*. As far as revelation is concerned, this is the message that Christ has given us. While we should revel in this call, we should not become euphoric or arrogant about it. Besides being an enormous privilege, an unbelievably magnificent gift of God, it is also an incredibly great obligation. We shall return later to the sense (and fact) of responsibility, of obligation, of duty. Suffice it to say here, repeating Christ's words, "from whom much has been given, much will be required" (Lk 12:48).

Pope John Paul II and Teilhard stress a unity in multiplicity that mirrors the unity of One God in the Trinity of Persons. They dwell on the unity in nature and history, in *process* and *event*. The church's constant teaching from the "Christogenesis of St. Paul and St. John," as Teilhard calls it, until our own day, has stressed the unity of love. The unity of love is not found in the absorption of the beloved into the lover, nor vice versa. The Christian notion of unity has long been expressed in *una caro*, in the union of two in one flesh. This clearly has primary significance in our understanding of nature and in all the major issues within the church (e.g., authority questions, freedom and responsibility, sacramentality and ecclesiology) as well as those confronting the church from the contemporary culture, i.e., from scientific/technical advance, political issues and so on. All turn on the notion of unity and community. These notions of unity and community turn on the two-in-one-flesh covenant which is at the heart of the Christian revelation.

Part of the contemporary theological crisis is our now centuries-long forgetfulness of the covenantal character of God's relation to us and to *all creation*. This forgetfulness extends to what might be called a *Christomonism*, i.e., a theological consideration of Christ apart from his covenantal relationship to Mary and through her to all of creation. This covenantal relationship is the whole focus of God's relation to creation, which, in turn, decides our relation to creation. Teilhard's prayer "that can only be made in space-time" depends radically upon Mary's *Fiat*

("be it done unto me according to your word"). Only in her acceptance of a two-in-one-flesh covenant does the Son become "one of us." It is in her covenantal "yes" that he has human relatives, a human genealogy, a human face. To overstress the hypostatic union (the union of God and man in Christ) at the expense of the two-in-one-flesh covenant (between two integral persons) with Mary is to render the Christian understanding of reality poorer. [Hypostatic is a word used to express the *consubstantiality* of Jesus Christ with the Father. It essentially states that the two natures in Christ, one divine and one human, are unified in one divine Person, the eternal Son of God.] To do so, it would seem, would make sacramentality practically meaningless, render the covenant incomprehensible and theology impossible.

The Incarnation was a covenantal event and in its present Eucharistic representation is still an event; in fact, it is *the* event in the world between Christ's first and second coming. It unifies the First Covenant, the Second Covenant and the final Kingdom. It is the integration of all events and the very ground of history. Teilhard says this in different words:

As early as in St. Paul and St. John we read that to create, to fulfil and to purify the world is, for God, to unify it by uniting it organically with himself. How does he unify it? By partially immersing himself in things, by becoming 'element,' and then, from this point of vantage in the heart of matter, assuming the control and leadership of what we now call evolution. Christ, principle of universal vitality because sprung up as man among men, put himself in the position (maintained ever since) to subdue under himself, to purify, to direct and superanimate the general ascent of consciousness into which he inserted himself.(9)

The insertion of the Second Person of the Trinity into creation through God's imperative offer of covenantal union to Mary and her acceptance continues in the two-in-one-flesh union (bride-bridegroom, head-members) of Christ and church. It continues to transfigure sacramentally the whole universe in and through us in the church. *Event* (every sacrament and every human response to God is an event) is modifying and, in Christ, transfiguring the fallen cosmic *process*. Teilhard stated:

Led astray by a false evangelism, people often think that they are honoring Christianity when they reduce it to a sort of gentle philanthropism. Those who fail to see it in the most realistic and at the same time the most cosmic of beliefs and hopes, completely fail to understand its 'mysteries.' Is the Kingdom of God a big family? Yes, in a sense it is. But in another sense it is a prodigious biological operation -- that of the Redeeming Incarnation.(10)

Christ became a human being. Indeed, he not only became a human being, he became a very specific human being. In the natural course of human affairs, barring still another miracle, there was only one maternal cycle in Mary's reproductive life that could have resulted in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. We do not know, of course, whether or not there was such a miracle beyond the virgin birth of a male child. Be that as it may, Jesus was a very specific human being, one with very specific relatives, born at a very specific time in an equally specific place. It is this very specificity that tells us how deeply God entered into his universe. In the Incarnation the Son of God did not assume some generalized kind of humanity, did not become human in a "one-size-fits-all" body. His body was completely appropriate to his time, his place, his relatives -- as our body is appropriate to our time, place and relatives. In the conformity of his body to its natural and historical environment he became a member of our race. Born in another time or place, the incarnate Son of God could not have been Jesus -- no more than we could have been born at another time and have remained ourselves.

For a very long time philosophers have stated that specificity is a property of matter. We have no evidence that God has ever done the same thing twice. The God who revealed himself in the Jewish and Christian scriptures is not a God of abstractions or generalities, no matter to what lengths philosophers and theologians have gone in generalities and abstractions. God neither creates us merely as a part of a group nor does he redeem us and promise glorification in some general way, only as members of a group. God's concern, as he has revealed it, is not for humankind or for the universe as a whole, but for individual human beings and for each of his creatures.

Endnotes

1. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960, p. 137.
2. de Chardin, *Divine Milieu*, p.14.
3. The Council of Chalcedon's definition demands this *one and the same* unity. Christ's pre-existence (even in creation from nothing) must be human as well as divine. As Durrwell, C.Ss.R, commenting on the hymn St. Paul quotes in Colossians 1, has stated in his article "Eucharist and Parousia," *Lumen Fidei*, 26, 295, note 45, June, 1971:

The two titles of Christ, "image of the invisible God" and "first born of all creation," involve the same complexity. *It is the Christ of glory and not the Logos considered outside the mystery of the Incarnation.* Yet the perfection of the image, his total equality with God, testifies to the transcendence of Christ.
4. Fr. Donald J. Keefe, S.J., "Faith, Science, and Sacramental Realism," Proceedings, ITEST's *Conversation with Father Stanley Jaki, O.S.B.*, October, 1991, p. 4.
5. Cited in *The Cosmic Christ*, George Maloney, S. J., New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968, p. 261.
6. Hippolytus of Rome, "De Pascha Homilia," 6 (PG, 59, 743-5), quoted in Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963, pp. 67-8.
7. Robert J. Russell *et al*, *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, M5.
8. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* New York: Harper, 1959, 296-97.
9. de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 293.
10. de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 293

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