

JUNE BOOK RECOMMENDATION

Reviewed by Dan Brent

The Divine Milieu by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, was both a scientist (a geologist) and a theologian. His life (1881-1955) overlapped that of Einstein (1879-1955). It was a period of enormous discoveries about the universe. The scientific progress of that era moved him to greater faith and to a vision of all of creation that centered on Christ.

De Chardin's overall position is that God has chosen to make Jesus the center of the *universe's* life, not just human life. The task of human beings, in this vision, is to help God complete the maturation of all creation on the Last Day – when creation arrives at the “Pleroma”.

“The elements of the universe, everything forms a single whole. And we see Christ rising over our interior world.” (p. 25) “The human soul is inseparable from the universe into which it is born.” (p. 23)

The Divine Milieu begins with an explanation that all human experience has divine undertones. Work, play, family, commerce – everything we do and everything that happens to us – is not different from (or an interruption of) our prayer and spirituality. It is all part of the whole of building God's kingdom. In our human activities, “We serve to complete creation by the humblest work of our hands.” (p. 26) “By virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, *nothing* here below is profane for those who know how to see.” (p. 30) So “Our faith imposes on us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of earth.” (p. 34)

In his section on “our passivities” – what is done *to* us – de Chardin distinguishes between the *passivities of growth* and the *passivities of diminishment*. “Passivities of growth” are the friendly and favorable forces that – out of our control – tend to shape who we become. “My *self* is given to me far more than it is formed by me.” (p. 43)

The “passivities of diminishment” are the hostile powers that hamper our progress. But even here, de Chardin is confident that everything works for good. “By virtue of Christ's rising again, nothing any longer kills inevitably, but everything is capable of becoming the blessed influence of God upon our lives.” (p. 49) But “the problem of evil will always remain one of the most disturbing mysteries of the universe.” (p. 51) “God transfigures deaths by integrating them into a better plan – provided we lovingly trust in him.” (p. 53)

In a section on asceticism, *The Divine Milieu* counsels moderation and balance. “There is no need to be wildly impatient. Death will come soon enough.” (p. 67) “The road of the Cross is the road of human endeavor supernaturally righted and prolonged.” (p. 72) “It is not our business to withdraw from the world before our time. Rather let us learn to orient our being in the flux of things.” (p. 78)

In summary: “By means of all created things, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us.” (p. 83) “God reveals himself everywhere, as a *universal milieu*, only because he is the *ultimate point* upon which all realities converge.” (p. 85) “The immensity of God is the essential attribute which allows us to seize him everywhere, within us and around us.” (p. 93)

And the tool God uses is Christ – his risen person, his Eucharistic presence (one communion through the ages), and his body the Church. “Christ acts as the center of radiation for the energies which lead the universe back to God.” (p. 95)

For us, personal progress, de Chardin explains, is made through three “operatives”. *Purity* – or “rectitude” – seeks Christ’s desire over the person’s own “advantage”. *Faith* is belief in God, charged with trust in his beneficent strength. And *fidelity* is our “active response to our daily task.” (p. 113) It is through fidelity that “we return to God the kiss he is forever offering us across the world.” (p. 114)

The meager efforts of each person gain clout through the solidarity of the Communion of Saints. That’s demonstrated through *charity*. “The task of each one of us is to divinize the whole world in an infinitesimal degree. The total divine milieu is formed by the confluence of our individual divine milieux.” (p. 118)

“Under the commonplace envelope of things and of all our purified and salvaged efforts, a new earth is being slowly engendered.” (p. 129)