

From the Ignatian Tradition

RETREAT NOTES, BEIJING

October 1945

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Teilhard's recently published retreat notes¹ powerfully illustrate his vision of adoration as research, and his struggles to reconcile his devotion to Jesus Christ with his sense of the universe's vastness. His retreat of 1945 (21-28 October), shortly before his return to France after spending the World War II years in China, bears moving witness to how he sustained his creative vision not only amid the hostility and incomprehension of Church and Jesuit authority, but also when confronted with personal fragility and advancing age.

First Day. (Creation 1) — Existence, Presence

Seldom have I felt so fragile, divided, incohesive,² right down to the last fibres and atoms of myself ... May this retreat be a long, patient, intimate, multiform act of pan-communion with the omnipresence of God-Evolver ... Actively to let myself be calmed, patiently, as serenely as I can, minute by minute, without disturbing thoughts about the future.

But for this, the first condition, essential, radically gratuitous: '*Domine fac ut videam, ut te videam, ut te omni-praesentem et omni-animantem*

¹ *Notes de retraites 1919-1954*, edited by Gérard-Henri Beaudry (Paris: Seuil, 2003); the extract reproduced here comes from pp. 261-272—© Editions du Seuil.

² *inconsistent*. Cognates of this word appear frequently in the text that follows. 'Inconsistent' and 'incoherent' are now too narrow in English—'disintegrated' would have been defensible, and more idiomatic than 'incohesive', but it would also have narrowed the range inappropriately to the psychological.

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videam et sentiam':³ the first and the last, the most elemental and the supreme, the most gracious of graces ...

Eight days of slow, confirmed, total, omniformed immersion in the Christic energy: interior and exterior climate, sun and shadow, calm and winds, incidents, visits, different arrangements ... everything, everything: the creational arrangement, loving and enloving.⁴

Jesus-Omega, make me serve you, proclaim you, glorify you, make you manifest right to the end—through all the time left to me to live—and above all through my end!

May this end not disgrace anything—and therefore may it be in beauty! Now I feel myself so radically pusillanimous, incapable of making the step ... My final active years, my death—these I confide to you in desperation, Jesus; may they not come to weaken what I have so much dreamt of finishing for you.

Perhaps it's inevitable, good, necessary that I feel myself as if incapable of moving forward, at every moment, never sure or confident of the next step ...

Second Day. (Creation 2) – 'Cohesiveness'

*'Sine me, nihil potestis facere'*⁵

– To consider the difficulty I'm going through (an anxious giddiness of the understanding, and then of action) as a test that is decentering me (in the awkwardness) onto the Cohesiveness of Christ-Omega,⁶ my only life-support. = Ultimate foundation of calm, within a supreme Baptism⁷ ...

³ 'Lord, make it that I can see, that I see you, that I see and sense you as omnipresent and omnianimating.' (See Mark 10:51.)

⁴ *aimant et amorisant*—the latter word is not standard French.

⁵ 'Without me, you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

⁶ 'Christ coinciding with both the theological notion of universal centre and the ... ultimate convergence of cosmic evolution': Siôn Cowell, *The Teilhard Lexicon: Understanding the Language, Terminology and Vision of the Writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2001), 30. Central to Teilhard's thought is an identification between Christ and his message, on the one hand, and the term of the evolutionary process. It is in such contexts that he speaks of Omega.

⁷ Probably alluding to Mark 10:38, where Jesus speaks of his death in terms of a particular baptism.

*'In patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras.'*⁸

– An essential point in Omegalization: the preservation of Christ's humanity in his Super-Humanity⁹ All the strength is there—it's not been replaced within 'modern man', and it's irreplaceable. (Cf. Foerster, Christ and the modern soul).¹⁰ Neither Goethe nor Nietzsche has ever 'saved' or consoled anyone.

It's true. The necessary Revelation of Omega is unimaginable biologically, or evolutionarily, without a 'humanisation' of the Jesus kind. And why should this not be just Jesus? ... Jesus, the initiator and the ever growing object of Super-Charity.¹¹

Why?—because there remain people, so to speak, 'on the side'.

In my Love of Evolution, to insist on this VITALITY of Jesus, and his necessary action within the passionate gift to Cosmogeneration. Without the historical and trans-historical Jesus, Evolution loses all the warmth in its real life. ...

'A common Spirit': made possible by a common Objective, respecting, by virtue of convergence, all the orientations that seem so incompatible in appearance (azimuths) ...

Third Day. (Creation 3) – 'The One Thing Necessary'

To continue to make out of this retreat an exercise in Pan- and Super-Communion. To let myself, every bit of me (even my anxiety), be basically calmed, in the super-gratuitous flow, creating and

⁸ 'In your patience, you will possess your souls' (Luke 21: 19).

⁹ 'Higher state that humanity appears destined to attain if it succeeds in becoming fully totalised on itself and submitting to the vivifying action of grace' (*Teilhard Lexicon*, 183-184). There are obvious questions about how this Teilhardian notion relates to the doctrine of Jesus' divinity.

¹⁰ Erich Förster (1865-1945), a Protestant theologian writing in Germany. In 1897, he had published a notable book on the difficulties of faith in the modern urban world.

¹¹ The prefix indicates the higher stage towards which we are constantly aspiring. Teilhard's vision touches on the point of controversy among theologians at the time—not resolved—regarding the relationship between the 'supernatural' and the merely 'natural'. The marginal note added later is cryptic. It appears that he thought better of the evolutionary interpretation of Christ suggested in the original text, reflecting that such a vision would still somehow exclude people who were not Christian. Teilhard is struggling in this retreat with the relationship between the particularity of Jesus and the sheer vastness of the universe.



consolidating. To accept and love the feeling of total, personal incohesiveness ...

O creative flux, consolidating, expanding, I vow myself and abandon myself in my desperation to your universal, profound influences!

– At root, what makes me suffer is the anguish and vertigo ‘of fragility’ ... The direct remedy: God my cohesion ...

– ‘If the worst comes to the worst’, were all future in speaking and writing to be closed in my face, there would still be, with Jesus’ help, the possibility for me of making this gesture, the supreme affirmation and witness of my faith: to disappear, to go under, in a spirit of super-Communion with the Christic forces of Evolution. ... ¹²

¹² Here Teilhard seems to be accepting the frustration, within a human perspective, of what he thought was his personal mission. He was to die without seeing any of his religious works published.

– The extraordinary and unique and irreplaceable Christian solution:

To 'Humanise' the Universe (without diminishing it)

- 1) theoretically
- 2) practically (in a mystic act made general to the whole mass of humanity)

= To cover everything,

{ from the irreducible element
of humanity (the most humble
life)
to the Cosmic Totality.

Fourth Day.

(Incarnation
God Incarnating Himself.

The birth of Christ. In order to be the Evolver,¹³ he must be evolving; consequently he must insert himself and recapitulate.¹⁴ A biological and psychic necessity for the supra-human Noosphere.¹⁵ If Christ had not entered through what is below, he would never have been able to force cosmic Immanence towards what is above, except if his Ego were to confuse itself with the Sum [fused!!] of elemental egos.¹⁶ –

¹³ See a sentence from a 1943 essay cited by Colwell in *The Teilhard Lexicon*, 76-77: 'To say that Christ is the term and mover of evolution—to say that he reveals himself as "evolver"—is to recognise that he becomes attainable in and through the whole process of evolution'.

¹⁴ See Ephesians 1: 10; Christ recapitulates the creation, gathers up all things in himself.

¹⁵ 'The spiritual (or thinking) layer of the world ... distinct from the biosphere, the non-spiritual (or non-thinking) layer ... represents as important an evolutionary leap forward as the atmosphere and hydrosphere.' (*Teilhard Lexicon*, 131)

¹⁶ The sense of this comment cannot be certain—but the use of *confondre* and *fusionée* with reference to the need for Christ's presence 'below' may allude to the Chalcedonian definition's 'without confusion'. If so, Teilhard is evoking the principle that the divinity and humanity of Christ, for all their inseparability, must remain distinct. In the introduction to the original edition, Gustave Martelet neatly summarises what is at stake in Teilhard's vision of Christ: 'Under the name of Omega, God is the One who dispossesses Himself in His Incarnation in order to make us, divinely, all the more ourselves—and not through some sort of evasion with regard to reality and the human, but through the medium of a real passage through both reality and the human.' (p. 13)

In all truth, quite simply, it is only God who can really help us, reach us at our root, interest Himself in us constantly and in a living way, heal us and save us from death—which is in fact to say: however surrounded we may be by people and friends, we are, each one of us, alone before God (the others not touching us or sustaining us except in function of God). = Application and mystery of Omegalization.

Fifth Day. Incarnation.	{ Our Lady – Purity Prayer
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– The universalisation of Our Lady *qua* woman. What about her? How is she to be ‘cosmified’? ... Queen of the Universe, however (or is it only of the Noosphere? ...): the whole question of the pluri-Incarnation of the Christ. ... Here obviously lies the great difficulty of Christ-Omega. In theory, there would need to be as many Christic¹⁷ forms as there are living Planets. Christianity cannot however be tied to the absolute uniqueness of humanity in the Universe! ... Quite independently of my personal *Weltanschauung*, there’s a problem here facing any Christian thought, even the most conservative. What now, then?

Here lies, here is revealed the difficulty ‘Christianity = Anthropocentrism’ ... This essential difficulty is in Anthropomonism (applying especially in the case of Mariology),¹⁸ and also in how we can admit that the Christic ego could still need to suffer in a future planet! ... So once again: how to detach Christology (and Mariology) from Anthropomonism? And everyone, I repeat, needs this. In one sense, science is less troubling in its formidable expansion of space-time than in the probability it establishes that Humanity is not the only thinking group existing in the Universe ...

¹⁷ In Teilhard’s vision, this adjective denotes ‘a fundamental energetic and transforming quality ... both a property of the universe and the spiritual sense that allows the believer to live by faith in the divine milieu’ (*Teilhard Lexicon*, 32).

¹⁸ ‘Anthropomonism’ refers to a claim that humanity is the only intelligent species in the universe, for Teilhard an implausible doctrine. It applies particularly to doctrine about Mary because of the dependence of such doctrine on the belief that Jesus Christ took flesh, human flesh, from her. Whatever adjustments to Christianity might be imaginable as a way of coping with intelligent life on other planets would leave Mariology without foundation.

There might be a Christic Ego that is pluri-incarnate. But there won't be any Marian Ego of that kind ... And, however, it is impossible that Christianity be essentially constructed for a Universe that has only one thinking form!¹⁹ ... Wouldn't that be Christianity's condemnation? ... Is the right attitude one of bowing down before a mystery that is currently insoluble—and to hold provisionally to a 'partial' line of truth? ... But that smacks of defeat.

Partial line, yes. But a line of progress, and if one follows it, one's view will broaden and clarify. What do we know about the coincidences and the things that come before and the things that come after in space-time? ...

Sixth Day. (Incarnation. Day of Confidence).

– Yes, the vertigo of fragility, of instability ... There remains the all-enveloping hand and the Heart of the Universal Christ. 'Come to me, once more, across the shifting, moving waters. Why be afraid, modicae fidei?'²⁰

– To make this retreat culminate in a complete gift to Christ-Omega, the Agent of Evolution; asking him to make me finish my life with the highest possible gesture for his glory and his revelation ... May my end spoil nothing, deny nothing, betray nothing; may it be the example of a perfect Super-Communion ... But, if my soul is 'pantheist', I'm such a bad 'subject' (in my physiological nature) for giving an example of calm and renunciation, and of gentle faith. If I make 'the gesture', it's that Our-Lord-Omega will make me make it—by a gracious intervention. – And this would be the seal that He recognises my effort.

As I wait:

<p><u>intrinsic</u> <u>extrinsic</u> and 'ahead'²¹</p>	}	<p>I feel myself <u>absolutely</u> dependent on Him, on His action of giving cohesion ...</p>
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¹⁹ '*pour un Univers mono-noïque*'.

²⁰ '[people] of little faith' (Matthew 14: 31).

²¹ 'intrinsically', 'extrinsically'; 'ahead' is written in English.

Seventh Day. – (Redemption.

Day of diminution in communion)

– To accept, to love, the fragility within – and age – with its long shadows, and its ever-diminishing perspectives ahead. Usque ad senectam ne me derelinquas, Domine ...²²

– To analyze and deepen the conditions of the highest possible²³ ‘communion’. Identifying with the other? By submission or capture? ... That my being may become His being. ...

Solution: along the lines of the laws of union. What I ‘bring to God’ is his ‘external being’, in so far as all that I am is an effect of union, engendered by union. – Created union
the movement constitutes²⁴ ↗

Eighth Day. – ‘Omegalization’, ‘Pleromization’

In one sense, isn’t there a ‘kind’ of fourth mystery in Christianity, distinct

from { Creation = generative side
 Incarnation = unitive side
 Redemption = labouring side

and synthesis—crowning of the three:

Pleromization = the supreme constitution of totalising Being
(the maximum of spirituality in the maximum of unification).

= It would seem yes ...

– Last meditation: the 3 consecrations:

1) *O Domina mea ...*

2) *Tu autem, Domine mi ...*

3) *Sume et suscipe.*²⁵

²² ‘Even to old age, do not forsake me, O Lord’; Teilhard is alluding to Psalm 71:18 in the Latin Vulgate.

²³ Teilhard uses the Latin *maxima*.

²⁴ Teilhard seems here to be struggling with issues of grace and good deeds, and to arrive at a classical formula of saying that our good deeds are the fruit of God’s grace in us. ‘The movement constitutes’ was added later, and a mark in the text points us to ‘created union’ as the object.

²⁵ Three prayers of consecration. The first is a traditional prayer of consecration to Mary. The second is a prayer to the Sacred Heart quoted in full at the culmination of ‘The Mass on the World’: ‘Lord,

Retreat Resolution

Clearly, I am going to enter a new and very different phase of my life. Perhaps the last? ... The grace of ending well, in the most effective manner for the prestige of Christ-Omega! ... The grace of graces.

An existence dominated by the unique passion of promoting the synthesis of Christ and the Universe. Therefore, love of both (most especially of Christ-Church, the supreme axis).

Fundamental attitude. The same: 'To supra-commune with the one who is coming (*Adveniat regnum tuum*), in reality (the Virtue of him who realises himself in Christ-Omega, his charm ...)

= During every day: a long act of active and passive pan-union. (The practice of love of Evolution)

– Place for the feminine influence of Our Lady ...

– Meditation drawn each day from something in the Office. Psalm, reading ...

Christmas: *Apparuit humanitas* ... S.H.²⁶

Masses²⁷ { 1) for the Cosmos [Cosmogenesis]
2) for the Noosphere (planetization)
3) for people close to me everywhere

2 Cor 5:4: *volumus super-vestiri*²⁸

(Evolution's Super-Charity)

lock me up in the deepest depths of your heart; and then, holding me there, burn me, purify me, set me on fire, sublimate me, till I become utterly what you would have me be, though the utter annihilation of my ego'. The third is the Ignatian 'Take, Lord, receive'.

²⁶ 'Humanity has appeared'. S.H. is thought to stand for *Super-Humanité*.

²⁷ A reference to Teilhard's Mass intentions for the three Christmas Day Masses.

²⁸ NRSV: 'We want to be further clothed'—but here Teilhard is using the Vulgate, with the nuance of 'super-clothed' or 'clothed from above', linked to his idiosyncratic usage of 'super' as a prefix to other common words.