

The Mass On The World – Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, S.J

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., was professor of geology at the Catholic Institute in Paris, director of the National Geologic Survey of China, and director of the National Research Center of France. He died in New York City in 1955.

His book Hymn of the Universe was published in 1961 by Harper & Row. Chapter One of the book was entitled The Mass on the World, reproduced below.

THE OFFERING

Since once again, Lord — though this time not in the forests of the Aisne but in the steppes of Asia — I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world.

Over there, on the horizon, the sun has just touched with light the outermost fringe of the eastern sky. Once again, beneath this moving sheet of fire, the living surface of the earth wakes and trembles, and once again begins its fearful travail. I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won by this renewal of labour. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth's fruits.

My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit. Grant me the remembrance and the mystic presence of all those whom the light is now awakening to the new day.

One by one, Lord, I see and I love all those whom you have given me to sustain and charm my life. One by one also I number all those who make up that other beloved family which has gradually surrounded me, its unity fashioned out of the most disparate elements, with affinities of the heart, of scientific research and of thought. And again one by one — more vaguely it is true, yet all-inclusively — I call before me the whole vast anonymous army of living humanity; those who surround me and support me though I do not know them; those who come, and those who go; above all, those who in office, laboratory and factory, through their vision of truth or despite their error, truly believe in the progress of earthly reality and who today will take up again their impassioned pursuit of the light.

This restless multitude, confused or orderly, the immensity of which terrifies us; this ocean of humanity whose slow, monotonous wave-flows trouble the hearts even of those whose faith is most firm: it is to this deep that I thus desire all the fibres of my being should respond. All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to you in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material you desire.

Once upon a time men took into your temple the first fruits of their harvests, the flower of their flocks. But the offering you really want, the offering you mysteriously need every day to appease your hunger, to slake your thirst is nothing less than the growth of the world borne ever onwards in the stream of universal becoming.

Receive, O Lord, this all-embracing host which your whole creation, moved by your magnetism, offers you at this dawn of a new day.

This bread, our toil, is of itself, I know, but an immense fragmentation; this wine, our pain, is no more, I know, than a draught that dissolves. Yet in the very depths of this formless mass you have implanted — and this I am sure of, for I sense it — a desire, irresistible, hallowing, which makes us cry out, believer and unbeliever alike:

‘Lord, make us *one*.’

Because, my God, though I lack the soul-zeal and the sublime integrity of your saints, I yet have received from you an overwhelming sympathy for all that stirs within the dark mass of matter; because I know myself to be irremediably less a child of heaven than a son of earth; therefore I will this morning climb up in spirit to the high places, bearing with me the hopes and the miseries of my mother; and there — empowered by that priesthood which you alone (as I firmly believe) have bestowed on me — upon all that in the world of human flesh is now about to be born or to die beneath the rising sun I will call down the Fire.

FIRE OVER THE EARTH

Fire, the source of being: we cling so tenaciously to the illusion that fire comes forth from the depths of the earth and that its flames grow progressively brighter as it pours along the radiant furrows of life’s tillage. Lord, in your mercy you gave me to see that this idea is false, and that I must overthrow it if I were ever to have sight of you.

In the beginning was *Power*, intelligent, loving, energizing. In the beginning was the *Word*, supremely capable of mastering and moulding whatever might come into being in the world of matter. In the beginning there were not coldness and darkness: there was the *Fire*. This is the truth.

So, far from light emerging gradually out of the womb of our darkness, it is the Light, existing before all else was made which, patiently, surely, eliminates our darkness. As for us creatures, of ourselves we are but emptiness and obscurity. But you, my God, are the inmost depths, the stability of that eternal *milieu*, without duration or space, in which our cosmos emerges gradually into being and grows gradually to its final completeness, as it loses those boundaries which to our eyes seem so immense. Everything is being; everywhere there is being and nothing but being, save in the fragmentation of creatures and the clash of their atoms.

Blazing Spirit, Fire, personal, super-substantial, the consummation of a union so immeasurably more lovely and more desirable than that destructive fusion of which all the pantheists dream: be pleased yet once again to come down and breathe a soul into the newly formed, fragile film of matter with which this day the world is to be freshly clothed.

I know we cannot forestall, still less dictate to you, even the smallest of your actions; from you alone comes all initiative — and this applies in the first place to my prayer.

Radiant Word, blazing Power, you who mould the manifold so as to breathe your life into it; I pray you, lay on us those your hands — powerful, considerate, omnipresent, those hands which do not (like our human hands) touch now here, now there, but which plunge into the depths and the totality, present and past, of things so as to reach us simultaneously through all that is most immense and most inward within us and around us.

May the might of those invincible hands direct and transfigure for the great world you have in mind that earthly travail which I have gathered into my heart and now offer you in its entirety. Remould it, rectify it, recast it down to the depths from whence it springs. You know how your creatures can come into being only, like shoot from stem, as part of an endlessly renewed process of evolution.

Do you now therefore, speaking through my lips, pronounce over this earthly travail your twofold efficacious word: the word without which all that our wisdom and our experience have built up must totter and crumble — the word through which all our most far-reaching speculations and our encounter with the universe are come together into a unity. Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: This is my Body. And over every death-force which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words which express the supreme mystery of faith: This is my Blood.¹

FIRE IN THE EARTH

It is done.

Once again the Fire has penetrated the earth.

Not with sudden crash of thunderbolt, riving the mountain-tops: does the Master break down doors to enter his own home? Without earthquake, or thunderclap: the flame has lit up the whole world from within. All things individually and collectively are penetrated and flooded by it, from the inmost core of the tiniest atom to the mighty sweep of the most universal laws of being: so naturally has it flooded every element, every energy, every connecting-link in the unity of our cosmos; that one might suppose the cosmos to have burst spontaneously into flame.

In the new humanity which is begotten today the Word prolongs the unending act of his own birth; and by virtue of his immersion in the world's womb the great waters of the kingdom of matter have, without even a ripple, been endued with life. No visible tremor marks this inexpressible transformation; and yet, mysteriously and in very truth, at the touch of the supersubstantial Word the immense host which is the universe is made flesh. Through your own incarnation, my God, all matter is henceforth incarnate.

Through our thoughts and our human experiences, we long ago became aware of the strange properties which make the universe so like our flesh:

like the flesh it attracts us by the charm which lies in the mystery of its curves and folds and in the depths of its eyes;

like the flesh it disintegrates and eludes us when submitted to our analyses or to our failings off and in the process of its own perdurance;

as with the flesh, it can only be embraced in the endless reaching out to attain what lies beyond the confines of what has been given to us.

All of us, Lord, from the moment we are born feel within us this disturbing mixture of remoteness and nearness; and in our heritage of sorrow and hope, passed down to us though the ages, there is no yearning more desolate than that which makes us weep with vexation and desire as we stand in the midst of the Presence which hovers about us nameless and impalpable and is indwelling in all things. *Si forte attrahent eum.*²

Now, Lord, though the consecration of the world the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face — in you. What my mind glimpsed through its hesitant explorations, what my heart craved with so little expectation of fulfilment, you now magnificently unfold for me: the fact that your creatures are not merely so linked together in solidarity that none can exist unless all the rest surround it, but that all are so dependent on a single central reality that a true life, borne in common by them all, gives them ultimately their consistence and their unity.

Shatter, my God, though the daring of your revelation the childishly timid outlook that can conceive of nothing greater or more vital in the world than the pitiable perfection of our human organism. On the road to a bolder comprehension of the universe the children of this world day by day outdistance the masters of Israel; but do you, Lord Jesus, 'in whom all things subsist', show yourself to those who love you as the higher Soul and the physical centre of your creation. Are you not well aware that for us this is a question of life or death? As for me, if I could not believe that your real Presence animates and makes tractable and endless even the very least of the energies which invade me or brush past me, would I not die of cold?

I thank you, my God, for having in a thousand different ways led my eyes to discover the immense simplicity of things. Little by little, though the irresistible development of those yearnings you implanted in me as a child, through the influence of gifted friends who entered my life at certain moments to bring light and strength to my mind, and through the awakenings of spirit I owe to the successive initiations, gentle and terrible, which you caused me to undergo: through all these I have been brought to the point where I can no longer see anything, nor any longer breathe, outside that *milieu* in which all is made one.

At this moment when your life has just poured with superabundant vigour into the sacrament of the world, I shall savour with heightened consciousness the intense yet tranquil rapture of a vision whose coherence and harmonies I can never exhaust.

What I experience as I stand in face of — and in the very depths of — this world which your flesh has assimilated, this world which has become your flesh, my God, is not the absorption of the monist who yearns to be dissolved into the unity of things, nor the emotion felt by the pagan as he lies prostrate before a tangible divinity, nor yet the passive self-abandonment of the quietist tossed hither and thither at the mercy of mystical impulses. From each of these modes of thought I take something of their motive force while avoiding their pitfalls: the approach determined for me by your omnipresence is a wonderful synthesis wherein three of the most formidable passions that can unlock the human heart rectify each other as they mingle: like the monist I plunge into the all-inclusive One; but the One is so perfect that as it receives me and I lose myself in it I can find in it the ultimate perfection of my own individuality;

like the pagan I worship a God who can be touched; and I do indeed touch him — this God — over the whole surface and in the depths of that world of matter which confines me: but to take hold of him as I would wish (simply in order not to stop touching him), I must go always on and on through and beyond each undertaking, unable to rest in anything, borne onwards at each moment by creatures and at each moment going beyond them, in a continuing welcoming of them and a continuing detachment from them; like the quietist I allow myself with delight to be cradled in the divine fantasy: but at the same time I know that the divine will, will only be revealed to me at each moment if I exert myself to the utmost: I shall only touch God in the world of matter, when, like Jacob, I have been vanquished by him.

Thus, because the ultimate objective, the totality to which my nature is attuned has been made manifest to me, the powers of my being begin spontaneously to vibrate in accord with a single note of incredible richness wherein I can distinguish the most discordant tendencies effortlessly resolved: the excitement of action and the delight of passivity: the joy of possessing and the thrill of reaching out beyond what one possesses; the pride in growing and the happiness of being lost in what is greater than oneself.

Rich with the sap of the world, I rise up towards the Spirit whose vesture is the magnificence of the material universe but who smiles at me from far beyond all victories; and, lost in the mystery of the flesh of God, I cannot tell which is the more radiant bliss: to have found the Word and so be able to achieve the mastery of matter, or to have mastered matter and so be able to attain and submit to the light of God.

Grant, Lord, that your descent into the universal Species may not be for me just something loved and cherished, like the fruit of some philosophical speculation, but may become for me truly a real Presence. Whether we like it or not by power and by right you are incarnate in the world, and we are all of us dependent upon you. But in fact you are far, and how far, from being equally close to us all. We are all of us together carried in the one world-womb; yet each of us is our own little microcosm in which the Incarnation is wrought independently with degrees of intensity, and shades that are incommunicable. And that is why, in our prayer at the altar, we ask that the consecration may be brought about *for us: Ut nobis Corpus et Sanguis fiat.* . .³ If I firmly believe that everything around me is the body and blood of the Word,⁴ then for me (and in one sense for me alone) is brought about that marvellous 'diaphany' which causes the luminous warmth of a single life to be objectively discernible in and to shine forth from the depths of every event, every element: whereas if, unhappily, my faith should flag, at once the light is quenched and everything becomes darkened, everything disintegrates.

You have come down, Lord, into this day which is now beginning. But alas, how infinitely different in degree is your presence for one and another of us in the events which are now preparing and which all of us together will experience! In the very same circumstances which are soon to surround me and my fellow-men you may be present in small measure, in great measure, more and more or not at all.

Therefore, Lord, that no poison may harm me this day, no death destroy me, no wine befuddle me, that in every creature I may discover and sense you, I beg you: give me faith.

COMMUNION

If the Fire has come down into the heart of the world it is, in the last resort, to lay hold on me and to absorb me. Henceforth I cannot be content simply to contemplate it or, by my steadfast faith, to intensify its ardency more and more in the world around me. What I must do, when I have taken part with all my energies in the consecration which causes its flames to leap forth, is to consent to the communion which will enable it to find in me the food it has come in the last resort to seek.

So, my God, I prostrate myself before your presence in the universe which has now become living flame: beneath the lineaments of all that I shall encounter this day, all that happens to me, all that I achieve, it is you I desire, you I await.

It is a terrifying thing to have been born: I mean, to find oneself, without having willed it, swept irrevocably along on a torrent of fearful energy which seems as though it wished to destroy everything it carries with it.

What I want, my God, is that by a reversal of forces which you alone can bring about, my terror in face of the nameless changes destined to renew my being may be turned into an overflowing joy at being transformed into you.

First of all I shall stretch out my hand unhesitatingly towards the fiery bread which you set before me. This bread, in which you have planted the seed of all that is to develop in the future, I recognize as containing the source and the secret of that destiny you have chosen for me. To take it is, I know, to surrender myself to forces which will tear me away painfully from myself in order to drive me into danger, into laborious undertakings, into a constant renewal of ideas, into an austere detachment where my affections are concerned. To eat it is to acquire a taste and an affinity for that which in everything is above everything — a taste and an affinity which will henceforward make impossible for me all the joys by which my life has been warmed. Lord Jesus, I am willing to be possessed by you, to be bound to your body and led by its inexpressible power towards those solitary heights which by myself I should never dare to climb. Instinctively, like all mankind, I would rather set up my tent here below on some hill-top of my own choosing. I am afraid, too, like all my fellow-men, of the future too heavy with mystery and too wholly new, towards which time is driving me. Then like these men I wonder anxiously where life is leading me . . . May this communion of bread with the Christ clothed in the powers which dilate the world free me from my timidities and my heedlessness! In the whirlpool of conflicts and energies out of which must develop my power to apprehend and experience your holy presence, I throw myself, my God, on your word. The man who is filled with an impassioned love of Jesus hidden in the forces which bring increase to the earth, him the earth will lift up, like a mother, in the immensity of her arms, and will enable him to contemplate the face of God.

If your kingdom, my God, were of this world, I could possess you simply by surrendering myself to the forces which cause us, through suffering and dying, to grow visibly in stature — us or that which is dearer to us than ourselves. But because the term towards which the earth is moving lies not merely beyond each individual thing but beyond the totality of things; because the world travails, not to bring forth from within itself some supreme reality, but to find its consummation through a union with a pre-existent Being; it follows that man can never reach the blazing centre of the universe simply by living more and more for himself nor even by spending his life in the service of some earthly cause however great. The world can never be definitively united with you, Lord, save by a sort of reversal, a turning about, an *excentration*, which must involve the temporary collapse not merely of all individual achievements but even of everything that looks like an advancement for humanity. If my being is ever to be decisively attached to yours, there must first die in me not merely the monad ego but also the world: in other words I must first pass through an agonizing phase of diminution for which no tangible compensation will be given me. That is why, pouring into my chalice the bitterness of all separations, of all limitations, and of all sterile failings away, you then hold it out to me. 'Drink ye all of this.'

How could I refuse this chalice, Lord, now that through the bread you have given me there has crept into the marrow of my being an inextinguishable longing to be united with you beyond life; through death? The consecration of the world would have remained incomplete, a moment ago, had you not with

special love vitalized for those who believe, not only the life-bringing forces, but also those which bring death. My communion would be incomplete — would, quite simply, not be

Christian — if, together with the gains which this new day brings me, I did not also accept, in my own name and in the name of the world as the most immediate sharing in your own being, those processes, hidden or manifest, of enfeeblement, of ageing, of death, which unceasingly consume the universe, to its salvation or its condemnation. My God, I deliver myself up with utter abandon to those fearful forces of dissolution which, I blindly believe, will this day cause my narrow ego to be replaced by your divine presence. The man who is filled with an impassioned love for Jesus hidden in the forces which bring death to the earth, him the earth will clasp in the immensity of her arms as her strength fails, and with her he will awaken in the bosom of God.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, now that beneath those world-forces you have become truly and physically everything for me, everything about me, everything within me, I shall gather into a single prayer both my delight in what I have and my thirst for what I lack; and following the lead of your great servant I shall repeat those enflamed words in which, I firmly believe, the Christianity of tomorrow will find its increasingly clear portrayal:

‘Lord, 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.’⁵

*Tu autem, Domine mi, include me in imis visceribus Cordis tui. Atque ibi me detine, excoque, expurga, accende, ignifac, sublima, ad purissimum Cordis tui gustum atque placitum, ad puram annihilationem meam.*⁶

‘Lord.’ Yes, at last, though the twofold mystery of this universal consecration and communion I have found one to whom I can wholeheartedly give this name. As long as I could see — or dared see — in you, Lord Jesus, only the man who lived two thousand years ago, the sublime moral teacher, the Friend, the Brother, my love remained timid and constrained. Friends, brothers, wise men: have we not many of these around us, great souls, chosen souls, and much closer to us? And then can man ever give himself utterly to a nature which is purely human? Always from the very first it was the world, greater than all the elements which make up the world, that I was in love with; and never before was there anyone before whom I could in honesty bow down. And so for a long time, even though I believed, I strayed, not knowing what it was I loved. But now, Master, today, when though the manifestation of those superhuman powers with which your resurrection endowed you you shine forth from within all the forces of the earth and so become visible to me, now I recognize you as my Sovereign, and with delight I surrender myself to you.

How strange, my God, are the processes your Spirit initiates! When, two centuries ago, your Church began to feel the particular power of your heart, it might have seemed that what was captivating men’s souls was the fact of their finding in you an element even more determinate, more circumscribed, than your humanity as a whole. But now on the contrary a swift reversal is making us aware that your main purpose in this revealing to us of your heart was to enable our love to escape from the constrictions of the too narrow, too precise, too limited image of you which we had fashioned for ourselves. What I

discern in your breast is simply a furnace of fire; and the more I fix my gaze on its ardency the more it seems to me that all around it the contours of your body melt away and become enlarged beyond all measure, till the only features I can distinguish in you are those of the face of a world which has burst into flame.

Glorious Lord Christ: the divine influence secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter, and the dazzling centre where all the innumerable fibres of the manifold meet; power as implacable as the world and as warm as life; you whose forehead is of the whiteness of snow, whose eyes are of fire, and whose feet are brighter than molten gold; you whose hands imprison the stars; you who are the first and the last, the living and the dead and the risen again; you who gather into your exuberant unity every beauty, every affinity, every energy, every mode of existence; it is you to whom my being cried out with a desire as vast as the universe, 'In truth you are my Lord and my God.'

'Lord, lock me up within you': yes indeed I believe — and this belief is so strong that it has become one of the supports of my inner life — that an 'exterior darkness' which was wholly outside you would be pure nothingness. Nothing, Lord Jesus, can subsist outside of your flesh; so that even those who have been cast out from your love are still, unhappily for them, the beneficiaries of your presence upholding them in existence. All of us, inescapably, exist in you, the universal *milieu* in which and through which all things live and have their being. But precisely because we are not self-contained ready-made entities which can be conceived equally well as being near to you or remote from you; precisely because in us the self-subsistent individual who is united to you grows only insofar as the union itself grows, that union whereby we are given more and more completely to you: I beg you, Lord, in the name of all that is most vital in my being, to hearken to the desire of this thing that I dare to call my soul even though I realize more and more every day how much greater it is than myself, and, to slake my thirst for life, draw me — through the successive zones of your deepest substance — into the secret recesses of your inmost heart.

The deeper the level at which one encounters you, Master, the more one realizes the universality of your influence. This is the criterion by which I can judge at each moment how far I have progressed within you. When all the things around me, while preserving their own individual contours, their own special savours, nevertheless appear to me as animated by a single secret spirit and therefore as diffused and intermingled within a single element, infinitely close, infinitely remote; and when, locked within the jealous intimacy of a divine sanctuary, I yet feel myself to be wandering at large in the empyrean of all created beings: then I shall know that I am approaching that central point where the heart of the world is caught in the descending radiance of the heart of God.

And then, Lord, at that point where all things are set ablaze, do you act upon me through the united flames of all those internal and external influences which, were I less close to you, would be neutral or ambivalent or hostile, but which when animated by an Energy *quae possit sibi omnia subjicere*⁷ become, in the physical depths of your heart, the angels of your triumphant activity. Though a marvellous combination of your divine magnetism with the charm and the inadequacy of creatures, with their sweetness and their malice, their disappointing weakness and their terrifying power, do you fill my heart alternately with exaltation and with distaste; teach it the true meaning of purity: not a debilitating separation from all created reality but an impulse carrying one through all forms of created beauty; show it the true nature of charity: not a sterile fear of doing wrong but a vigorous determination that all of us together shall break open the doors of life; and give it finally — give it above all — though an ever-

increasing awareness of your omnipresence, a blessed desire to go on advancing, discovering, fashioning and experiencing the world so as to penetrate ever further and further into yourself.

For me, my God, all joy and all achievement, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on this one basic vision of the union between yourself and the universe. Let others, fulfilling a function more august than mine, proclaim your splendours as pure Spirit; as for me, dominated as I am by a vocation which springs from the inmost fibres of my being, I have no desire, I have no ability, to proclaim anything except the innumerable prolongations of your incarnate Being in the world of matter; I can preach only the mystery of your flesh, you the Soul shining forth though all that surrounds us.

It is to your body in this its fullest extension — that is, to the world become through your power and my faith the glorious living crucible in which everything melts away in order to be born anew; it is to this that I dedicate myself with all the resources which your creative magnetism has brought forth in me: with the all too feeble resources of my scientific knowledge, with my religious vows, with my priesthood, and (most dear to me) with my deepest human convictions. It is in this dedication, Lord Jesus, I desire to live, in this I desire to die.

Ordos 1923

NOTES:

1. As was pointed out in the *Introduction*, there is no confusion here between transubstantiation in the strict sense and the universal presence of the Word: as the author states explicitly in *Le Pretre*, 'The central mystery of transubstantiation is aureoled by a divinization, real though attenuated, of all the universe.' From the cosmic element into which he has entered through his incarnation and in which he dwells eucharistically, 'the Word acts upon everything else to subdue and assimilate it to himself.' (Ed.'s note.)
2. 'That they [all mankind] should seek God, if happily they may feel after him or find him. . .' (Acts 17.27.)
3. 'That it may become for us the Body and Blood of your dearly loved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.'
4. Through the 'physical and overmastering' contact of him whose appanage it is to be able *omnia sibi subicere* ['to subdue all things unto Himself.' Phil. 3.21]. (*Le Milieu Divin*, Eng. trans. p.114.)
5. The term 'ego' is used here (in contrast to the 'true self') to denote the proud, defiant self-reliance, the attempted autonomy, of man in revolt against God. Only through the death of the ego can the true self be liberated; for man is truly himself only when he has replaced his egocentricity by theocentricity and thus found his true self by looking for it in God, in whom alone we 'live and move and have our being'. (Tr.'s note.)
6. 'And thou, my Lord, enfold me in the depths of thy Heart. And there keep me, refine, purge, kindle, set on fire, raise aloft, according to the most pure desire of thy Heart, and for my Cleansing extinction.'
7. 'Which is able to subdue all things unto itself.'