

THOMAS MERTON ON PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

—by **Thomas M. King, S.J.**

I

In the summer of 1966 five books by Teilhard had been published in the United States and his name was widely mentioned in Catholic circles. In September Thomas Merton allowed that he had not read much of Teilhard. He explained the reason: an article that he had written on Teilhard's *DIVINE MILIEU* had been turned down by the Cistercian censors; Merton commented wryly, "Teilhard too wicked." He added, "I was not sufficiently concerned to read him when I could do nothing with it — and not sold enough on him to read him for pure illumination and uplift."

Most of Merton's reading at this time was background for his own writing on violence and non-violence. But in June of 1967 Merton took eighteen pages of notes on DeLubac's *THE RELIGION OF TEILHARD*. He wrote a review of the book emphasizing that a theologian of DeLubac's stature had found Teilhard perfectly orthodox and was greatly concerned with "the urgent business" of his defense. Merton tells of Teilhard's "fidelity to the traditional ideas of religious obedience" and adds that "the censors did more than anyone else to confer on Teilhard the aura of charismatic authority." In highlighting these themes Merton was probably trying to make his own point with Cistercian censors. In any case, his review was published in *COMMONWEAL* not long after it was written.¹

Merton's knowledge of Teilhard would seem to be based on reading *THE DIVINE MILIEU*, DeLubac's study, Zaehner's *MATTER AND SPIRIT*, and numerous references appearing in the popular press.²

Teilhard had become the guiding spirit of activists in the post-Vatican II Church. Some of these used Teilhard to suggest that the monastic way of life no longer had a place. Merton resisted this unrestricted activism. He was pleased with the long section on passivities in *THE DIVINE MILIEU*. In his review he pointed to these passages and in reference to page 79 wrote:

No finer and more contemplative page has been written in our century. And it gives us the key to the mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin, showing us that in this above all he is an authentic witness to the Christian tradition.

In his correspondence Merton insisted on several occasions that what Teilhard said was different from what his activist followers were making of him. He would also argue that Teilhard himself would not have thought of himself as quite so original if he had read more widely in the tradition.

Merton would soften Teilhard's enthusiastic support of evolution by speaking of his "mitigated evolutionism." In his private notebook he quoted a line of Teilhard and called it "metaphysical gibberish and romanticism," but then excused the line as "subjective and aesthetic." He was not pleased with Teilhard's enthusiasm for technology, but he was gentle in expressing his own difference.

II

Those familiar with Merton know that he died in Bangkok shortly after giving a major talk on Christian monasticism. In this talk he again mentioned Teilhard. There he praised Teilhard for two qualities that had become significant concerns of his own during the final years of his life. The first quality was that Teilhard "takes matter into account as basic." Several years earlier Merton had focused on a similar value: "The real importance of Teilhard is his affirmation of the 'holiness of matter,' and this is the reason that some Christians are shocked by him." Merton himself had not always seen matter as basic or affirmed it was holy. He would look back on his early years and say that he had "concentrated on a kind of angelism in contemplation." He was pleased that monks had "a sensual contact with matter;" their hands were "in the fruitful dirt;" they were more "directly in contact with matter than other religious." One of Merton's biographers, Monica Furlong, has pointed out that he was in the monastery for several years before he began taking an interest in nature.

His interest in matter can be seen by the style of his photography: he showed the texture of weather-beaten rocks and the grain of dried old wood. In the Spring of 1967 he read a life of Neils Bohr. He judged Bohr to be a hero for developing a way "to understand what is happening in matter." Merton added with regret that he could not understand what Bohr was saying as he had studied no physics. But he sympathized with Bohr for realizing "that the basic constitution of matter could not be fitted into abstract categories." This sense of the reality of matter apart from all categories and concepts is as good a way as any for understanding what Merton meant by Zen. He would sum up the message of Zen as "Don't think; Look!" He called his camera a Zen camera.

Teilhard had praised matter for a similar quality; it draws us out of attenuations, abstractions and the wordiness of social life. It gives us a 'point d'appui' apart from the conventions of language. See his essay, 'The Spiritual Power of Matter.'

The second quality of Teilhard that Merton commended in Bangkok was that Teilhard wrote a message that was accepted by scientists and Marxists. Again this touches on a quality that appears only in the later Merton. Earlier he had claimed that "the contemplative and the Marxist have no common ground." *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN* had a narrow focus on monasticism, a facile critique of Protestants, and pictured most of American society as confused in self-contradictory hungers. He wrote of "the indignity of being a member of the human race as opposed to a soul fully liberated in Christ." But gradually Merton came to speak of the illusion of regarding the monk as living a holy existence apart. He would proclaim: "It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race." He would write his apologies to unbelievers: "I recognize that I have been standing on your foot, and I am now at last getting off." He eventually reached out to Asian religions, to California hippies and to Marxists, and he did so to such an extent that many of his Catholic followers were confused.

Teilhard was long concerned with speaking to those outside of Catholicism. In one of his early essays he had prayed to "be more widely human in my sympathies and more nobly terrestrial in my ambitions than any of the world's servants." It is this sense for humanity and the earth that enabled a great diversity of readers to identify with him. It was also this sense for the 'human race' and for 'matter' that emerged in the later years of Merton's writing and extended the range of his admirers.

III

But there was also a basic theme that Merton and Teilhard long had in common: the Mystical Body of Christ as embracing humanity. Merton had a sense for this since reading Leon Bloy before he entered the monastery. Even SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION with its call to solitude and withdrawal from the world has a strong sense of the Mystical Body. Its chapter titles proclaim 'We are One Man,' but now the Christ is 'A Body of Broken Bones.' An early pamphlet that he wrote for the monastery explains that "the monk's job is to collaborate with his brothers in forming One Person — the Mystical Christ."

Teilhard's fundamental message was that through all of the events of the earth One Person, the Mystical Christ, is being formed. Though his life was busy and active he still felt deeply his solitude. But Teilhard saw Christ uniting souls at this level apart from the differences that are evident. He would often speak of Christ as the deeper identity or deeper being of humanity. Several weeks before his death Merton asked a group of monks from diverse traditions to join hands as he prayed: "O God . . . we adore you and we love you with our whole being, because our being is in your Being, our spirit is rooted in your Spirit."

Both Merton and Teilhard had entered into the mysterious depths of themselves to find a loving Person drawing them together in a common humanity. Because of this similar awareness they both spoke of the Mystical Body of Christ; and they spoke of it in such a way that we have come to call them mystics. It is no wonder that Merton would find in Teilhard a "sympathetic character," and minimize their differences: "my own approach tends to be from another angle, due to circumstances of temperament, personal history, and so forth."

¹ Both Merton's original reflection on THE DIVINE MILIEU and the review of DeLubac's book are now published in LOVE AND LIVING. For other published references to Teilhard see, CONTEMPLATION IN A WORLD OF ACTION, 27, 51, 55, 56, 76, 94, 168; FAITH AND VIOLENCE, 284-286; SEED OF DESTRUCTION, 221-222; MYSTICS AND ZEN MASTERS, 3-12; ASIAN JOURNAL, 331. Henri DeLubac is a Jesuit priest and was a long-time friend of Teilhard. He once had restrictions on what he could publish on Teilhard. These were removed in December 1961 and DeLubac's carefully argued assessment soon appeared. He has since written three other studies of Teilhard and has been made a cardinal.

² EDITOR'S NOTE: In a letter written June 14, 1967, Merton said: "I do not take Genesis to be a literal scientific account of how everything began. It is poetic and symbolic, and that is how I myself take it in THE NEW MAN . . . As to evolution, I accept this scientific theory pretty much as everyone else does today. You are free if you like to read the books of Teilhard de Chardin which take this approach, but I personally do not have complete confidence in everything he says. But he is interesting."

Thomas M. King, a Jesuit teaching at Georgetown University, has written TEILHARD'S MYSTICISM OF KNOWING (Seabury, 1981) and edited TEILHARD AND THE UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE (Paulist, 1983). He is also the author of "The Writer Loses Himself; a Study of Thomas Merton," CHICAGO STUDIES (1985). From his study of Teilhard he believes that Teilhard never read any Merton, but was aware of him. Though Merton's reading of Teilhard was limited, his numerous allusions to Teilhard give an interesting picture of his own concerns in the final years of his life. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a Jesuit priest and paleontologist; because of Church restrictions his religious and philosophical writings were not published until after his death.