

Across the Gulf of Seven Hundred Years: Aquinas and Teilhard's Metaphysics of Union

DONALD WAYNE VINEY

The priests shook hands, then stood together for a few moments, nodding across the gulf of seven hundred years, and chatted about Auvergne.¹

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) never dwelt on the mechanisms by which evolution might be accomplished, but he became convinced that evolution had ceased to be one hypothesis among others. He said, and said often, that evolution is more than a hypothesis; it is the key to unlocking reality, a condition to which all forms of knowledge must conform.² Moreover, as evolution had transformed the world of science, so too, he claimed, it cannot help but add a new dimension to all of our thinking, including metaphysics. His sketches of a metaphysics of union were his answer to what “first philosophy” would look like as informed by evolutionary perspectives. These ideas put Teilhard on a collision course with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church of his day. It did not help that his popularity, especially in Paris after the second World War, made him a *cause célèbre*. One enthusiastic journalist classified him as an “eminent theologian,” which amused Teilhard and his friends but was no laughing matter to Thomists who were critical of his views.³

¹ Mary Lukas and Ellen Lukas, *Teilhard: A Biography*, New Annotated Edition (McGraw-Hill, 1981), 272. The Lukas sisters are describing a brief meeting of Teilhard and the Thomist theologian who was critical of Teilhard's work, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964). Both were from Auvergne. Teilhard had gone to Rome in October 1948 in a finally unsuccessful attempt to seek permission to publish *Le Phénomène humain*.

² This is a constant theme in Teilhard's work from at least 1921 until 1954. See, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harper and Row, 1966), 25, 87, 127, 246; *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 152; *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 139; *Science and Christ*, trans. René Hague (Harper & Row, 1968), 193; and *The Appearance of Man*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harper & Row, 1965), 211.

³ Upon Teilhard's return to Paris after the war, a Dean of Students remarked that if you want to fill a room at the risk of a lot of broken chairs, invite Jean-Paul Sartre or Father Teilhard. René d'Ouince, *Un Prophète en procès: Teilhard de Chardin dans l'Église de son temps* (Aubier-Montaigne, 1970), 149, 160.