

Catching Fire!

A Teilhardian Discussion Process for Parishes



Developed by Anita Wood, DMin

Catching Fire!

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“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire.”

– Pierre Teilhard De Chardin



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Catching Fire!

Introduction

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire.”

— Pierre

Teilhard De Chardin



Goal of “Catching Fire”

The overall goal of “Catching Fire” is growth in consciousness, which includes personal awareness of oneself (one’s own center), others, the cosmos, and the spiritual dimension of life (a shared divine Center). In particular, this resource’s goal will be accomplished as the participants gain:

- Familiarity with the core spiritual themes and evolutionary principles of Teilhard de Chardin, which integrate science and faith
- Practice in contemplative dialogue skills within a small group
- An introduction of spiritual practices which enhance spiritual consciousness

Participation

Participants who will benefit from this program:

1. Spiritual seekers interested in integrating ideas from evolutionary science and faith
2. Persons who want to experience evolutionary principles applied to spiritual growth within a group setting
3. Persons who want to explore evolving theological ideas and language
4. Christians or non-Christians open to learning from Teilhard de Chardin and one another for the purposes of personal growth
5. People concerned with growth in unity and consciousness on our planet

Ideally, there should be 4 to 8 people in a dialogue group, so that there is breadth of sharing but also adequate time for every person to express themselves within a 1 ½ -hour period. The process includes prayer, reading together a short selection focusing on one of Teilhard’s ideas, brief discussion of that material for greater clarity, quiet reflection time and personal consideration of some questions related to the material, and contemplative dialogue within the small group about the meaning and applications of Teilhard’s ideas for each participant.

Teilhard de Chardin believed that learning to come together as one mind and heart was the future of human evolution. This does not mean that all agree, but that all respectfully bring to the circle the unique gift of perspective each has to offer. Learning to fruitfully dialogue as part of a group in which all the members are seeking greater consciousness and spiritual growth is just as important as the content that the group is exploring. Together, through dialogue, greater understanding of reality is gained and the forward movement toward unity accelerated.



Catching Fire!

1. Seeing with New Eyes: The Experience of Wonder

LARGE GROUP

1. Opening Prayer (facilitator leads)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (participants take turns reading paragraphs)

In France of 1881, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born to parents who introduced him to his two great loves. Teilhard’s father, an amateur naturalist, often took the child with him to collect rocks, insects and plants, introducing Teilhard to the wonders of the natural world. Teilhard’s mother was a devoted Christian, with a special devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a symbol of radiating divine love. She nurtured young Teilhard’s faith, which included sending him to a Jesuit school. Describing his childhood, Teilhard recalled that the world gradually “caught fire” for him, “becoming luminous, lit from within,” as he saw God’s own Heart at the heart of matter. He likened this “Diaphany [or sacred shining] of the Divine at the heart of a glowing universe” to the Burning Bush that Moses encountered in the desert - “the Divine radiating from the depths of a blazing Matter.”¹

Through Teilhard’s eyes, God was at the depth of all creation. He could feel God enveloping him in the world as a whole. He describes his own experience as glimpsing something behind “a song, a sunbeam, a glance”² - a presence existing everywhere.

Teilhard felt an affinity with the sky, the sea, and the earth - a solidarity with every creature, for at the center of every being was a spark of God, joining all things together at their deepest point. In fact, Teilhard saw matter and spirit as two aspects of every created thing. Over time, Teilhard saw matter becoming increasingly expressed as Spirit or Consciousness. He wrote, “Through the centuries, a general plan appears truly to be in course of realization around us. Something is afoot in the universe; a result is working out which can best be compared to a gestation and birth: the birth of a spiritual reality.”³

For Teilhard, there was no need to distinguish between natural and supernatural happenings in daily life. The entire cosmos exists in God, though God is even greater than the cosmos. Grace, or active divine presence, impregnates nature with possibility at every turn, through both the predictability and the chance within nature. According to Teilhard, “Grace is the unique sap passing from a single trunk into the branches; blood flowing into the veins from the pumping of a single heart.”⁴

Coming to consciousness of our connectedness to the world around us and awakening to the wonder of God in all creation is the first step in Teilhard’s spirituality. Being aware of the dynamic nature of the universe and feeling oneself a part of that adventure is a basic spiritual practice. Beholding in awe the mysterious vastness of space and time and knowing ourselves bathed in God’s pervasive presence is mindfulness in its most religious sense.

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 16.

² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1968), 117.

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 49.

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 304.

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard's ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *Recall moments when the Earth has "caught fire" for you, when you have experienced wonder and awe at creation and sensed depth, mystery or divinity within creation.*
- b. *How have science and religion/faith both played a part (if they have) in your sense of what is true, meaningful, beautiful or holy?*
- c. *What is your experience of God's deep, working presence (grace) within, like sap passing through a tree or blood pumping throughout a body?*

5. Basic Guidelines for Speaking in Contemplative Dialogue

Read the guidelines aloud. Discuss briefly why such guidelines are important.

- a. When speaking, speak from your own experience; Use "I" language, rather than statements using words like "You" or "They" or "We."
- b. When speaking, authentically share your mind and heart, so your experience can be understood by others. Dialogue is not about teaching others or giving advice.
- c. When speaking, monitor yourself so that you neither dominate nor disappear in the dialogue.
- d. When speaking, choose words that are sensitive and caring of one another. Being loving is more important than being right. We are all exploring for the truth.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

- a. **First Go-Around**
Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.
- b. **Free-Flowing Dialogue**
Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others' sharing that moves you to add something more to today's dialogue?
- c. **How Was Our Dialogue Process Today?** *(last 5 minutes of small group time)*
How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

8. Closing Prayer (*facilitator reads*)

“All around us, to right and left, in front and behind, above and below,
we have only had to go a little beyond the frontier of sensible appearances
in order to see the divine welling up and showing through. . . .

It has sprung up so universally,
and we find ourselves so surrounded and transfixed by it,
that there is no room left to fall down and adore it, even within ourselves.

By means of all created things, without exception,
the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us.

We imagined it as distant and inaccessible,
whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers. . . .

As Jacob said, awakening from his dream,
the world is . . . in truth a holy place, and we did not know it.

Venite, adoremus.”⁵

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 112.

2. Everything Is Becoming

LARGE GROUP

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

In each one of us, the whole history of the world is, in part, reflected. We each sum up the world in a different way. We have inherited our unique genetics, our particular family, our society, and our environment, which all directly emerged from what preceded them. Some of what we have received is healthy and wholesome, and some has the capacity to poison our souls. So, part of the spiritual journey is becoming aware of the myriad influences that affect our being, so that we can more freely act on what life presents us through our choices.

“Matter is infinitely shifting and varied. . . . On the one hand, matter weighs us down, suffers, wounds, tempts and grows old. . . . But at the same, matter is physical exuberance, ennobling contact, virile effort and the joy of growth. It attracts, renews, unites and flowers. By matter, we are nourished, lifted up, linked to everything else, invaded by life. . . . Matter is simply the slope on which we can go up, just as well as go down. . . . The task assigned to us is to climb towards the light.”⁶

Teilhard was attuned to the deep current of evolution moving within the universe. The God who was Above was also experienced by him as the God who was Ahead, luring the cosmos toward its fulfillment. God was not only at the birth of the universe, but within the growth of each part of it and at the end of all things.

Teilhard, through eyes of a scientist, could see the universe “becoming” in the many stages of development the earth had passed through over billions of years. Observing this maturing pattern, Teilhard reasoned that there were still countless possibilities ahead for further development, even now.

“We may perhaps imagine that the creation was finished long ago. But that would be quite wrong. It continues still more magnificently . . . and we serve to complete it, even by the humblest work of our hands.”⁷

In Teilhard’s Christian vision, the cosmos is heading toward total fulfillment because God has been in matter since creation’s very beginning, through the Divine Word which became incarnate. Later, God also revealed God’s Self definitively in the person of Jesus when evolution’s time was right. Teilhard believed that in Jesus Christ, we see the full-flowering potential of humanity, reflecting its Loving Source.

Jesus’ earthly lifetime was not the end of the story of Incarnation. Christ’s full becoming continues within us, as, like Jesus, we live the Way of Love, by the grace of God. As Teilhard saw it, “Christ has not yet completed his own forming. He has not yet gathered into himself the last folds of the Garment of flesh and love which his disciples are making for him. The mystical Christ has not yet attained his full growth. Christ is the Fulfillment even of the natural evolution of beings.”⁸

⁶ Ibid., 106-7.

⁷ Ibid., 61-62.

⁸ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 305.

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard's ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What things of the past have had the most influence on your becoming the person you are? Consider genetic, familial, societal and environmental factors, both positive and negative.
How has increased awareness of how these influences affect you led to greater freedom of choice on your part?*
- b. *What is your sense of God who is Ahead, the One who invites us to the More of the future? Where have you sensed God's energy pulling or inviting you at different points in your life?*
- c. *Teilhard assumed, in his day, that human life was progressing. He saw it in humanity's "passion for nature . . . liberty and fraternity . . . a keen intuition of the universal process of becoming . . . a tendency to make progressively more allowance for the freedom of the individual . . . the ideas of democracy and association making their way into the consciousness of the humblest worker . . . the search for a greater measure of justice . . . nationalities seeking to emerge [out of colonialism] . . . feminism has asserted itself. . . . It is, indeed, mysterious Divinity that . . . stirs up . . . Evolution."⁹ Do you assume that the world is progressing, is becoming worse, or is always going to stay the same? Trace back why you think this way.*
- d. *How would you imaginatively describe the earth fulfilled or Christ coming to full growth?*

5. Basic Guidelines for Listening in Contemplative Dialogue

Read the guidelines aloud. Discuss briefly why such guidelines are important.

- a. When listening, temporarily suspend your own judgments, opinions and inner commentary, so you can focus only on understanding what the other means.
- b. When listening, try to understand what the person is saying from their point of view. Put yourself in their shoes.
- c. When listening, be aware of both a person's verbal and non-verbal communication. A person's body position and facial expression are revelatory.
- d. When listening, never interrupt. This honors the speaker.
- e. When listening, give eye contact to the speaker.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

⁹ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 77-78.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

a. **First Go-Around**

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. **Free-Flowing Dialogue**

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others' sharing that moves you to add something more to today's dialogue?

c. **How Was Our Dialogue Process Today?** (*last 5 minutes of small group time*)

How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

8. Closing Prayer

"O God...it is you who are at the origin of the impulse, and at the end of that continuing pull which all my life long I can do no other than follow. . . . It is you yourself . . . who makes me participate in your being, you who molds me. . . . O God, whose call precedes the very first of our movements, grant me the desire to desire *being*—that, by means of that divine thirst which is your gift, access to the great waters may open wide within me. . . . Grant that, after having desired, I may believe ardently and above all things in your active presence . . . so that I may work together with your action. . . . May I respond by taking great care never to stifle, distort, nor waste my power to love and to do."¹⁰

¹⁰ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 78-79.

3. The Power of Attraction and Love

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

Although, in reality, we are interconnected, inseparable from the cosmos, from one another and from God, we often *feel* isolated and alone. We do not see or feel the oneness when our egos are locked in either ignorance or fear. We may prefer to disengage from strangers, not knowing what threat they pose. We might resist the wearying business of interaction when we get depressed or are fatigued by life. Sluggishness takes hold when we lack motivation and zest for life.

Though there are forces of repulsion, forces of attraction are a continual counterbalance. We discover others with whom we share affinities and encounter people who ignite our passions and desires. We are drawn, center to center, together.

The phenomenon of mutual attraction is built into the universe. For example, hydrogen atoms attracted to oxygen atoms create an entirely new being – a molecule of water. Attraction instincts also invite sexual partnerships which not only pass on life to others but also allow unique new forms of being to evolve. In general, human beings bond together seeking fulfillment and, in the process, form families, friendships and civilizations. All of creation is perpetually being drawn into deeper relationship through a universal force of attraction. Teilhard asks, “What name shall we give to the physical-moral energy . . . to which all activities in the universe can be reduced? Love. The physical structure of the universe is love.”¹¹

“Love is the attraction which is exercised upon each element of the universe. It is the call toward greater union, the only real business in nature. . . . Love is primitive, universal psychic energy . . . the very blood stream of spiritual evolution.”¹²

“Driven by the forces of love, the fragments of the world seek each other, so that the world may come to being. This is no metaphor and it is much more than poetry. . . . Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.”¹³

Love is not about losing oneself in the other. We actually become *more* ourselves by the giving of ourselves as “Love is the only synthesizing energy whose action can more deeply personalize us and differentiate us.”¹⁴ In Teilhard’s estimation, “Love is the most universal, the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces.”¹⁵

Teilhard challenges us to see Love as the greatest power for evolution. “Christian love is more than making good the harm done by selfishness and easing the injuries afflicted by human malice. It is more than applying a soothing lotion. It brings souls together in love, so that a higher nature may be born from their union.”¹⁶

¹¹ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 72.

¹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 64-65.

¹³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 264-65).

¹⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 47.

¹⁵ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 32-33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard's ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What attracts you to someone? For what qualities have people been attracted to you?*
- b. *What kinds of causes or involvements attract you?*
- c. *Recall how a particular relationship of love has fulfilled or developed you as a person. Alternately, not all attractions are healthy. Consider the health of an attraction you have had in which you felt lost, lessened or belittled as a person.*
- d. *How has your loving someone or something contributed toward its greater flourishing?*

5. Basic Guidelines for Pace of Dialogue in Contemplative Dialogue

Read the guidelines aloud. Discuss briefly why such guidelines are important.

- a. When you have something to say, pause to let the last person's statement have time to sink in before you speak. Silence between speakers is vital for processing.
- b. In the silences, take time to ponder what is arising in you; also, discern whether a thread or theme may be developing in the group on which you can build.
- c. Before you share with the group, test within yourself whether what you are about to say will enrich the dialogue on today's theme. Wait for an opening. Don't be surprised if someone else speaks what you have in mind while the group is on the same wavelength.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

- a. **First Go-Around**
Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.
- b. **Free-Flowing Dialogue**
Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others' sharing that moves you to add something more to today's dialogue?
- c. **How Was Our Dialogue Process Today?** *(last 5 minutes of small group time)*
How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

8. Closing Prayer

“O God . . . I would proclaim from the house-tops and in all places where people meet together:

that You do more than simply stand apart from things as their Master;

You are more than the incommunicable splendor of the universe;

You are the dominating influence that penetrates us, holds us, and draws us,

through the inmost core of our most imperative and deep-rooted desires. . . .

O God, You said to me, “I am at hand, at the common heart of your own being and of all things,

to welcome even the wildest of your longings

and to assure you that not one single fragment of what is useful in them will be lost. . . .

For it is I who am the true bond that holds the world together.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid., 141-42.

4. Greater Consciousness Together

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest as well as a geologist and paleontologist. Blending science and religion added much complexity to Teilhard’s life. It led to rich and unique spiritual insights but also to a lot of personal pain, as the Church of his day lagged in their acceptance of Teilhard’s modernizing work, for growing consciousness is predictably slow labor. Teilhard died without any of his works on evolution and spirituality being published. Yet, years later, Teilhard’s thoughts began to revolutionize how theologians think. Leaders in Vatican 2, as well as popes ever since, have mentioned how Teilhard has been foundational in the Church’s new, more evolutionary thinking.

As a research scientist, Teilhard became convinced that evolution had a discernable direction. He found that tiny elements had been increasingly growing toward greater complexity as they joined together with others. Atoms converged into molecules, molecules eventually converged into living cells, and living beings became ever more conscious. In fact, Teilhard asserted the universe’s increasing complexity had directly led to a leap of reflective consciousness in humankind, meaning the universe had become conscious of itself. Teilhard believed that one day each center of human consciousness would converge with others into a single, uniting vision of shared love and relationship. A new level of global being would emerge, and matter would keep evolving into spirit, even beyond the threshold of death.

Unsurprisingly, emerging scientific understandings of the cosmos affect how we think about God. For instance, Teilhard’s writings contained different interpretations of the creation and Adam and Eve stories, which, to this point, had been read literally.

Today it can be demonstrated that humanity gradually evolved from previous species and that physical suffering and death were a natural part of the universe’s developing process long before human beings had the conscious freedom to sin. From an evolutionary perspective, then, mistakes, failings, and even death can be appreciated as built-in catalysts that bring new opportunities, regrettably along with pain. Teilhard wrote of a God who walks with us compassionately on our evolutionary path forward.

Teilhard also saw that concepts such as “original sin” would benefit from updated language. For example: Sin and struggle have been there (and their effects growing) since the beginning of history, *and* humans do bear some responsibility for this, due to self-centered sin. God, however, has also always been there from the beginning, constantly providing grace and redemptive opportunities for healing and growth. A loving life lived with faith in Jesus has a saving effect, as does participation in Christ’s Living Body, the community of the Church.

In the light of evolution, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection was an indispensable, vital moment—a second “Big Bang”—in God’s continuing creation. In Jesus, we received an invitation to leap forward in evolution—through a more inclusive, loving relationship with God and with one another, through the indwelling of Christ’s Holy Spirit. We experienced an exemplar in our midst who was definitively revelatory, both of who God is and who humanity has the potential to become, in union with God. Additionally, we witnessed in Jesus’ resurrection that material death is not the end of human life and consciousness; our lives together continue in a new and glorified way beyond the threshold of death.

Teilhard assumed that further complexification and growth in consciousness would continue until it reached its maximum complexity, cosmic in extent. Teilhard identified this endpoint, or Omega Point, as Christ, the universe coming to full maturity through the unification of human minds and hearts in love. In the fullness of time, the Body of Christ will be all-encompassing, joined as one, by a single Center, the Heart of Christ.

This coming together, however, must be done freely, by individuals drawn by a common vision and a chosen commitment to universal love. People united by fear or coerced by power, such as in the history of Communism and Nazism in the early 20th century, tend to form a controlled, mechanistic society instead, without a deep personal center to hold them together.¹⁸ “Our consciousness must change – to see that ‘love one another’ is the only imaginable precept for the future earth’s equilibrium.”¹⁹

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard’s ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *Consider how as you matured and experienced more of life, there was increased complexity in the way you saw yourself, others, the world, and God. How did this complexity give birth in you to new consciousness in these areas?*
- b. *How has increasing complexity and consciousness both added richness to your life and caused anxiety or pain? Has greater consciousness resulted in greater freedom for you?*
- c. *What is your feeling about language and theological concepts needing to evolve as we learn more about the universe?*

5. Basic Guidelines for Paying Attention to What is Happening Within

Read the guidelines aloud. Discuss briefly why such guidelines are important.

- a. Take note of resistances within you as you listen. They are worth exploring. Is some assumption you hold being challenged?
- b. Be aware of expectations or judgments (even unwanted) you might have of others in the group. These can color or distort how you hear them. Consciousness of such thoughts and feelings can be a gift if you learn from them.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

a. First Go-Around

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. Free-Flowing Dialogue

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others’ sharing that moves you to add something more to today’s dialogue?

c. How Was Our Dialogue Process Today? (last 5 minutes of small group time)

How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

¹⁸ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 74-75.

¹⁹ Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, 20.

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

8. Closing Prayer

"O God, lay hold of me fully, both by the Within and the Without of myself. Grant that I may never break this double thread of my life."²⁰

²⁰ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 80.

5. The Call to Community: Growing as Relational Persons

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

While Teilhard de Chardin was a stretcher-bearer in the trenches of World War I, he discovered a kind of solidarity he had never known. People from several continents and of different races and religions were thrust together towards a common goal. Lives were put on the line for the sake of something every one of them believed in. Teilhard glimpsed the possibility for the world’s greater union during his military service. This experience of service to the world with others became a touchstone for his life.

Unfortunately, when the war ended, people returned to smaller lives. “Elements brought together only out of necessity or fear cohere only on the surface. When the wave of fear or common interest has passed, the union dissolves without having given birth to a soul. Not through external pressure but an inward impulse can the unity of humanity endure and grow.”²¹

What can bring us together today? “There needs to be a concentrating agent to bring people together and increase their powers to act as a community.”²² Besides war, “another cause must emerge to direct our energies permanently and for the good. . . . The pursuit of a positive ideal can give us that same consciousness.”²³

People, however, sometimes hesitate to get “too involved” in being part of a community. Family and work make enough demands, and we are so often tired. Is the benefit of joining a group worth the time and effort? Will it really help me or the world? Though Teilhard himself struggled at times with the decision of whether to leave behind the Jesuits and a Church closed to modern ideas, he still gave a resounding “Yes.” The downside of community participation was far outweighed by the good it could bring. To reach our fullest being, he believed, we must develop along with others. “It stimulates dormant properties, fertilizes and completes us. . . . The interrelations of [various people] are an essential cosmic work of nature.”²⁴

Often, we develop our strongest character traits by working through conflicts that arise with others. We see models of character strength around us we desire to emulate. Because we are needed within the group for the gifts we bear, we are encouraged to develop and use our talents. In times of difficulty, a community gives support. In times of inertia, we are challenged by others. In times of blindness, we are enlightened. In times of shared listening, truths arise that point the way.

Being part of a community should not make one a nameless number. In Teilhard’s words, it should “personalize.” In true community, we do not lose our individuality. By relating deeply with others, we actually become our fullest selves. “Souls develop only collectively and will be completed only in union.”²⁵ Community participation and personalization are not opposed.

In community, a person develops empathy, the capacity to think and feel with other people, so as to understand and accompany them with compassion. The selfless quality of empathetic listening is a spiritual practice in itself.

²¹ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 190.

²² Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 42.

²³ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 285.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

²⁵ Teilhard. *The Divine Milieu*, 61.

Teilhard believed that communities, such as the Church, were not meant to be primarily about personal pleasure or even mainly about personal salvation. "Religion can become an opium. It is too often understood as simply a soothing of our woes. But it *is* to sustain us and spur us on in the progress of life."²⁶ "We represent, all of us together, the front line, the crest of an evolutionary wave still in full flood."²⁷

"We must give people a Gospel in which moral teaching and the precepts of Christ are presented not simply as the guarantees of an individual reward, but as the road organically essential to the collective success of the whole of life."²⁸ This is what Jesus was teaching as he modeled this prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, on Earth as it is in heaven."

As others help us become who we have the potential to be, our joined efforts, by the grace of God, advance the world towards its fulfillment. Together, with God and each other, "The future is in our hands."²⁹

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard's ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What is your experience of feeling isolated? Of wanting to be part of something bigger? What needs, issues and beliefs draw you to be with others in community?*
- b. *What personal or individual rights must be preserved within a community? Why is this important? How can this be balanced with the pursuit of a common goal or pursuit?*
- c. *Consider a time you were part of a community that helped bring out the best in you. What helped that to happen? What gifts are you able to contribute to a group?*
- d. *What has been your experience of Church as a community that personalizes?*

5. Basic Guidelines for Staying Connected to the Circle's Center (Shared Spirit)

- a. When listening, be mindful that God's Spirit dwells uniquely within each person. Seeing that is a gift.
- b. As you both listen and speak, be mindful that we are all one Body, connected in God.
- c. Be aware of that connective energy. Be aware of the energy flowing within the group. Stay in touch with being center to center with other members and center to center with Spirit.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

²⁶Teilhard, *Building the Earth*, 44.

²⁷ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 241.

²⁸ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 251.

²⁹ Ibid., 285.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

a. **First Go-Around**

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. **Free-Flowing Dialogue**

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others' sharing that moves you to add something more to today's dialogue?

c. **How Was Our Dialogue Process Today?** *(last 5 minutes of small group time)*

How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

8. Closing Prayer

“O Ever-Greater Christ . . .
as humankind emerges into consciousness
of the Movement that carries it along,
it has a continually more urgent need
of a Direction up ahead,
to which it will at last be able to consecrate itself.

Who then, is This –

No longer the God of the old cosmos but the God of the new Cosmogogenesis . . .

You, the Lord of Union,
Whose distinguishing mark
is the power indefinitely to grow greater,
to the measure of all matter,
whose heart You fill.”³⁰

“Christ, Word of God, You are incarnate in the world
and we are all of us dependent upon You. . . .

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...

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.”³¹

³⁰ Teilhard, *The Heart of Matter*, 57-58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120-21, 126-27.

6. Contemplation and Prayer

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

There is a Deep Well or Source of Life and Love within each one of us. Christianity and many other religions call this Creative Energy with whom we are in relationship “God.” Whether one refers to this Ultimacy as Spirit or by some other name, those who pray often say that finding ways to be in regular, conscious awareness of God is vital to the fullness of who they are and are becoming. “Sustained and guided by the tradition of the great human mystical systems, along the road of contemplation and prayer, we succeed in entering directly into receptive communication with the very source of all interior drive. The vital charge of the world...poured directly into the depths of our being.”³²

Prayer forms differ person to person and around the globe. There are various ways body movements, breathing, and posture aid concentration and express the heart’s feelings. There are prayer forms that use prescribed words, chant repetitively, are spontaneously verbal, or are utterly silent. There are prayer rituals that have a long tradition and rituals that are individually meaningful. In some forms of meditation, one thinks about God, self, and the world. In others, memory or imagination is key. Any way that connects a person to the divine is prayer, whether in a church, on a mountain, or at one’s place of work.

Everything we do can become a prayer if we are flowing *with* Life. Teilhard said, “I adhere in each action to the creative power of God. I coincide with it. I become not only its instrument but its living extension.”³³ All prayer is meant to flow into life, for connection with the Sacred is not just a gifted moment for us as individuals but for all creation. What we receive from God, because we are all one, is consciously or unconsciously shared with all. So, out of love, we stay connected to the Divine Current, to the Universal Center, because we desire our being to have a favorable effect on the world.

“Because we have turned toward the Center, its Reality will make itself felt by the light and heat which descend into us.”³⁴ One traditional word for this spiritual energy that transforms is grace. Grace building upon nature is the wedding of the supernatural and natural. Living out of this unity is what the Christ-Life is about.

For Teilhard, to be a mystic was simply to see with new eyes, to see God in all things, as Ignatian spirituality invited. This contemplative vision would lead to new quality of action.

Anyone who has the mystic’s insight and who loves will feel within himself Something that seizes him and drives him on to integrity and the use of all his powers. He is willing to self-correct and self-develop in order to become perfectly resonant to the pulsations of the Rhythm of Reality; the mystic makes himself docile to the unobtrusive demands of grace. To increase his creative energy, he tirelessly develops his thought, dilates his heart and intensifies his activity. He works to purify his affections and remove all blocks to the light. He seeks an identification (with Christ) that will fulfill his being. He will not disappear, but become an ever more perfect instrument, one with the creative act.³⁵

³² Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, 242.

³³ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 62.

³⁴ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 89.

³⁵ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 134-35.

Prayer, faithfully embraced, brings deeper relationship and growth. It brings us into the highest environment in which we flower, which is God, “a living Loving Being; All-embracing in immensity and intimately warm, God is the Infinite Center . . . that knows, attracts, and loves.”³⁶

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard’s ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What kind of prayer helps you to stay aware of and flowing with Spirit? Do you find a difference in your day when you make this effort and when you don’t?*
- b. *Consider whether you have had mystical moments when God was glimpsed or felt. How have these affected your life and relationship with God over time?*
- c. *How can everything we do be a prayer? What has been your experience of this?*

5. Guidelines for Contemplative Dialogue - Before the sharing begins, participants look back and read to themselves all of the Guidelines for Dialogue that have been presented.

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

6. Contemplative Dialogue

a. **First Go-Around**

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. **Free-Flowing Dialogue**

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others’ sharing that moves you to add something more to today’s dialogue?

c. **How Was Our Dialogue Process Today?** *(last 5 minutes of small group time)*

How did the specific dialogue skill you chose to work on help you today?

LARGE GROUP

7. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today’s dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

³⁶ Ibid., 48.

8. Closing Prayer

“Radiant Word, blazing Power, You who mold the multiple so as to breathe your life into them all, I pray you lay on us your hands and touch us here and now...for you know how your creatures can come into being only, like shoot from stem, as part of an endlessly renewed process of evolution. . . . 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.”³⁷



³⁷ Teilhard, *The Heart of Matter*, 122-23.

7. Discerning our Part in Evolution

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

Morality is evolving. Previously, moral prohibitions and laws were primarily written to defend individuals or nations from encroachment by other individuals or nations. Killing, stealing, lying and so forth were forbidden, and they still are the bottom line for order in society. However, Teilhard declares that evolutionarily there must be more. “The morality we must look toward must be based on progress. We don’t just want inter-personal lubrication—but fuel!”³⁸

The morality of today must direct our spiritual energies into the world. For at this stage of humanity’s development, “What is of value now? What is only finally good is what makes for the growth of spirit on earth!”³⁹ Not doing harm cannot be the only criteria for morality. Moral living must include development of every part of ourselves, Teilhard teaches, for we have no “right” to leave parts of ourselves dormant. We belong to each other and our “riches” must be shared.⁴⁰ Not only this, “society must be constituted to create the most favorable environment for full development, physically and spiritually, chosen (not forced) by the individual.”⁴¹ This is certainly a new norm for holiness!

Teilhard believes that humanity is ready to begin the next step—beyond individualization as a final goal, the result of which is a scattering of isolated people. It is time for the world to be built up by communal effort. As human culture matures, we realize that the center of the world can no longer be one’s single self. We must discover together what we have to build.

“In practice, what will aid our forward march? 1.) A great hope in every generous soul in the face of his or her anticipated work which will lead to needed growth of being. 2.) A sense of working in common—towards greater synthesis and unity; individualistic egoism and exclusion and diminishment of any of our brothers and sisters must end. We need human solidarity.”⁴² “We must press on towards this evolution with all our strength. We do not know yet where it will lead us, but we have faith that it will be towards some supreme value.”⁴³

Everything we bring to the world can serve the good of the whole— our forms of social organization, our attitudes toward work, our engagement with the arts, our commitment to scientific research, the education of consciousness, the creation of new technology. God “awaits us every instant in our action, in the work of the moment. There is a sense in which God is at the tip of my pen . . . my spade . . . my brush . . . my needle.”⁴⁴ Our efforts, even in realms inaccurately called profane, assume a holy role. “It is collaboration, trembling with love, which we give to the hands of God.”⁴⁵

³⁸ Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, 52.

³⁹ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴¹ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 194-95.

⁴² Teilhard, *Building the Earth*, 92-93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁴ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 64-65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

“We are called by the music of the universe to reply, each with his own pure and incommunicable harmonic. . . . As love for the All advances in our hearts.”⁴⁶ We follow this call “like the Magi the star. The star leads each man differently, by a different path, in accord with his vocation. But all the paths it initiates have this in common—they always advance upward.”⁴⁷

Since, in humanity as a whole, evolution has become reflectively conscious of itself, it is time for those who compassionately care about the world to ask the questions, “What shall I do? How? In what concrete direction will I extend the generative forces of the world?”⁴⁸ Then, with trust that God can make good use of every effort we offer, we say, “I only want to be an instrument of progress. I have faith that every good and useful thing done will be assimilated in some way.”⁴⁹

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard’s ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What moral principles might make for human progress, where morality is not just about “inter-personal lubrication but fuel?”*
- b. *How do you feel about not having the “right” to keep parts of yourself “dormant” and the moral mandate to share all of your personal “riches?” Does this cross some of your assumptions?*
- c. *In what ways do you feel you are an instrument of progress?*

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

5. Contemplative Dialogue

a. First Go-Around

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. Free-Flowing Dialogue

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others’ sharing that moves you to add something more to today’s dialogue?

c. In General, How Was Our Dialogue Process Today? (last 5 minutes of small group time)

⁴⁶ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 150.

⁴⁷ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 139.

⁴⁸ Teilhard, *Human Energy* 29.

⁴⁹ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 42-43.

LARGE GROUP

6. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?

7. Closing Prayer

God, we are gathered here before you,
united with "the whole vast anonymous army of living humanity,
those who surround us and support us, though we do not know them;
those who come and those who go;
above all, with those who in offices, laboratories and factories,
through their vision of truth . . . believe in the progress of this Earthly reality
and who today will take up again their impassioned pursuit of the light."⁵⁰
We ask you this day and every day to bless abundantly the works of our hands.

⁵⁰ Teilhard, *The Heart of Matter*, 120.

8. Transformation: Death to New Life

1. Opening Prayer (*facilitator leads*)

- Take a minute to relax and still your body.
- In a gentle rhythm, be mindful as you breathe in the air of the cosmos; then, breathe out naturally, with reverence and gratitude for life.
- Form an image of a light, a spark of God, at your “center.” Feel its warmth and energy slowly fill your body.
- Become aware of the light of God at the center of every person here in our group; then, feel yourself connected to one another, center to center, by the Spirit that we share.

2. Presentation of Content (*participants take turns reading paragraphs*)

The pain of growth has a role in a cosmos that is evolving. Pain stimulates us to react *against* conditions that get in the way of full development. It forces us to leave unprofitable roads. It stimulates us to more fruitful work and induces us to attain harmony. God converts our pain into good as our character is strengthened, renewed, tempered and becomes wiser. Suffering can hollow us out so God can penetrate deeply.⁵¹

On every religious path, including that of Jesus, we must die and be reborn. We must change our fundamental values and action. It is a conversion.⁵² There is much that must be expelled and pruned. It can be anguishing, but the price is worth it, to give up the secure and tangible unity of the egocentric life and risk everything in God. “If the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die, it remains just a grain.”⁵³

Something dying so that something new may arise is the way of evolution. It always has been and will continue to be. “Suffering in whatever species is what we pay for the forward march and triumph of all. They are all casualties fallen on the field of honor. . . . But seeing the world in a state of growth gives our human effort and the pain that goes with it great value. In all birth there is pain. In its groping, progress can only take place at the expense of many failures and wounds.”⁵⁴ Higher states are yet to be achieved—but by struggle.

Suffering is never to be valued or sought for its own sake. Teilhard insisted, “We first aim to defeat suffering, if possible. But at some point, we may have to rationally accept it. It can act to center us on God and join us to the Body of Christ who suffers.”⁵⁵ Teilhard exhorts his readers to resist evil with all their strength; but if laid low, even this can be a means of renewal if done in faith that God can bring good even out of evil. We are to trust in what is Greater than ourselves to bring transformation.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 80, 89.

⁵² Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 38.

⁵³ Teilhard, *Writings in Time of War*, 112-14.

⁵⁴ Teilhard, *Human Energy*, 49-50.

⁵⁵ Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, 249.

⁵⁶ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 91-92.

Teilhard in his elder years embraced the suffering and diminishment involved with his own aging and approach towards death. He shared with us this prayer:

Now that I have found the joy of utilizing all forms of growth to make You, or to let You, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess You by diminishing in You. . . . When the signs of age begin to mark my body (still more when they touch my mind . . .) and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me, in all those dark moment, O God, grant that I may understand that it is You (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within Yourself. . . . Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.⁵⁷

Teilhard, who had been through two world wars and witnessed a Jewish and an atomic holocaust, was well aware that God sanctifies within life's sufferings. Holiness is also about how we handle our struggles and losses, in compassionate company with God and one another.

3. Clarification of Ideas

Ask the group to help you clarify any words or ideas.

4. Applying Teilhard's ideas to your experience

Read all the questions aloud; then, in shared silence, each person journals about what draws or interests him or her most.

- a. *What has been your experience of the pain of growth, of letting go so something new can come?*
- b. *What has happened to you, without your choice or consent, that you have had to struggle with in life? How did you first try to defeat it? Did there come a point when you had to rationally accept it? Was there spiritual growth in this for you?*
- c. *Have you observed someone aging or dying in a way that inspired you?*
- d. *How do the diminishment of aging and prospect of death figure into your spirituality?*

Choose a particular guideline you intend to work on for yourself during this session. You do not need to share this at this point.

SMALL GROUPS

5. Contemplative Dialogue

a. First Go-Around

Each person will have up to 2 minutes to share what was most moving to him or her during the reflection time. Please allow a contemplative pause between each speaker.

b. Free-Flowing Dialogue

Build on what has been said. What did you connect to in others' sharing that moves you to add something more to today's dialogue?

⁵⁷ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 89-90.

LARGE GROUP

6. What New is Emerging for You?

Take a minute to consider your response to one of the following questions; then share briefly with the whole group until everyone has had a turn.

- What thought, feeling, or experience was most important to you from today's dialogue?
- Where, during this dialogue, did you feel an invitation, desire, or challenge for your life?
- **Finale: What real difference might this entire experience of dialoguing about Teilhard together make in your life?**

7. Closing Prayer

"What would our spirits be, O God, if they did not have the bread of earthly things to nourish them, the wine of created beauties to intoxicate them, and the conflicts of human life to fortify them? What feeble powers and bloodless hearts your creatures would bring You if they were to succeed in cutting themselves off prematurely from [their difficult settings]. Teach us, Lord, even how to contemplate . . . the hidden mystery in the womb of death."⁵⁸

"All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase,
all those that will diminish, and all those too that will die—
all of them, O God, I gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to You in offering.
This is the material—the matter—of my sacrifice, the only offering you desire."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 106-7.

⁵⁹ Teilhard, *The Heart of Matter*, 120.