Teilhard's Mathematical Analogies and the Tradition of the Church

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Introduction

In his remarks at the end of Mass during his apostolic journey to Mongolia, Pope Francis reminded us of the beauty of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's century-old "Mass on the World" and noted the intuitive connection between it and his own 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'.* He also reminded us that Teilhard remains "often misunderstood."[1] A contributing factor to this misunderstanding is Teilhard's liberal use of insights from many fields of study in his reflections on the human condition. Not one to draw hard lines between the academic disciplines of his time, Teilhard saw them all as informing our quest to understand how we are to be in our world and what lies beyond its physical and temporal boundaries for us. Because in our own time few people have training in all the fields Teilhard engaged in his work, it has taken the work of many scholars to illuminate the theological, philosophical, and scientific currents that help us understand Teilhard's work. This essay is part of an attempt to do the same with mathematics, a field less frequently discussed as deeply informing Teilhard's thought.

Skillful use of mathematics requires training, so the content and methods of Teilhard's study of math as a young person and his use of it as a young professional are the topic of Part I. In Part II, I address how mathematics could remain relevant to Teilhard's thought long after his formal study and professional use of it had ended. Here the influence of Teilhard's colleague and friend, Édouard Le Roy, is key. Through Le Roy, Teilhard had access to an intellectual community that crossed disciplinary boundaries between mathematics, science, philosophy, and theology. Having thus established Teilhard's math credentials, I move on in Part III to one example of how Teilhard makes use of geometry in his work. Teilhard's engagement with mathematical ideas was intentional and precise, so I first address the vocabulary necessary to understand one of Teilhard's most oft-used analogical objects, the cone, and then lay out and interpret what Teilhard is saying by way of such analogies. Finally in Part IV, how Teilhard's work relates to the Tradition of the Church from the time of the apostles is the topic. Here the whole of Teilhard's mathematical analogies taken collectively shed light on how his neologism-filled ideas are talking about the same Christ we find in the writings of St. John and St. Paul, the two biblical writers most used in Teilhard's Christology.

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[1] Pope Francis, "Remarks of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Conclusion of Holy Mass" (Sept. 3, 2023), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20230903-mongolia-omelia.html.