

Teilhard de Chardin: A Short Biography  
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*There is a communion with God, and a communion with the Earth, and a communion with God through the Earth.*

*Writings in Time of War*, New York, 1968, p. 14

These lines that conclude Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's essay, "The Cosmic Life," provide an appropriate starting point for a consideration of his life. They are of special interest because Teilhard wrote them in 1916 during his initial duty as a stretcher-bearer in World War I. In many ways they are an early indication of his later work and a reminder that much of the richness of Teilhard's thought was framed during these seminal war years. These lines also suggest one of Teilhard's lasting contributions, namely, a sense of one's personal life as manifesting, and manifested in, the larger story of the universe. The communion experiences emphasized here take us back to his early childhood in the south of France and ahead to his years of travel and scientific research. Throughout Teilhard's seventy-four years, then, his communion experience with the divine and his insight into the role of the human in the evolutionary process emerge as his dominant concerns. In briefly presenting the biography of Teilhard three periods are distinguished here: the formative years, the years of travel, and the final years in New York.

### **The Formative Years**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1881, to Emmanuel and Berthe-Adele Teilhard de Chardin. While both of his parental lineages were distinguished, it is noteworthy that his mother was the great grandniece of François-Marie Arouet, more popularly known as Voltaire. He was the fourth of the couple's eleven children and was born at the family estate of Sarcenat near the twin cities of Clermont-Ferrand in the ancient province of Auvergne in south, central France. The long extinct volcanic peaks of Auvergne and the forested preserves of this province left an indelible mark on Teilhard. He remarks in his spiritual autobiography, *The Heart of Matter*, that:

Auvergne molded me... Auvergne served me both as museum of natural history and as wildlife preserve. Sarcenat in Auvergne gave me my first taste of the joys of discovery... to Auvergne I owe my most precious possessions: a collection of pebbles and rocks still to be found there, where I lived. (translated in Claude Cuenot, *Teilhard de Chardin*, Baltimore, 1958, p. 3.)

Drawn to the natural world, Teilhard developed his unusual powers of observation. This youthful skill was especially fostered by his father who maintained an avid interest in natural science. Yet Teilhard's earliest memory of childhood was not of the flora and fauna of Auvergne or the seasonal family houses but a striking realization of life's frailty and difficulty of finding any abiding reality.

A memory? My very first! I was five or six. My mother had snipped a few of my curls. I picked one up and held it close to the fire. The hair was burnt up in a fraction of a second. A terrible grief assailed me. I had learnt that I was perishable. . . . What used to grieve me when I was a child? This insecurity of things. And what used I to love? My genie of iron! With a plow hitch I believed myself, at seven years, rich with a treasure incorruptible, everlasting. And then it turned out that what I possessed was just a bit of iron that rusted. At this discovery I threw myself on the lawn and shed the bitterest tears of my existence! (from *The Heart of Matter* in Cuenot, p. 3.)

It was but a short step for Teilhard to move from his “gods of iron” to those of stone. Auvergne gave forth a surprising variety of stones — amethyst, citrine, and chalcedony just to name a few with which to augment his youthful search for a permanent reality. Undoubtedly his sensitive nature was also nurtured by his mother’s steadfast piety. Teilhard’s reflection on his mother’s influence is striking, he writes:

A spark had to fall upon me, to make the fire blaze out. And, without a doubt, it was through my mother that it came to me, sprung from the stream of Christian mysticism, to light up and kindle my childish soul. It was through that spark that ‘My Universe’ still but half-personalized was to become amortized, and so achieve its full centration. (*The Heart of Matter*, in Cuenot, p.4.)

This early piety was well established so that when he entered Notre Dame de Mongre near Villefranche-sur-Saone, thirty miles north of Lyons, at twelve years of age, his quiet, diligent nature was already well formed. During his five years at this boarding school Teilhard exchanged his security in stones for a Christian piety largely influenced by Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*. Near the time of his graduation he wrote his parents indicating that he wanted to become a Jesuit.

Teilhard’s training as a Jesuit provided him with the thoughtful stimulation to continue his devotion both to scientific investigation of the earth and to cultivation of a life of prayer. He entered the Jesuit novitiate at Aix-en-Provence in 1899. Here he further developed the ascetic piety that he had learned in his reading at Mongre. It was also at Aix-en-Provence that he began his friendship with Auguste Valensin who had already studied philosophy with Maurice Blondel. In 1901, due to an anti-clerical movement in the French Republic, the Jesuits and the other religious orders were expelled from France. The Aix-en-Provence novitiate that had moved in 1900 to Paris was transferred in 1902 to the English island of Jersey. Prior to the move to Jersey, however, on March 26, 1902, Pierre took his first vows in the Society of Jesus. At this time the security of Teilhard’s religious life, apart from the political situation in France was painfully disturbed by the gradual sickness that incapacitated his younger sister, Marguerite-Marie, and by the sudden illness of his oldest brother, Alberic.

Alberic’s death in September, 1902, came as Pierre and his fellow Jesuits were quietly leaving Paris for Jersey. The death of this formerly successful, buoyant brother, followed in 1904 by the death of Louise, his youngest sister, caused Teilhard momentarily to turn away from concern for things of this world. Indeed, he indicates that

but for Paul Trossard, his former novice master, who encouraged him to follow science as a legitimate way to God, he would have discontinued those studies in favor of theology.

From Jersey Pierre was sent in 1905 to do his teaching internship at the Jesuit college of St. Francis in Cairo, Egypt. For the next three years Teilhard's naturalist inclinations were developed through prolonged forays into the countryside near Cairo studying the existing flora and fauna and also the fossils of Egypt's past. While Teilhard carried on his teaching assignments assiduously, he also made time for extensive collecting of fossils and for correspondence with naturalists in Egypt and France. His collected *Letters from Egypt* reveal a person with keen observational powers. In 1907 Teilhard published his first article, "A Week in Fayoum." He also learned in 1907 that due to his finds of shark teeth in Fayoum and in quarries around Cairo a new species named Teilhardia and three new varieties of shark had been presented to the Geographical Society of France by his French correspondent, Monsieur Prieur.

From Cairo Pierre returned to England to complete his theological studies at Ore Place in Hastings. During the years 1908 to 1912 Teilhard lived the rigorously disciplined life of a Jesuit scholastic. Yet the close relation he maintained with his family is evident in the depth of feeling expressed at the death in 1911 of his elder sister, Françoise, in China. This sister, who was the only other family member in religious life, had become a Little Sister of the Poor and worked among the impoverished of Shanghai. For Teilhard her death was particularly poignant because of the selfless dedication of her life.

His letters during this period at Hastings indicate that the demands of his theological studies left little time for geological explorations of the chalk cliffs of Hastings or the clay of nearby Weald. Yet his letters also reveal his enthusiasm for both of these types of study. In summary, three different but interrelated developments occurred during this period which significantly affected the future course of Teilhard's life. These are the reading of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, the anti-modernist attack by Pope Pius X, and his discovery of a fossil tooth in the region of Hastings.

In reading Henri Bergson's newly published *Creative Evolution* Teilhard encountered a thinker who dissolved the Aristotelian dualism of matter and spirit in favor of a movement through time of an evolving universe. Teilhard also found the word evolution in Bergson. He connected the very sound of the word, as he says, "with the extraordinary density and intensity with which the English landscape then appeared to me — especially at sunset — when the Sussex woods seemed to be laden with all the fossil life that I was exploring, from one quarry to another, in the soil of the Weal" (from *The Heart of Matter*, in Robert Speaight, *The Life of Teilhard de Chardin*, New York, 1967, p. 45). From Bergson, then, Teilhard received the vision of on-going evolution. For Bergson, evolution was continually expanding, a "tide of life" undirected by an ultimate purpose. Teilhard would eventually disagree with Bergson with respect to the direction of the universe, but these descriptions give us some sense of Teilhard's deeply experiential encounter with evolution. Later he put forward his own interpretation of the evolutionary process based on the intervening years of fieldwork.

In 1903 while Pierre was in Egypt, Pius X succeeded Leo XIII as Pope. The forward-looking momentum of Leo was abandoned by the conservative Italian Curia in favor of retrenchment and attacks on a spectrum of ideas labeled "modernism" in the encyclical *Pascendi* (1907) and the decrees of *Labmentabili* (1907). Among the many new works eventually placed on the Index of Forbidden Works was Henri Bergson's

*Creative Evolution*, although it was not yet suspect when Teilhard read it at Hastings. It is in this ecclesiastical milieu that Teilhard endeavored to articulate his emerging vision of the spiritual quality of the universe.

It was also during his years at Hastings that Teilhard and other Jesuits met Charles Dawson, an amateur paleontologist. Dawson would be credited with the Piltdown finds, linking humans to simian ancestors, that later proved to be frauds intentionally planted by a clerk at the British Museum. Because of Pierre's years of collecting in Cairo he had acquired a growing interest in fossils and in prehistoric life, but he was not an accomplished paleontologist, nor did his studies allow him the time to develop the skills needed to accurately date or determine pre-historic fossils. In his limited association with Dawson, Teilhard discovered the fossil tooth in one of the diggings that caused his name to become known to the scientific community. Moreover, Teilhard's enthusiasm for the scientific study of prehistoric human life now crystallized as a possible direction after his ordination in August 1911.

Between 1912 and 1915 Teilhard continued his studies in paleontology. But because of his initiative in meeting Marcellin Boule at the Museum of Natural History and in taking courses at the Paris museum and at the Institute Catholique with Georges Boussac, Teilhard now began to develop that expertise in the geology of the Eocene Period that earned him a doctorate in 1922. In addition, Pierre also joined such accomplished paleontologists as the Abbé Henri Breuil, Father Hugo Obermaier, Jean Boussac and others in their excavations in the Aurignacian period caves of southern France, in the phosphorite fossil fields of Belgium and in the fossil rich sands of the French Alps. While Teilhard was developing a promising scientific career he also renewed his acquaintance in Paris with his cousin Marguerite Teilhard Chombon. Through Marguerite, Teilhard entered into a social milieu in which he could exchange ideas and receive critical comment from several perspectives. In these surroundings Teilhard developed his thought until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

When the war came in August, Teilhard returned to Paris to help Boule store museum pieces, to assist Marguerite turn the girl's school she headed into a hospital and to prepare for his own eventual induction. August was a disastrous month for the French army; the German forces executed the Schlieffen Plan so successfully that by the end of the month they were about thirty miles from Paris. In September the French rallied at the Marne and Parisians breathed easier. Because Teilhard's induction was delayed, Teilhard's Jesuit Superiors decided to send him back to Hastings for his tertianship, the year before final vows. Two months later word came that his younger brother Gonzague had been killed in battle near Soissons. Shortly after this Teilhard received orders to report for duty in a newly forming regiment from Auvergne. After visiting his parents and his invalid sister Guiguite at Sarcenat, he began his assignment as a stretcher-bearer with the North African Zouaves in January 1915.

The powerful impact of the war on Teilhard is recorded in his letters to his cousin, Marguerite, now collected in the *Making of a Mind*. They give us an intimate picture of Teilhard's initial enthusiasm as a "soldier-priest," his humility in bearing a stretcher while others bore arms, his exhaustion after the brutal battles at Ypres and Verdun, his heroism in rescuing his comrades of the Fourth Mixed Regiment, and his unfolding mystical vision centered on seeing the world evolve even in the midst of war. In these letters are many of the seminal ideas that Teilhard would develop in his later years. For

example during a break in the fierce fighting at the battle of Verdun in 1916 Teilhard wrote the following to his cousin Marguerite:

I don't know what sort of monument the country will later put up on Froideterre hill to commemorate the great battle. There's only one that would be appropriate: a great figure of Christ. Only the image of the crucified can sum up, express and relieve all the horror, and beauty, all the hope and deep mystery in such an avalanche of conflict and sorrows. As I looked at this scene of bitter toil, I felt completely overcome by the thought that I had the honor of standing at one of the two or three spots on which, at this very moment, the whole life of the universe surges and ebbs — places of pain but it is there that a great future (*this* I believe more and more) is taking shape." (*The Making of a Mind*, New York, 1965, pp 119/20).

Through these nearly four years of bloody trench fighting Teilhard's regiment fought in some of the most brutal battles at the Marne and Epres in 1915, Nieuport in 1916, Verdun in 1917 and Chateau Thierry in 1918. Teilhard himself was active in every engagement of the regiment for which he was awarded the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur in 1921. Throughout his correspondence he wrote that despite this turmoil he felt there was a purpose and a direction to life more hidden and mysterious than history generally reveals to us. This larger meaning, Teilhard discovered, was often revealed in the heat of battle. In one of several articles written during the war, Pierre expressed the paradoxical wish experienced by soldiers-on-leave for the tension of the front lines. He indicated this article in one of his letters saying:

I'm still in the same quiet billets. Our future continues to be pretty vague, both as to when and what it will be. What the future imposes on our present existence is not exactly a feeling of depression; it's rather a sort of seriousness, of detachment, of a broadening, too, of outlook. This feeling, of course, borders on a sort of sadness (the sadness that accompanies every fundamental change); but it leads also to a sort of higher joy ... I'd call it 'Nostalgia for the Front.' The reasons, I believe, come down to this; the front cannot but attract us because it is, in one way, the *extreme boundary* between what one is already aware of, and what is still in process of formation. Not only does one see there things that you experience nowhere else, but one also sees emerge from within one an underlying stream of clarity, energy, and freedom that is to be found hardly anywhere else in ordinary life — and the new form that the soul then takes on is that of the individual living on the quasi-collective life of all men, fulfilling a function far higher than that of the individual, and becoming fully conscious of this new state. It goes without saying that at the front you no longer look on things in the same way as you do in the rear; if you did, the sights you see and the life you lead would be more than you could bear. This exaltation is accompanied by a certain pain. Nevertheless it is indeed an exaltation. And that's why one likes the front in spite of everything, and misses it." (*The Making of a Mind*, pp. 267/8).

Teilhard's powers of articulation are evident in these lines. Moreover, his efforts to express his growing vision of life during the occasional furloughs also brought him a foretaste of the later ecclesiastical reception of his work. For although Teilhard was given permission to take final vows in the Society of Jesus in 1918, his writings from the battlefield puzzled his Jesuit Superiors especially his rethinking of such topics as evolution and original sin. Gradually Teilhard realized that the great need of the church was, as he says, "... to present dogma in a more real, more universal way — a more 'cosmogonic' way" (*The Making of a Mind*, pp. 267/8). These realizations often gave Teilhard the sense of "being reckoned with the orthodox and yet feeling for the heterodox" (*The Making of a Mind*, p. 277). He was convinced that if he had indeed seen something, as he felt he had, then that seeing would shine forth despite obstacles. As he says in a letter of 1919, "What makes me easier in my mind at this juncture is that the rather hazardous schematic points in my teaching are in fact of only secondary importance to me. It's not nearly so much ideas that I want to propagate as a *spirit*: and a *spirit* can animate all external presentations" (*The Making of a Mind*, p. 281).

After his demobilization on March 10, 1919, Teilhard returned to Jersey for a recuperative period and preparatory studies for concluding his doctoral degree in geology at the Sorbonne, for the Jesuit provincial of Lyon had given his permission for Teilhard to continue his studies in natural science. During this period at Jersey Teilhard wrote his profoundly prayerful piece on "The Spiritual Power of Matter."

After returning to Paris, Teilhard continued his studies with Marcellin Boule in the phosphorite fossils of the Lower Eocene period in France. Extensive field trips took him to Belgium where he also began to address student clubs on the significance of evolution in relation to current French theology. By the fall of 1920, Teilhard had secured a post in geology at the Institute Catholique and was lecturing to student audiences who knew him as an active promoter of evolutionary thought.

The conservative reaction in the Catholic Church initiated by the Curia of Pius X had abated at his death in 1914. But the new Pope, Benedict XV renewed the attack on evolution, on "new theology," and on a broad spectrum of perceived errors considered threatening by the Vatican Curia. The climate in ecclesiastical circles towards the type of work that Teilhard was doing gradually convinced him that work in the field would not only help his career but would also quiet the controversy in which he and other French thinkers were involved. The opportunity for fieldwork in China had been open to Teilhard as early as 1919 by an invitation from the Jesuit scientist Émile Licent who had undertaken paleontological work in the environs of Peking (Beijing). On April 1, 1923, Teilhard set sail from Marseille bound for China. Little did he know that this "short trip" would initiate the many years of travel to follow.

## **The Years of Travel**

Teilhard's first period in China was spent in Tientsin, a coastal city some eighty miles from Peking where Émile Licent had built his museum and housed the fossils he had collected in China since his arrival in 1914. The two French Jesuits were a contrast in types. Licent, from the north of France, was unconventional in dress, taciturn and very independent in his work. He was primarily interested in collecting fossils rather than interpreting their significance. Teilhard, on the other hand, was more urbane, he enjoyed

conversational society in which he could relate his geological knowledge to a wider scientific and interpretive sphere. Almost immediately after his arrival Teilhard made himself familiar with Licent's collection and, at the latter's urging, gave a report to the Geological Society of China. In June 1923 Teilhard and Licent undertook an expedition into the Ordos desert west of Peking near the border with Inner Mongolia. This expedition, and successive ones during the 1920s with Émile Licent, gave Teilhard invaluable information on Paleolithic remains in China. Teilhard's correspondence during this period also gives penetrating observations on Mongolian peoples, landscapes, vegetation, and animals of the region.

Teilhard returned to Paris in September of 1924 and resumed teaching at the Institute Catholique, but the intellectual climate in European Catholicism had not changed significantly. Pius XI, the new Pope since 1922, had allowed free reign to the conservative factions. It was in this hostile climate that a copy of a paper that Teilhard had delivered in Belgium made its way to Rome. A month after he returned from China Teilhard was ordered to appear before his provincial Superior to sign a statement repudiating his ideas on original sin. Teilhard's old friend Auguste Valensin was teaching theology in Lyon, and Teilhard sought his counsel regarding the statement of repudiation. In a meeting of the three Jesuits, the Superior agreed to send Rome a revised version of Teilhard's earlier paper and his response to the statement of repudiation.

In the interim before receiving Rome's reply to his revision, Teilhard continued his classes at the Institute. Those students who recalled the classes remembered the dynamic quality with which the young professor delivered his penetrating analysis of *homo faber*. According to Teilhard the human as tool-maker and user of fire represents a significant moment in the development of human consciousness or hominization of the species. It is in this period that Teilhard began to use the term of Edward Suess, "biosphere," or earth-layer of living things, in his geological schema along with hydrosphere and lithosphere. Teilhard then expanded the concept to include an additional earth-layer of thinking beings which, along with the Russian thinker, Vladimir Vernadsky, he called the "noosphere" from the Greek word *nous* meaning "mind." While his lectures were filled to capacity, his influence had so disturbed a bloc of conservative French bishops that they reported him to Vatican officials who in turn put pressure on the Jesuits to silence him.

The Jesuit Superior General of this period was Vladimir Ledochowski, a former Austrian military officer who sided openly with the conservative faction in the Vatican. Thus, in 1925 Teilhard was again ordered to sign a statement repudiating his controversial theories and to remove himself from France after the semesters courses.

Teilhard's associates at the museum, Marcellin Boule and Abbé Henri Breuil, recommended that he leave the Jesuits and become a diocesan priest. His friend, Auguste Valensin, and others recommended signing the statement and interpreting that act as a gesture of fidelity to the Jesuit order rather than one of intellectual assent to the Curia's demands. Valensin argued that the correctness of Teilhard's spirit was ultimately Heaven's business. After a week's retreat and reflection on the Ignatian Exercises, Teilhard signed the document in July 1925. It was the same week as the Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Tennessee which contested the validity of evolution.

In the spring of the following year Teilhard boarded a steamship bound for the Far East. The second period in Tientsin with Licent is marked by a number of significant

developments. First, the visits of the Crown Prince and Princess of Sweden and later that of Alfred Lacroix from the Paris Museum of Natural History, gave Teilhard new status in Peking and marked his gradual movement from Tientsin into the more sophisticated scientific circles of Peking. Here American, Swedish, and British teams had begun work at a rich site called Chou-kou-tien. Teilhard joined their work contributing his knowledge of Chinese geological formations and tool-making activities among prehistoric humans in China. With Licent Teilhard also undertook a significant expedition north of Peking to Dalai-Nor. Finally in an effort to state his views in a manner acceptable to his superiors Teilhard wrote *The Divine Milieu*. This mystical treatise was dedicated to those who love the world; it articulated his vision of the human as “matter at its most incendiary state.”

Meanwhile Teilhard had been in correspondence with his superiors who finally allowed him to return to France in August 1927. But even before Teilhard reached Marseille a new attack was made on his thought due to a series of his lectures which were published in a Paris journal. While Teilhard edited and rewrote *The Divine Mileu* in Paris, he was impatient for a direct confrontation with his critics. Finally in June 1928 the assistant to the Jesuit Superior General arrived in Paris to tell Teilhard that all his theological work must end and that he was to confine himself to scientific work. In this oppressive atmosphere Teilhard was forced to return to China in November 1928.

For the next eighteen years Teilhard continued his exile in China broken only by travel related to his scientific work and five brief visits to France. These visits were to see his family and friends who distributed copies of his articles and to give occasional talks to those student clubs in Belgium and Paris who continued to provide a forum for his ideas. These years were also very rich in geological expeditions for Teilhard. In 1929, Teilhard traveled in Somaliland and Ethiopia before returning to China. He played a major role in the find and interpretation of “Peking Man” at Chou-kou-tien in 1929-1930. In 1930 he joined Ray Chapman Andrew’s Central Mongolian Expedition at the Invitation of the American Museum of Natural History. The following year he made a trip across America which inspired him to write *The Spirit of the Earth*. From May 1931 to February 1932 he traveled into Central Asia with the famous Yellow Expedition sponsored by the Citroen automobile company. In 1934, with George Barbour he traveled up the Yangtze River and into the mountainous regions of Szechuan. A year later he joined the Yale-Cambridge expedition under Helmut de Terra in India and afterwards von Koenigswald’s expedition in Java. In 1937 he was awarded the Gregor Mendel medal at a Philadelphia Conference for his scientific accomplishments. That same year he went with the Harvard-Carnegie Expedition to Burma and then to Java with Helmut de Terra. As a result of this extensive field-work Teilhard became recognized as one of the foremost geologists of the earth’s terrain and interpreters of hominid evolution. This notoriety made him a valuable presence for the French government in intellectual circles east and west. His professional accomplishments are even more noteworthy when one recalls the profound tragedies that he experienced in the years between 1932 and 1936 when his father, mother, younger brother Victor, and his beloved sister, Guiguite, all died during his absence.

The final years of exile in China, 1939 to 1946, roughly correspond to the years of Word War II and the disintegration of central control in Chinese Republican policies. During this period, Teilhard and a fellow Jesuit and friend, Pierre Leroy, set up the Institute of Geobiology in Peking to protect the collection of Émile Licent and to provide



a laboratory for their on-going classification and interpretation of fossils. The most significant accomplishment of this period, however, was the completion of *The Human Phenomenon* in May of 1940. An important contribution of this work is the creative manner in which it situates the emergence of the human as the unifying theme of the evolutionary process. *The Human Phenomenon* in its presentation of the fourfold sequence of the evolutionary process (the sequence of evolution associated with the galaxies, the planet Earth, life on Earth and the emergence of consciousness) establishes what might be considered a new literary genre. That is, Teilhard located the human phenomenon in prior processes of universe emergence rather than seeing consciousness as wholly limited to the human.

With the war's end Teilhard received permission to return to France where he engaged in a variety of activities. He published numerous articles in the Jesuit journal, *Études*. He reworked *The Human Phenomenon* and sent a copy of it to Rome requesting permission for publication, a permission never granted in his lifetime. He was also asked to stand as a candidate for the prehistory chair at the Sorbonne's Collège de France soon to be vacated by his long-time friend, Abbé Henri Breuil. By May of 1947 Teilhard had exhausted himself in the attempt to restate his position and to deal with the expectations of his sympathetic readers. His exhaustion caused a heart attack on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1947. For Teilhard this illness meant a postponement in joining a University of California expedition to Africa sponsored by the Viking Fund of the Wenner-Gren Foundation in New York. Teilhard had looked forward to the trip as an interlude before the confrontation with Rome over *The Human Phenomenon* and the teaching position at the Sorbonne. While recovering from this illness, Teilhard was honored by the French Ministry of Foreign affairs for his scientific and intellectual achievements and was promoted to the rank of officer in the Legion of Honor.

In October 1948, Teilhard traveled to the United States. At this time he was invited to give a series of lectures at Columbia University. Permission was refused by the local Jesuit Superior. Suddenly in July 1948, Teilhard received an invitation to come to Rome to discuss the controversies surrounding his thought. Gradually Teilhard realized that the future of his work depended on this encounter and he prepared himself as he said, "to stroke the tiger's whiskers."

Rome in 1948 was a city just beginning its recovery from the war's devastation. The Vatican Curia was also beginning its reorganization; for Pius XII who had assumed the Pontificate in 1939 had been in relative isolation during the war years. In the late 1940s he developed his plans for the holy year of 1950. As a former Vatican diplomat, Pius XII brought to his office a more sophisticated intellectual effort, yet he also continued the Curia's conservative stance.

When Teilhard came to Rome he stayed at the Jesuit residence in Vatican City. After several meetings with the Jesuit general, Fr. Janssens, Teilhard realized that he would never be allowed to publish his work during his lifetime. Nor would he be granted permission to accept the position at the Collège de France. Those who spoke with Teilhard when he returned to Paris could sense the frustration that enveloped him as he groped to understand the forces against which he was so powerless. During the next two years Teilhard traveled extensively in England, Africa and the United States trying to determine an appropriate place to live now that China was no longer open. In December of 1951 he accepted a research position with the Wenner-Gren foundation in New York.

## The Final Years in New York

Teilhard's decision to live in New York was approved by his Jesuit Superiors and this resolved his uncertainty with regard to a place of residence. He lived in the following years with the Jesuit fathers at St. Ignatius Church on Park Avenue and walked both to his office at the Wenner-Gren Foundation and to the apartment of his self-appointed secretary and friend, Rhonda de Terra. Teilhard's correspondence with Father Pierre Leroy during these final years, recently published in English as *Letters from My Friend*, are remarkable in their lack of bitterness, their single-minded scientific focus, and insight into Teilhard's mystical vision.

In 1954 Teilhard visited France for the last time. He and his friend Leroy drove south together to the caves at Lascaux. Prior to visiting Lascaux they stopped at Sarcenat together with Mrs. De Terra who had joined them. Wordlessly they walked through the rooms until they came to his mother's room and her chair. Only then did Teilhard speak, saying half to himself, "This is the room where I was born." Hoping to spend his final years in his native country, Teilhard applied once more to his superiors for permission to return to France permanently. He was politely refused and encouraged to return to America.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin died on Easter Sunday, April 10, 1955 at six o'clock in the evening. His funeral on Easter Monday was attended by a few friends. Father Leroy and the ministering priest from St. Ignatius accompanied his body some sixty miles upstate from New York City where he was buried at St. Andrews-on Hudson, then the Jesuit novitiate.

Teilhard's life with its simple, quiet ending unfolds like the tree of life in his own description, slowly, seemingly half opened at points yet bearing within it an enduring dignity. As he wrote of the tree of life:

Before attempting to probe the secret of its life, let us take a good look at it. For from a merely external contemplation of it, there is a lesson and a force to be drawn from it: *the sense of its testimony*. (*The Human Phenomenon*, New York, 1965, p. 137)