



# Teilhard: Visionary Scientist A SPIRITUAL MASTER FOR THE MODERN AGE

By Eric A. Clayton

“**T**he deeper I descend into myself, the more I find God at the heart of my being,” wrote the French Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. “The more I multiply the links that attach me to things, the more closely does he hold me — the God who pursues in me the task, as endless as the whole sum of centuries, of the incarnation of his Son.”<sup>1</sup>

These words — taken from a collection of essays entitled *Writings in Time of War* that Teilhard drafted while serving on the front-line during World War I — evoke a sense of wistful urgency, a desire for more time, for more opportunities to uncover life’s deepest meaning and purpose.

Teilhard’s story didn’t end in the trenches of World War I. Unlike so many with whom he served, Teilhard got the chance to continue unraveling life’s mysteries, and he did so from a multitude of perspectives. Thanks to the new documentary, *Teilhard: Visionary Scientist* — now available for streaming on the PBS app — viewers can journey alongside Teilhard on this lifelong quest.

Born in rural France in 1881, Teilhard de Chardin lived a life of wondering and wandering, of seemingly intractable contradictions

and remarkable discovery. His mother instilled in him a deep devotional life of faith; his father inspired in him a love of fossils, rocks and scientific inquiry. The story of Teilhard spans the globe, from the academic heights of Paris to the archaeological frontiers of China, from the sacred sites of Rome to the lonely skyscrapers of New York City — where, in exile, he would die on Easter Sunday, 1955, at age 74.

The physical miles Teilhard traveled throughout his life pale in comparison to the spiritual depths to which this Jesuit scientist journeyed. Teilhard was a visionary ahead of his time. He was responsible for groundbreaking scientific discoveries, playing an instrumental role in the finding of Peking Man in the 1920s, an essential



The Chateau of Sarcenat, where Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born on May 1, 1881. (Photo credit: Teilhard de Chardin Project)

Above: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Photo credit: Fondation Teilhard de Chardin)



Peking Man Site at Zhoukoudian, China (Photo credit: Teilhard de Chardin Project)



Bust of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin at the Shuidonggou Museum in China (Photo credit: Teilhard de Chardin Project)

“missing link” in the ongoing understanding of human evolution. His scientific insights fueled and were fueled by mystical insights into God and evolution. But despite his effort to bridge science and faith, Teilhard was forbidden by his Jesuit superiors to publish or teach about theology or spiritual matters.

Teilhard’s struggles — both internal and external — take center stage in *Teilhard: Visionary Scientist*. These struggles, and the questions they raise, are ones modern-day viewers can understand.

“Themes that emerge from Teilhard’s story connect to issues very current in society and religion,” says Frank Frost, co-producer of the film and founder of Frank Frost Productions. “Themes like the compatibility of science and faith, a spirituality that embraces the world and looks to the future, ecological sustainability, evolution ever more evident in technology, the future of the human species...” The list goes on.

These are themes that resonate with a general audience, regardless of religious affiliation, making *Teilhard*

a film with a wide reach. “The suppression of his religious thought and his struggle against an unbending authority strike a nerve for many, making his story universal,” says Mary Link Frost, the other half of the husband-wife co-producing team.

Teilhard’s reluctant acceptance of that suppression, though, seems countercultural to modern ears, and it surprised even some of his

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contemporaries, who encouraged him to leave the religious life that, to their eyes, hampered his scientific mind. “He kept his fidelity to his Jesuit vows and to the Catholic Church, though he never understood why they couldn’t accept the gift he was offering them,” Mary said.

It was Teilhard’s desire to reconcile his understanding of evolution with his Catholic faith that got him into trouble. Teilhard was convinced that

the evolutionary view of life could not only exist alongside his faith but inform it. As a result, he found himself wrestling with the story of Adam and Eve — were humans literally descended from this single pair? — and, consequently, Church teachings on original sin. These ideas got the attention of his Jesuit superiors who insisted he affirm Church teaching or risk expulsion from the Society of Jesus.

Teilhard found himself living in this tension for the remainder of his life. He was energized by what he discerned to be God revealing Godself through the ongoing evolution of creation only to be forced by his Jesuit superiors to remain silent about his conclusions. Though his work influenced the Second Vatican Council and has enjoyed a renaissance under Pope Francis, Teilhard himself died fearing his writing





# Laudato Si'

On Care for Our Common Home

POPE FRANCIS

“The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.”

– In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis credits Teilhard de Chardin for this concept.



would forever be relegated to the trash bin of theological thought.

The “forbidden” nature of Teilhard’s work was, in part, the unlikely origin story of *Teilhard: Visionary Scientist*.

“The seeds of interest in Teilhard were planted 50 years before we started the film,” Frank remembers. In those days, Frank was studying to be a Jesuit. “[It was] a time when the Vatican warned seminary rectors not to allow their charges to read the ‘dangerous’ writings of Teilhard. So, of course, my peers and I did just that.”

Some 50 years later, Frank returned to his copy of Teilhard’s classic text, *The Divine Milieu*. He and Mary knew that Teilhard had an international following, but he was perhaps less well known in America.

“After having a preliminary discussion with PBS, and after doing due diligence, we discovered that there had never been a TV show about him in America,” Mary said. “And so, we launched the project and dove into research in earnest.”

“We learned that Georgetown University had a very extensive collection of his original texts, letters, scientific writings and artifacts,” said Frank. “So, the necessary research material was at hand. And even a little research told us that his life story contained all the drama that would make for good television.”

Still, it would take 13 years, span four countries and three continents and involve 35 interviews before the project was completed. The Frosts view the experience as a pilgrimage.

“Working on this project was a process of continual discovery,” Frank said. “At the beginning, we thought we were telling the story of a deeply spiritual man, which we were. So, it was a surprise to discover that he was also a world-class scientist, a down-in-the-dirt paleontologist who wrote as many detailed papers about geology and paleontology as he did essays that dealt with spirituality. This led us to make a course correction, giving greater attention to his scientific endeavors in China.”

“Arriving in China for research, we were further surprised to discover that Teilhard today is held in very high esteem by the Chinese scientific establishment,” Mary adds.

In some ways, the slow unfolding of the film and the many twists and turns of production mirror the famous prayer attributed to Teilhard — one of Mary’s favorites: “Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. ... Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

Frank and Mary Frost pose in front of a fossil excavated by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, now displayed in the Museum of Natural History in Paris. (Photo credit: Teilhard de Chardin Project)



Certainly, Teilhard was forced to learn to accept the anxiety of living in a state of constant suspense: Would he be able to teach? Would he be able to publish? Where would he be asked to travel next? His story is one of begrudging acceptance, but also of total trust in a God who would continue to guide his life's journey. And Teilhard wanted to know that God.

“For Teilhard, the heart of God is found at the heart of the world, and the living, natural world is shot through with the presence of the divine, with what he eventually was to call ‘the divine milieu,’” writes biographer Ursula King.<sup>2</sup> “Teilhard’s incarnate spirituality of divinized matter and flesh, of the sacramental offering up of the whole world with all its toil and pain to God, is the very basis for holding together all the elements of his worldview.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2015, 60 years after Teilhard’s death, Pope Francis published his groundbreaking encyclical *Laudato si’*, on caring for our common home. In it, the pope writes: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.” He credits Teilhard for this line of thought.

Deemed too radical for his own era, time has shown that Teilhard was indeed a visionary scientist, a deeply committed Jesuit priest and an individual with a keen sense of what it means to inhabit a mystic tradition. For us in our day, struggling “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor,” Teilhard de Chardin is exactly the spiritual master we need.<sup>4</sup>

Check out Teilhard: Visionary Scientist at [TeilhardProject.com](http://TeilhardProject.com) or on the PBS app.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>“Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Modern Spiritual Masters Series,” (Orbis, 1999), 50-51.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>4</sup>*Laudato si’*, 49.



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Teilhard as a Jesuit novice, age 18



Teilhard as a teenager with his class at Mongré Jesuit High School, around 1896



Teilhard poses with other young Jesuits in August 1909.

La promotion de "L'Arbre" avant de quitter Jency - Août 1909

Photos courtesy of the Archives Jesuites of the Western European Province of the Society of Jesus, Vanves, France.