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Eucharist, Matter and the Supernatural: Why de Lubac Needs Teilhard

Toute la théorie du Surnaturel ... s'agite dans un domaine de pensée que la plupart des modernes ont déserté... Nous sommes totalement et essentiellement *suspendus* à l'attraction divine.¹

Abstract

Henri de Lubac intended to found his theology on a revaluation of nature achieved by reasserting its dependence on divine action. He usually identifies nature with human nature however, and therefore fails to demonstrate that the entire natural order depends on God for its creation, preservation and redemption. In his extensive engagement with the oeuvre of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, de Lubac nevertheless begins to revise this reduction of nature to human nature, although does not fully incorporate these insights into his theology. Teilhard's fundamentally eucharistic understanding of materiality provides suggestive possibilities for the successful completion of de Lubac's abolition of the theory of pure nature.

Henri de Lubac and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin first met in the early 1920s, while de Lubac was studying at the Maison Saint-Louis, the Jesuit philosophate at St Helier on Jersey, and Teilhard was lecturing at the Institut Catholique in Paris.² Their intellectual friendship continued, sustained often by letter writing, for over three decades up until Teilhard's death in 1955. De Lubac became instrumental in the posthumous publication and interpretation of Teilhard's theology, producing several substantial and controversial monographs and articles, and preparing various volumes of letters. He refers to the editorial work which formed part of these projects as 'one of the most useful

¹ Letter of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to Henri de Lubac, 27 June 1934, in *Lettres intimes à Auguste Valensin, Bruno de Solages, Henri de Lubac, André Ravier, 1919–1955*, ed. Henri de Lubac (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1972), pp. 277–78, original emphasis. This collection includes 23 of Teilhard's letters to de Lubac written in the period 1930 to 1949.

² Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned his Writings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), p. 105, dates their friendship from either 1921 or 1922. It is possible, however, that the two first met during August 1920, when Teilhard visited St Mary's College, Canterbury, where de Lubac had just completed his juniorate. See *Lettres intimes*, p. 64, n. 11; Jean-Pierre Wagner, *Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), p. 12.

tasks ever given to me to accomplish'.³ Teilhard's theology, he affirms, restores the catholic harmony between nature and grace⁴—an aim identical to his own.

De Lubac's interest in Teilhard was not, however, purely editorial. Teilhard's theology remained latent in his own oeuvre, and I will show how he goes some way towards reassessing its significance in his 1980 *Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*. Despite this, and the fact that de Lubac continues to be the most important expositor of Teilhard's theology, its impact on his own theological enterprise has received little attention, especially where the questions it poses to his eucharistic theology are concerned.⁵

De Lubac's Retention of the Concept of Pure Nature

De Lubac's central abiding theological concern was to challenge the prevailing understanding in contemporary catholic theology of the relation between nature and the supernatural.⁶ Nature and grace were, according to the reigning Neo-Thomist consensus, separate and discontinuous, with nature regarded as complete in itself and not dependent on divine action for its preservation. This 'pure nature' was, indeed unable to enjoy any form of relation with God, neither of participated being nor of knowledge, because its end, appetite and powers were regarded as solely natural.⁷ Suárez, who formulated the theory explicitly, argued that humanity possesses a distinct spiritual nature on which God can elect to act, proposing models of pure nature and graced nature which denied the possibility of interaction between the two. De Lubac summarizes this theory as follows:

³ De Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, p. 101; see especially Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1970); *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin and Note on the Apologetics of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965).

⁴ De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 130.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Wagner, « Henri de Lubac et Pierre Teilhard de Chardin : le sens d'une hospitalité », *Revue des sciences religieuses* 77, 2 (2003), pp. 199–214, focuses on Teilhard's incarnational realism. Marc Pelchat, « Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et Henri de Lubac : pour une nouvelle synthèse théologique à l'âge scientifique », *Laval théologique et philosophique* 45 (1989), pp. 269, 273, recognizes that both Teilhard and de Lubac present, in different ways, a theological cosmology in which physical nature is not construed separately from grace. James R. Pambrun, 'The Presence of God: A Note on the Apologetics of Henri de Lubac and Teilhard de Chardin', *Église et théologie* 10 (1979), p. 368, identifies divine presence, a dialectic of transcendence and immanence, and engagement with human experience as their common grounding. None of these pertinent assessments translates its insights eucharistically.

⁶ This is argued convincingly in John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005). For a summary, see David Grumett, *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2007), ch. 1.

⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), pp. 158–59.

In the complete system, the two series—pure nature and supernaturalized nature, or nature called to the supernatural—flowed along parallel channels in complete harmony.⁸

De Lubac rejects the view that there is any absolute difference between the supernatural and natural realms such that no mutual interaction is possible, affirming that the ‘*ordo gratiae* (order of grace) contains and perfects the *ordo naturae* (order of nature)’. God is, in other words, *naturarum auctor*, the originator of natures.⁹ De Lubac states:

Nature was made for the supernatural, and, without having any right over it, nature is not explained without it. As a result, the whole natural order, not only in man but in the destiny of man, is already penetrated by something supernatural that shapes and attracts it.¹⁰

The containment of nature is just as important here as the possibility of its exaltation. De Lubac, following Aquinas, does not suggest that a simple passage from nature to grace is possible, because to do so would be to erode the distinction which exists between them, and to present nature as being the cause of its own salvation. The importance and uniqueness of grace is that it alone makes possible the perfection of the properties and attributes specific to nature.

De Lubac consistently affirms his determination to eradicate the concept of pure nature from theological discourse, and believed that he had accomplished this task. Regrettably, however, his success was only partial. This is because ‘nature’ implies *human* nature in most of de Lubac’s work, and he omits any serious consideration of the role of supernatural action in constituting, preserving and redeeming the wider created order. The concept of pure nature therefore remains intact in his understanding of material creation, with existence and essence intrinsic to it rather than a divine gift. Paul McPartlan perceptively contends that de Lubac ‘ventures to explain only Jesus’ gathering of *humanity* into himself’, and states of the association of the eucharist with eternity which de Lubac establishes: ‘Rather than bringing the material creation into the *aevum*, the link serves to make of the Eucharist an experience of Augustinian *abstraction* from material creation.’¹¹ Indeed, in his classic study *Catholicism*, de Lubac specifically excludes from consideration the ‘rich resources of Scripture and the great doctors on the subject of human solidarity with the universe’.¹² At no future point does he remedy this omission.¹³

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp. 41.

⁹ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, pp. 26, 21.

¹⁰ Henri de Lubac, ‘Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred’, in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), p. 231.

¹¹ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 59, 294, original italics.

¹² Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), p. 17.

¹³ McPartlan, *Eucharist Makes the Church*, p. 290.

Even more can be said, however, because human beings, inalienably embodied, are themselves evidently part of the material order. On this point, McPartlan argues that de Lubac's theology belies an 'admitted lack of integration of human beings with the rest of creation and of creation in general with the Kingdom'.¹⁴ It could be said in de Lubac's defence that he at least desists from schematically separating body, soul and spirit into distinct faculties, preferring in his 'Tripartite Anthropology' essay to designate them as particular states of a whole person.¹⁵ He nevertheless fails to take proper account of human embodiment, partly because in this essay, his principal exposition of the human person, he seeks to oppose a dualistic anthropology of flesh warring against the spirit with a distinctively Christian—not, he argues, Hellenic—trichotomy of body, soul and spirit inspired by 1 Thessalonians 5:23. He does not therefore completely eliminate the concept of pure nature even from his notion of humanity, excising it fully only from the third spiritual aspect of humanity.

Teilhard's Supernatural Conception of Nature

Readers of de Lubac usually look to *Surnaturel*, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, and *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* for his concept of nature, and it is these readings which this paper has so far summarized. In his late study *Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, published in 1980, de Lubac nevertheless admits some qualifications to this standard position. In particular, he acknowledges the possibility of a definition of nature not restricted to the purely human:

The word 'nature' can mean either, in a more general sense, the entire sense, the whole order of creation, or again, in a more particular and direct sense, human nature; but without there being any need to cut man off completely from the universe... If, because of what makes him the 'image of God', man is superior to the cosmos, he still remains nonetheless a 'microcosm', just as Christian anthropology has always conceived him; and no one has shown this better in our day than Fr. Teilhard de Chardin when he gave a new impulse to this classical view through the history of life.¹⁶

De Lubac proceeds to examine the concept of transformation which Teilhard uses to describe the action of the supernatural on nature. The supernatural does not simply elevate or penetrate nature, he suggests, but changes nature in a movement which includes both metamorphosis and

¹⁴ McPartlan, *Eucharist Makes the Church*, p. 294.

¹⁵ Henri de Lubac, 'Tripartite Anthropology', in *Theology in History*, p. 117.

¹⁶ Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), pp. 10–11.

transfiguration. It is a ‘ferment, a soul, not a complete organism. Its role is to transform “nature”.’¹⁷ He quotes approvingly Teilhard’s statement that

the supernatural fullness grows out of the natural universe according to a law of transformation ... in that the supernatural actually rearranges the elements of this world to the point of making them truly more and other than what they were.¹⁸

Transformation is, in other words, a divine creative event which necessarily encompasses material nature as well as spiritual nature. Teilhard suggests that a ‘real quality of grace’ exists which does not remain external to humanity. Divine grace, de Lubac similarly states, ‘without any commingling of natures ... really leaves its mark on our nature and becomes in us a principle of life’.¹⁹

Teilhard had, in fact, provided de Lubac with the outlines of an account of nature’s material dimension almost fifty years earlier, while de Lubac’s theology of the *surnaturel* was in early gestation. In a letter written to de Lubac in 1934, commenting on de Lubac’s essay « Remarques sur l’histoire du mot ‘Surnaturel’ », Teilhard observes approvingly that the ‘greatest flaw in the [received understanding of the] “supernatural” is to contrast it with a static notion of “nature”’.²⁰ Teilhard realizes that the concept of pure nature separated from the supernatural provides the object of both de Lubac’s critique and his own. In so doing, however, he identifies their methodological differences: de Lubac’s enterprise is primarily archaeological, in contrast with Teilhard’s own effort to reconceive the supernatural in light of modern religious and quasi-religious experience. Even so, in his next letter to de Lubac, Teilhard defines the particular elements of the tradition which require rethinking, stating that he is

more and more persuaded that all the difficulties currently encountered by religious thought and practice are connected with the need to rethink a very small number of fundamental points (probably reducible to just one): concept of Union, physical unity of the Universe, spiritual value of ‘matter’.²¹

¹⁷ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, p. 49; quotation from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 116. De Lubac tellingly omits the following qualifying phrase: ‘... but [the supernatural] cannot do so apart from the matter with which nature provides it.’

¹⁸ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, p. 55; quotation from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, paper of 12 December 1919, in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – Maurice Blondel: Correspondence*, ed. Henri de Lubac (New York: Herder & Herder, 1976), p. 33.

¹⁹ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, pp. 50, 42.

²⁰ Letter of Teilhard to de Lubac, 27 June 1934, in *Lettres intimes*, pp. 277–78; see « Remarques sur l’histoire du mot ‘surnaturel’ », *Nouvelle revue théologique* 61 (1934), pp. 225–49, 350–70. This essay provided some of the third part of *Surnaturel : études historiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1946).

²¹ Letter of Teilhard to de Lubac, 15 September 1934, in *Lettres intimes*, pp. 294–95.

To understand materiality in all its dimensions was indeed an abiding concern of Teilhard's from the earliest years of his life. One dimension of this work was for him scientific, but he pursued with equal determination the search for a specifically theological conception of matter, its relation to spirit, and its preservation by divine action.²² As early as 1918, he identifies faith in Christ with a teleological principle of the 'integration of the natural in the supernatural' which superimposes itself on human activity and consciousness, granting them a 'sort of vital infallibility, the power to penetrate boldly into the Real, and the firm guarantee of a single, inflexible direction'.²³ For Teilhard, humanity is thus the agent of divine action on matter in a role analogous to the priest's at the eucharist.

De Lubac on the Eucharist

In 1930, Maurice Blondel published a French resumé of his Latin dissertation on the bond of substance in Leibniz, and de Lubac reviewed the abridged work in *La Vie catholique*. He commences the review by comparing the reception of this work with Blondel's other, on action, expressing his surprise that 'during the lengthy controversies kindled by the publication of *L'Action*, there has been hardly any discussion of the Latin thesis that accompanied it'.²⁴ De Lubac accepts the translation which Blondel effects in *L'Action* of Leibniz's materialistic concern into a less concrete philosophy of action concerned with the transformation of human will, communities and wider society, rather than with the questions about substance and matter central to Leibniz and Teilhard.²⁵ In his own words: 'Blondel shows the Eucharist to be the privileged case that precedes and prepares the everlasting bond of love when the universe will reach its culmination in Christ.'²⁶

²² For more extensive discussion of this point, see David Grumett, 'The Eucharistic Cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin', *Theology* 110, 1 (2007), pp. 22–30.

²³ De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 127; reference to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Operative faith', in *Writings in Time of War* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 244. This collection was anonymously co-edited by de Lubac and Bruno de Solages (De Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, p. 108).

²⁴ Henri de Lubac, "'Vinculum substantiale'", in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), p. 401. The original *thèse secondaire* is Maurice Blondel, *De vinculo substantiali et de substantia composita apud Leibnitium* (Paris: Alcan, 1893); trans. *Le Lien substantiel et la substance composée d'après Leibniz* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1972). The synopsis on which de Lubac comments is Maurice Blondel, *Une énigme historique : le vinculum substantiale d'après Leibniz et l'ébauche d'un réalisme supérieur* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1930).

²⁵ For these Leibnizian motifs in Teilhard, see David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 13–36.

²⁶ De Lubac, "'Vinculum substantiale'", p. 403.

De Lubac's eucharistic theology is most clearly expressed in his 1944 study *Corpus Mysticum*, recently published in English translation.²⁷ The term 'mystical body' was used to refer to the eucharistic body of Christ in a way which distinguished it from the actual historical body of Jesus, rather than equating the two. In *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac argues that the term was subject to a gradual shift in reference and meaning. Prior to the middle of the twelfth century, he contends, it had typically been used to designate the host, whereas it then began to be employed to refer to the church as well. Participation in the eucharist, identified with the flesh (*caro*) of Christ, thus became identified with participation in the church as the body (*corpus*) of Christ. This modulation provided the possibility of a renewed fusion of Christ, church and sacrament. In practice, however, it allowed the visible church to be regarded as a purely political and administrative *corpus mysticum*. This theory attained its apogee in Giles of Rome's treatise on ecclesiastical power, which Giles believed to be the source of all political power and authority, with its fullness in the papacy.²⁸ Wider society is, by implication, then interpreted as an opposed secular realm rather than as one infused with divine grace. De Lubac regards the theological outcome of this shift in identification to be the Reformation understandings of the eucharist as merely symbolic of the presence of Christ, rather than as actually comprising Christ's mystical body. He intends, in contrast, to rearticulate a eucharistic ecclesiology in which the spiritual presence of Christ is distinguished from his presence in the flesh as a means of *affirming* the substantiality of the body of Christ in the eucharist, and thereby in the church, rather than of denying or diminishing its reality. It is therefore a founding principle of his ecclesiology that the eucharist makes the Church. He affirms: 'Eucharistic realism and ecclesial realism: these two realisms support one another, each is the guarantee of the other. Ecclesial realism safeguards eucharistic realism and the latter confirms the former.'²⁹

The implications of de Lubac's eucharistic ecclesiology are, however, ambiguous. His ecclesial interpretation of the eucharist is an attempt to challenge accounts of the eucharist 'fixated' on the definition and defence of presence³⁰ and thereby to revivify the church community. It is fundamental to his identification of the church as the body of Christ rather than the people of God—an equation which, whilst not denying the status of the eucharistic species as also the body of Christ, was to have the unintended effect of demystifying the eucharist and understating its supernatural dimension. De Lubac would, indeed, later see the liturgical movements within the church spawned by particular interpretations of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council as

²⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM, 2006).

²⁸ De Lubac, "Political Augustinianism?", in *Theological Fragments*, p. 269. See R.W. Dyson, *Giles of Rome on Ecclesiastical Power*, I.3 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986).

²⁹ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, p. 251.

³⁰ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, p. 220.

accentuating the diminution of the sense of the sacred. These liturgical-ecclesial changes contributed, he believes, to the growth of secularism in its place, which promoted the estrangement of nature from the supernatural order in opposition to his own conviction, grounded on faith in Christ, that nature must remain open to transformation and transfiguration by the supernatural.³¹ Yet by failing to promote and defend materialist notions of the eucharist, de Lubac unwittingly expedited this process of separation.

Teilhard on the Eucharist

Teilhard links the eucharist explicitly and directly to Christ's action on the material world. This principal sacrament does not signify simply membership of the church, but displays the action and transformation which are part of the everyday life of Christians, and also motivated by the action of Christ. More importantly, the eucharist *is* that transformation. During the autumn of 1919, Teilhard despatched a selection of his wartime writings to Maurice Blondel for advice and comments. Blondel stated in his response:

The question raised by Leibniz and des Bosses concerning transubstantiation during the Eucharist leads us to conceive of Christ ... as the bond which makes substantiation possible, the vivifying agent for all creation: the bond of perfection.³²

This letter establishes a crucial link between Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology, Leibniz's theory of the bond of substance in the eucharist, and Blondel's discussion of its wider metaphysical implications. Leibniz and Blondel inspire Teilhard's conception of the eucharist as the exemplary instance of divine action on matter, and of Christ as the 'true bond that holds the World together'.³³ De Lubac, confirming this association, cites a passage from Blondel's 1930 resumé of his Latin thesis in order to demonstrate its affinities with Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology: 'Transubstantiation ... is therefore seen by us as the prelude, hidden under the veil of mystery, to the final assimilation and supreme incorporation in the incarnate Word of all that exists.'³⁴ De Lubac is thus clearly aware of Teilhard's very different development of eucharistic theology from his own, though appears not to appreciate its full importance.

Teilhard's theological interest in the eucharist preceded his correspondence with Blondel, emerging from the eucharistic spirituality of his early years. It provided the topic for his 1911

³¹ See Christopher J. Walsh, 'De Lubac's Critique of the Postconiliar Church', *Communio* 19 (1992), p. 407.

³² Maurice Blondel, paper of 5 December 1919, in *Teilhard – Blondel: Correspondence*, p. 23.

³³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The mystical milieu', in *Writings in Time of War*, p. 142.

³⁴ Henri de Lubac, *The Eternal Feminine: A Study on the Poem by Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1971), p. 249, n. 31; quoting Blondel, *Une énigme historique*, pp. 103–106.

thesis, prepared whilst a student at the Jesuit theology scholasticate at Ore Place, Hastings,³⁵ and is identifiable in many of his wartime writings as part of a wider concern to understand the theological significance of materiality. Matter is both natural and offered to transformative supernatural action, and these facts are revealed ecclesially. Teilhard affirms:

In its dogmas and sacraments, the whole economy of the Church teaches us respect for matter and insists on its value. Christ wished to assume, and had to assume, a real flesh. He sanctifies human flesh by a specific contact. He makes ready, physically, its Resurrection. In the Christian concept, then, matter retains its cosmic role as the basis, lower in order but primordial and essential, of union.³⁶

De Lubac identifies the primary element of Teilhard's eucharistic theology as being the 'extensions' of the eucharist. The physical transformation effected in the host is not, Teilhard argues, confined within the visible surface of the bread itself:

When the priest says the words *Hoc est Corpus meum*, his words fall directly on to the bread and directly transform it into the individual reality of Christ. But the great sacramental operation does not cease at that local and momentary event.³⁷

Teilhard believes that the transformative action of Christ cannot be restricted to the matter of the particular eucharistic host as delineated by its persisting accidents, and communicates this intuition in one place with the image of the whole of creation as an altar: nature is matter offered to the supernatural.³⁸ Embracing Blondel's appropriation of Leibniz's bond of substance, Teilhard develops a cosmology in which the action of Christ is required to sustain all composite substances in the world, and not just the eucharist. In so doing, he nonetheless subjects Blondel to a theological turn. Blondel, he had complained to de Lubac, tended to 'remain too long in metaphysics'³⁹ in so far as he employed the eucharist as a philosophical model and thereby evacuated it of any distinctively theological meaning. Teilhard, in contrast, regards the eucharist as not only signifying the presence of Christ in the world but as actually embodying and realizing that presence, employing striking light and fire imagery to express this cosmology:

³⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from Hastings, 1908–1912*, ed. Henri de Lubac (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 179, n.

³⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Cosmic Life', in *Writings in Time of War*, p. 64.

³⁷ De Lubac, *Faith of Teilhard*, p. 59; allusion in de Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 65: 'The priestly function extends to the growth of the mystical body and the consecration of the cosmos.'; cf. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 85.

³⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Mass on the World', in *The Heart of Matter* (San Diego: Harvest, 1974), p. 119. De Lubac, *Faith of Teilhard*, p. 125.

³⁹ Letter of Teilhard to de Lubac, 9 February 1931, in *Lettres intimes*, p. 224.

The Host is like a burning hearth from which flames spread and radiate. As the spark thrown into the briars is soon surrounded by a circle of fire, so, throughout the centuries, the sacramental Host (for these is but one Host, growing ever greater in the hands of priests as one follows after another), the Host of bread, I repeat, is continually more closely surrounded by another Host, infinitely greater, which is nothing less than the universe itself—the universe gradually absorbed by the universal Element.⁴⁰

This universal element is Christ, the bond of substance who gives unity and intelligibility to all substances in the world. Teilhard states: ‘The sacramental action of Christ, precisely because it sanctifies matter, extends its influence beyond the purely supernatural.’⁴¹

De Lubac recognizes that Teilhard’s eucharistic theology is, like his own, the product of a genealogy, even if Teilhard does not identify all its antecedents and probably remains unaware of many of them. He observes:

In the Eucharist, which is the central mystery, Teilhard contemplates both the extension of the Incarnation of the Word and the promise of the world’s transfiguration. Here again his faith is as realistic as it is lively. He accepts the dogma literally; but his realism cannot be satisfied by the literal expression of the revelation... He seeks, accordingly, ‘worthily to interpret the fundamental position that the Eucharist holds in the economy of the world’. He considers its ‘extensions’; following the liturgy and a number of ancient writers, he sees that it already contains what it effectively signifies. Thus it is that, in his own way, he spontaneously rediscovers something of the fullness of tradition that our age was in the process of forgetting.⁴²

De Lubac certainly regards Teilhard as an inheritor of the patristic vision of the unity of the whole cosmos in Christ.⁴³ Christian confidence in the world is justified by supernatural action on

⁴⁰ De Lubac, *Faith of Teilhard*, p. 58, and generally pp. 56–61; De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 65; cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘My Universe’, in *Science and Christ* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 65.

⁴¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 87.

⁴² De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 65; cf. *At the Service of the Church*, p. 318.

⁴³ Teilhard obviously appropriates, for instance, the eucharistic cosmology of Gregory of Nyssa. Compare ‘Your life is so much stronger than ours that it dominates us, absorbs us, and assimilates us to itself... Although I might have imagined that it was I who held the consecrated Bread and gave myself its nourishment, I now see with blinding clarity that it is the Bread that takes hold of me and draws me to itself.’ (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘The Priest’, in *Writings in Time of War*, pp. 210, 214–15, amended translation.)

with

‘That body to which immortality has been given it by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself... The immortal Body, by being within that which receives it, changes the whole to its own nature... The mere framework of our body possesses nothing belonging to itself that is cognizable by us, to hold it together, but remains in

materiality world and not vague pantheist notions of its numinous character. Teilhard, de Lubac states, ‘in no way regards the world as sacred in itself’ but ‘sees it as wholly “sacralized” by the universal presence of its Creator’. Moreover

he sees it as ‘consecrated’ by the presence of the risen Christ, his ‘immortal and unifying’ presence radiating through the eucharist... Such a concept of the ‘consecration of the world’ is therefore equally far removed from the secularist theory and from that which attributes to the world, in itself and by itself, a sacred character.⁴⁴

It has long been fashionable to criticize Teilhard for an excessively optimistic view of nature and of the role of humankind in shaping it.⁴⁵ Critics of his cosmology invariably fail, however, to consider the incarnational and eucharistic basis of this vision, and the place of sacrifice and redemption within it.⁴⁶ Indeed, from this perspective, a denial of the grandeur and dignity of the created order would amount to a refusal of the all-pervasive power of supernatural action on it and within it.

Christ, the Church and the World

Teilhard’s eucharistic theology is intimately linked with his cosmic christology, owing to the real presence of the body of Christ in the eucharist as exemplary of the function of Christ as universal bond of the whole created order. Christ’s universal presence is, de Lubac states in a discussion of Teilhard, the ‘effect and continuation into infinity of the Eucharistic transubstantiation’.⁴⁷ In both his principal studies of Teilhard’s theology, he quotes a draft of Teilhard’s essay ‘Forma Christi’ which refers to ‘Christ who is more real than any other reality in the World, the Christ who is everywhere present and everywhere growing, the Christ who is the ultimate determining force and moulding principle of the Universe’.⁴⁸ De Lubac later describes the cosmos as a sacrament through which God is discovered, identifying this with Teilhard’s ‘divine milieu’ in which the action of God on the world, and presence of God in the world, are revealed.⁴⁹ He compares Teilhard’s cosmology with that of Jules Monchanin, making clear that both theologians consider

existence owing to a force that is introduced into it.’ (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, § 37, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, II.5 (28 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 504–506.)

⁴⁴ De Lubac, *Eternal Feminine*, p. 182.

⁴⁵ e.g. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, *Systematic Theology*, I (2 vols.; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991), p. 229. See Grumett, *Teilhard*, pp. 257–60.

⁴⁶ Grumett, *Teilhard*, pp. 73–102.

⁴⁷ De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 129.

⁴⁸ De Lubac, *Faith of Teilhard*, p. vii; de Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 67.

⁴⁹ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, p. 213.

transubstantiation to be dependent on the physical action of Christ on the cosmos. Monchanin envisions

*The sacraments, which, like stars, gravitate around The Sacrament: his Resurrected Body, in its inadmissible, transbiological and transhistorical mode, no longer an element of the universe but transcending the universe and ordering, by conferring its meaning upon it. Such is at least my theology of the Eucharistic Sign, so real that it is reifying the world. It is in and through the Eucharist that matter, in transubstantiating itself, acquires its essence which it reveals.*⁵⁰

De Lubac recognizes that Teilhard appropriates research into the Pauline cosmic Christ by Ferdinand Prat, Teilhard's former tutor, and Joseph Huby, his contemporary at Hastings.⁵¹ This reminded Teilhard forcibly that no theology which fully appraises the power of Christ's action on the world and its comprehensive character can avoid considering the cosmic aspect of his work. In the words of Karl Barth, referring in passing to an apparently distinct cosmic dimension of Christ's action:

Does He really exist only as the One He alone is with God, and then as the One He is with and in His community? Does He not already exist and act and achieve and work also as the *Pantocrator*, as the κεφαλῆ; ὑπε;ρ παννννννννννννννντα, as the One who alone has first and final power in the cosmos?⁵²

Whilst Barth does not develop these insights⁵³ like Teilhard does, he nevertheless suggests just as insistently that the effects of Christ's incarnation must extend to the entire cosmos.

Although de Lubac undertakes an attentive, detailed and sympathetic reading of Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology, he ultimately does not integrate the insights gained into his theory of the supernatural or his ecclesiology. A particular difficulty with de Lubac's theology is the exclusively ecclesial setting within which the eucharist is confined. His virtually univocal identification of the Church as the body of Christ, and of the eucharist as signifying this identity, effectively prevents

⁵⁰ Henri de Lubac, « L'Abbé Monchanin et le Père Teilhard de Chardin », in *Images de l'abbé Monchanin* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967), pp. 142–43; partial trans. in *At the Service of the Church*, p. 336; from Jules Monchanin, *Écrits spirituels* (Paris: Centurion, 1979), pp. 129–30.

⁵¹ De Lubac, *Faith of Teilhard*, p. 34, and generally pp. 29–38; see Ferdinand Prat, *La Théologie de saint Paul* (2 vols.; Paris: Beauchesne, 1908–1912); trans. *The Theology of Saint Paul* (2 vols.; London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1945); Joseph Huby, *Saint Paul : les épîtres de la captivité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1935). The two major studies are James Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin: A Comparative Study* (Oxford University Press, 1982); and Christopher Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (London: Collins, 1966).

⁵² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 72, 1 (10 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77), p. 756, quoted in Lyons, *Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard*, p. 57.

⁵³ John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2nd edn, 2004), pp. 111–12, discusses Barth's failure to develop a theology of nature.

him from developing a conception of the eucharist as representing the substantial unity of the wider created order in Christ. De Lubac admittedly leaves open the latter possibility in places, stating for instance that ‘we can give the name “Church” to that gigantic organism which includes the host of angels as well as men, and even extends to the whole of the cosmos as well’.⁵⁴ This definition of church would, however, encompass many people who do not regard themselves as part of it in even an analogical sense, whether because of unbelief or owing to commitment to another religion, as well as material objects that possess no liturgical or ecclesial function. Teilhard argues, in contrast, that it is the *specificity* of the church, and in the context of the eucharist the transformation of matter effected by it, which embody the sanctifying supernatural power which extends beyond the boundaries of the church through the wider created order.

Teilhard emphasizes that the church’s mission is wholly dependent on its adherence to the creative and physical action of Christ in the transformation of the material world. It is at this point that his reading of scripture becomes a governing influence on his theology. Susan Wood identifies, in her study of de Lubac’s scriptural exegesis, Blondel’s notion of the ‘concrete universal’ with the typological relation of Christ and Mary to the church, yet states that ‘de Lubac himself does not draw this connection between Teilhard’s work and the intellectual framework of his own work’.⁵⁵ The reason, I suggest, that de Lubac fails to exploit this comparison is that he recognizes that Teilhard, in his reading of scripture, does not in fact identify the concrete universal exclusively with the church, even though the church occupies an absolutely fundamental place in his theology and cosmology as the organic body in which creation, history and redemption are focused.⁵⁶ He usually employs scriptural analogy to describe the action of Christ not so much on the church as on the universe as a whole.⁵⁷ Christ, he states, is ‘he in whom everything is reunited, and in whom all things are consummated—through whom the whole created edifice receives its consistency—Christ dead and risen *qui replet omnia, in quo omnia constant*’.⁵⁸ Particularly striking is a gloss of Teilhard’s combining at least four scriptural passages, which praises Christ as

the Alpha and the Omega, the principle and the end, the foundation stone and the keystone, the Plenitude and the Plenifier. He is the one who consummates all things and gives them

⁵⁴ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), p. 90.

⁵⁵ Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 101.

⁵⁶ This point is rarely recognized, but two recent discussions are David Grumett, ‘Church, World and Christ in Teilhard de Chardin’, *Ecclesiology* 1 (2004), pp. 87–103; Mathias Trennert-Helwig, ‘The Church as Axis of Convergence in Teilhard’s Theology and Life’, *Zygon* 30, 1 (1995), pp. 73–89.

⁵⁷ See the excellent study Richard W. Kropf, *Teilhard, Scripture and Revelation: A Study of Teilhard de Chardin’s Reinterpretation of Pauline Themes* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1980).

⁵⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 84; cf. Col 2.10, 1.17.

their consistence. It is towards him and through him, the inner life and light of the world, that the universal convergence of all created spirit is effected in sweat and tears. He is the single centre, precious and consistent, who glitters at the summit that is to crown the world.⁵⁹

Teilhard therefore envisions the sacramental mission of the church as a movement towards a world already predisposed to receive Christ owing to its natural orientation to receive the grace granted to it by his supernatural action.

Conclusion

Hans Urs von Balthasar perceptively observes that Teilhard's work 'provides an occasion to develop more intensively a whole dimension—the cosmic dimension—in de Lubac's thought'. He states: 'De Lubac's whole problematic of the "*desiderium naturale*" appears in a radical form with Teilhard: the entire universe from its lowest level as pure matter is nothing else but this.'⁶⁰ Teilhard offers a theological account of how the whole created order is given an orientation and desire for God by virtue of its supernatural creation, preservation and redemption. De Lubac needs this perspective in order to complete his critique of the concept of pure nature, motivated in part by a pastoral concern about a declining mystical sense in church life.⁶¹ De Lubac's relation with Teilhard is indeed one of need rather than dependence: whilst inspired by Teilhard, he fails to complete the appropriation of Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology into his own eucharistic ecclesiology that would resolve the aporia in the latter which I have highlighted. Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology also provides, at the pastoral level, a suggestive antidote to the declining mystical sense which de Lubac laments—not, crucially, by abolishing the reality of the material order, but through completing it. As de Lubac himself states, in the course of expounding Teilhard's understanding of the grace-nature relation: 'It is the nature of lower things to be drawn to and absorbed in the higher, not in such a way that they cease to be, but so that they are more fully preserved in the higher, and they subsist, and are one.'⁶² The eucharist thus guarantees the reality of the world by revealing, in its materiality, the impossibility of pure nature.

6,650 words, including footnotes.

⁵⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Science and Christ', in *Science and Christ* (London: Collins, 1968), pp. 34–35; cf. Rv 22.13, Col 1.17, Jn 8.12, Rm 8.22. Other important passages for cosmic christology include Acts 17.28, 1 Cor 15.28, Eph 1.10, 1.23, 4.9–10, Col 1.15–20.

⁶⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp. 83, 88.

⁶¹ De Lubac, 'Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred', p. 230.

⁶² De Lubac, *Religion of Teilhard*, p. 159.