

A Jesuit Centennial at Hastings

by Edward P. Echlin



The ancient fishing port of Hastings, with its stone castle, is associated by most schoolboys with the battle to its north in 1066. Yet last August Hastings commemorated the centenary of the ordination of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin at Ore Place on the Hastings ridge. Hastings seems an unlikely place to celebrate a French Jesuit priest from volcanic Auvergne in deep France. The reason is that the French Jesuits, during an intermittent outburst of *laïcité* in France, established their theologate in

Hastings from 1902-1926. The building was demolished in 1987 and replaced by houses, with an entrance named 'Chardin Drive'. Recently, in 2008, the centennial of Teilhard's brief presence on the site was commemorated with a blue plaque in a ceremony addressed by the Chairman of Hastings Council, by Fr William Hewett, S.J., of Campion Hall, Oxford, and by the Anglican Canon Alan Nugent of the British Teilhard Association. The plaque reads: *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin 1881-1955, Philosopher, Priest, and Author, Student of the Jesuit Seminary, Ore Place, 1908-1912.*

Pierre Teilhard was an extraordinary man, one of the original thinkers and writers of modern times. Pierre's life, like his interests, was rocky. He was the fourth of eleven children of Emmanuel and Bertholde Chardin, described at Clermont Ferrand in his native Auvergne, as '*petite noblesse provinciale*'. Pierre later said he owed his love of nature and of rocks to his father and his devotion to Christ Risen in his loving humanity to his mother. Pierre was born and grew up in the family chateau at Sarcenat, near Orcines, beneath the famous volcano Puy de Dôme. Pierre was less interested in literature and the humanities than in the natural world, its geology, fossils, and rocks, what he later called 'blazing matter'. Like his brothers, Pierre attended the Jesuit secondary school at Villefranche-sur-Saône. One of his teachers was Henri Bremond, a renowned writer on spirituality. Of his pupil Bremond later wrote, 'I have had as a student in the humanities a little Auvergnat, very intelligent, the first in everything ... I learned long after the secret of his apparent indifference. He had another passion, jealous, absorbing, that made him live far from us: rocks.' When at school Pierre informed his parents that he wished to enter the Jesuits. He

trained at Aix-en-Provence, Laval, and Jersey, taught at the Jesuit school in Cairo, and then studied theology at Ore Place, Hastings.

The evolutive Christ

While at Hastings Teilhard became convinced of evolution which he said, 'haunted my mind like a tune'. In this he was influenced by Cardinal John Henry Newman whose *Essay on Development* fascinated him. Newman said, 'I will either go the whole hog with Darwin, or, dispensing with time and history altogether, hold, not only the theory of distinct species – but also of the creation of fossil-bearing rocks.' Teilhard integrated evolution with God present in Christ, whom Teilhard called 'the evolutive Christ'. At Hastings he discovered the Pauline hymns and began to develop his own thinking on the cosmic, 'universal Christ'. One of his teachers was the eminent Pauline scholar Ferdinand Prat. A fellow scholastic, one year his senior, was Joseph Huby. Both men were still respected in Pauline studies when I did Jesuit theology at Bellarmine School of Theology in the hills of southern Indiana.

Teilhard's superiors encouraged his interest in geology. On his first free days he soon discovered that popular local geological sites such as the Hastings beds, Fairlight, the Weald and local quarries were fascinating sources of fossils, ranging from ferns and fish to dinosaurs. Teilhard wrote to his parents: 'I'm beginning to have a better collection than the Hastings museum.' Indeed he donated many of his discoveries to the museum where they are on display this year as part of the centenary, having been stored all these years wrapped in Jesuit thesis papers. He also donated fossils to the London Natural History Museum where some of his discoveries are named after him.

Teilhard was ordained in 1911 by Bishop Amigo in the presence of his parents and four of his brothers. The next day, served by his brothers Joseph and Gabriel, he said his first mass at St Mary Star of the Sea church, a beautiful Victorian gothic building largely financed by the Hastings poet Coventry Patmore.

Last summer, because of the centenary, I visited Teilhard's boyhood home at Sarcenat, near Orcines, with the Puys volcano in the background. A little road in tiny Sarcenat village is named 'Rue Pierre Teilhard de Chardin'. In the family church at adjacent Orcines the baptismal, now containing holy water, is placed just inside the entrance. Above the baptismal is a plaque, 'In this baptismal in July 1881 was baptized Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.'. I blessed myself with

water from the baptismal font. Also commemorated in the church war memorial are two of Pierre's brothers who fell in the trenches, Olivier in 1914, and Gonsague in 1918.

Another French Jesuit who studied at Ore Place was Henri de Lubac, later author of the theological classic *Catholicism*, and *peritus* at Vatican II to the Archbishop of Cracow, later Pope John Paul II, and, as Cardinal, defender of Teilhard and his evolutionary writings. De Lubac edited a touching collection of letters entitled *Letters from Hastings*, which Teilhard sent from Ore Place to his parents. They reveal, perhaps even more than his scholarly writings, what a warm, sensitive, caring, and compassionate person Teilhard was. His sister, François, a nun, died in China two months before Teilhard's ordination. When he learned of her death he wrote his grieving parents 'Know that your remaining children love you even more, and would give anything to comfort you.'

The 'Mass on the World'

At the commemoration at St Mary Star of the Sea, Teilhard's grand-niece attended. It was her grandfather Joseph who had served Teilhard's first mass. Teilhard scholar David Grumett spoke on 'Teilhard the priest'. Fr William Hewett, S.J., who has family connections to Hastings, then celebrated the Mass of the Transfiguration, before which all present recited together Teilhard's famous 'Mass on the World'. The Teilhard biographer Ursula King then spoke on Teilhard's evolutionary thought, 'A vision transformed, Teilhard's evolutionary theology'. In the afternoon there were visits to Teilhard's collection of fossils now on display in Hastings Museum, and to Ore Place. In the museum there is a picture of Teilhard in clerical clothing at the fossil-rich Hastings cliffs. At Ore Place the residents of a house on the site of the former theologate invited us into their garden where we could see the downland view which Teilhard described in his letters, including the area where I now live and write. The following day, at St Leonards-on-Sea, where the exiled French Jesuits had their novitiate, members of the French Teilhard Association led a seminar on 'Newman's influence on Teilhard'. Teilhard was influenced by Newman's arguments for development, which included evolution and the future, as well as doctrine.

Teilhard visited Hastings several times after his studies here. The Ore Place theologate was the matrix of his later thought and writings on the evolution of matter which, in his writings, always included 'the universal Christ', the 'Omega point' to which all creation led. After a lifetime of traveling the world and studying

its stones, Teilhard wrote gratefully of his Hastings years shortly before his death in New York: *I found extraordinary solidity and intensity then in the English countryside, particularly at sunset when the Sussex woods were charged with all that "fossil" life which I was hunting for, from cliff to quarry, in the Wealden clay. There were moments, indeed, when it seemed to me that a sort of universal being was about to take shape suddenly in Nature before my very eyes.* These words are now posted in Hastings museum.

An extraordinary man lived, worked and prayed here for four years. Hastings has not forgotten him.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, born in the Auvergne in 1881, was fascinated with fossils and rocks from childhood. He entered the French Jesuits at eighteen and soon became interested in evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin and others. Yet church authorities were hesitant, in Pius XII's words because 'it was not at all clear how it could be conjoined with the doctrine of creation of one Adam.' The Pope cautiously left the door barely open.

During his early months in theology at Hastings, Teilhard read Henri Bergson and Newman's *Essay on Development*, which convinced him. 'Evolution haunted my mind like a tune', Teilhard said. For the rest of his life he combined science with his knowledge of theology, as one with both poetic and mystical gifts. He lived for many years in China studying the origin of man. He travelled and explored widely. He described the cosmos as moving towards an even greater union in Christ, the culmination which he called 'the Omega Point'.

It is his view of the future and of man's "ever greater unity" that is most controversial in his writings. His major works include *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, and *The Heart of the Matter*. A wonderful introduction to Teilhard as a person is Henri de Lubac's edition of Teilhard's *Letters from Hastings*. Another is an edition of some of his much later essays in *The Future of Man*. He retained forever his love of Jesus Christ and the church, and the evolving earth; he successfully reconciled these loves. He died in New York, and was buried at the Jesuit novitiate in 1955.

Dr Edward P. Echlin is Honorary Fellow in Theology at Leeds Trinity University College, and author of *Climate and Christ, A Prophetic Alternative*, Columba, 2010.