

## Butterflies and our risen life

HITS: 35

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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**HOLINESS**



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

During the Easter Season, the weeks between Easter until Trinity Sunday, we hear scriptures about the Resurrection of Jesus and its meaning for us. I think of Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, at this time of year. Having expressed his wish to die on Easter Sunday, Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, died suddenly of a heart attack on Easter in 1955. He was a world-renowned paleontologist and spiritual writer. At the time he wrote, the Church viewed him with suspicion because of his use of evolutionary thought, but more recently even several Popes have quoted his theology. There is an anecdote from when Fr. Chardin was serving as a stretcher bearer during World War I. While under fire one time, he was asked if he feared death. Reportedly he said, “No! If I die, I will just be in a different state.”

We all wonder what happens after death, but as we listen to our scriptures, we notice that the stories of Jesus’ appearances after his resurrection are very strange. The crucified body laid in the tomb disappears. The risen Jesus who does appear is often not recognized, or only recognized when he does something like blessing bread or eating fish or letting Thomas touch his wounds. The risen Jesus enters through locked doors, appears suddenly, and is taken up into the clouds. Clearly this risen Christ has a different body than Jesus of Nazareth had. The early Church seems to have understood this. The US Catholic Catechism for Adults (p 156) cites 1Cor 15. There it says that our risen bodies will be incorruptible, and what is raised of us is the incorruptible we have sown with our lives. Clearly, we will be in a different state. “Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen,” is one quote associated with Teilhard; another is that “We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a physical experience.”

But that physical experience is the problem, isn’t it? Because we have so many positive bodily experiences of pleasure, love, beauty, and joy, we craft images of heaven that are an extension of these bodily experiences. Heaven is going to be like our best day on earth but squared, we think! But the catechism cautions us: The manner of our resurrection exceeds our understanding and imagination and is accessible only to our faith.

Perhaps we need to work harder to be in touch with ourselves as spiritual beings, intimately formed and distinguished by our bodily or historical experience but not confined to it. If we ask, “how is the world different because I have lived?” we catch a glimpse of a larger “self” than the one in the mirror, a self that has transformed a bit of what has happened in a small section of the universe. If we are for-

fortunate to attend a funeral of a well-loved person, and we listen to the stories told of him or her, we encounter a person much larger than the one I knew and loved. That person has overflowed his/her body by being taken in by and affecting many other people. If I get in touch with the sense of wonder in myself, with the restless questioning within me, with my deep desire for unity with God and others, with my capacity to transcend pain and suffering, with my ability to be faithful to something beyond myself—these and other experiences help me believe in the part of me that cannot be quantified in the atoms or nano seconds of our physical or historical form of existence.

“Our Father who art in heaven...thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus taught us to pray. Appreciation of the immensity and duration of the cosmos has grown in recent decades, and Catholic thought has embraced and built on Teilhard’s deep appreciation that the work of Christ is unfinished. The risen Christ is continuing to do the work of Jesus of Nazareth, “thy kingdom come.” The risen Christ is working to infuse human history as it unfolds with the image of his Father, to divinize it so that it can reflect the glory of God. If at death we are taken into Christ, if we are united with Christ as scripture says we are, then, undoubtedly, we will participate in His continuing incarnation in matter and his continuing divinizing work in the ongoing history of the world. For we are part of his risen body and we are still his disciples.

There is a nurse on the palliative care team at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center who raises butterflies in her yard at home. Inside the pupa or chrysalis, the caterpillar stage of this insect’s life completely changes its form; the old form dissolves and a new reconstituted form of its life emerges, the butterfly stage. Butterflies help keep the spiritual dimension of human life front and center for nurse Sue as she helps people move toward death every day. The caterpillar seems to go eagerly toward its metamorphosis. For many of us, including for Jesus of Nazareth, it is not so easy to say goodbye to our historical bodily stage of existence. The empty tomb and the risen and ascending Christ are the images scripture gives us, our butterflies, to help us embrace our own metamorphosis into what we will become someday.

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