

Daily Meditation 01/24/2023

Chenu on the Spirit at Work in Human and Cosmic History

Good morning.

We're meditating this morning with Père Chenu, a French Dominican who was writing during the Second World War and afterwards, really, in many ways launched the big questions and contributions of the Second Vatican Council.

But he tells us how intertwined human existence is with the history of spirit and with the history of nature. As he says,

The history of humankind, the history of spirit, is by ontological necessity, tied up with the history of nature, for humanity is in the full sense of the word a microcosm. We are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe. We contain the universe within ourselves. And so we are bound up not in a pugilistic way with matter, but matter and spirit are playing together in our consciousness, and literally in our physical existence, and above all, in all our relationships, and how we treat one another through our economic systems, and through our political systems, and through our social systems.

So he's very keen on connecting the social, the political, the spiritual, the economic. And for him, they all go together. And so two of his favorite phrases are "continuous incarnation" and "continuous creation." What he's trying to get us to do is not to just lookback, say, to Jesus 2000 years ago and his incarnation, but he's saying that incarnation has to continue, that we have to incarnate the divine in us, much like Meister Eckhart taught.

And that the same is true of creation. Creation isn't just a question of 13.8 billion years ago, but is a question of the renewal of creation that's happening on a regular basis: that creation is ongoing, and incarnation is ongoing. And incarnation means the divinization of all of us, and the presence of the Spirit among us.

So all these themes are flowing out of Chenu's theology, out of his vision, and in many practical ways it has to do with how we treat one another at work, for example, in our work, and in our citizenship, and of course, how are we treating other creatures and Mother Earth herself?

And so he says, "Every individual is at the service of the species," that we're all here to serve the species. And as his mentor, Thomas Aquinas, said, "All beings are here to serve the universe itself."

So bringing in the sense of community and the sense of the whole is such an important way to see the world: that grace is flowing through all of us, or wants to. And we are here, as he says, to co-create, to create anew with the Spirit, a world that is more godlike, that is more just, that is more joyful, and that acknowledges our interdependence in so many ways.

In some ways, I see him echoing the teaching of his brother Teilhard de Chardin, who was a Jesuit, not a Dominican like Chenu. Of course he's a scientist, but also a mystic, and a poet. And here's just one teaching from Teilhard that echoes the teaching of Chenu:

Matter and spirit (says Teilhard), these are no longer two things, but two states or two aspects of one and the same cosmic stuff, according to whether it was looked at or carried further in the direction in which it is becoming itself, or in the direction in which it is disintegrating. Matter is the matrix of spirit. Spirit is the higher state of matter.

That's page 222 of *Christian Mystics*.

So these two French primary thinkers, foundational thinkers, are trying to shift, trying to move out of that dualism of matter versus spirit and recognize that spirit and matter are part of nature and part of all of us.

Something to celebrate: Grace flows both ways.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.