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The Book Reviewer

ST. MARY'S PARISH LIBRARY

FEB 2008

The Jesuit and the Skull by Amir D. Aczel (People of the Church)

Bestselling author Amir Aczel takes on the story of the historically controversial church figure, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the part he played in discovering Peking Man, the fossilized remains of one of the “missing links” in the line of human evolution.

A devoted Jesuit priest, who was trained as a paleontologist, de Chardin was at the center of a developing chasm between the established Biblical view of creation and scientific evidence that suggested a new

way of looking at how modern humans came to exist.

De Chardin's enthusiastic and invaluable participation in archeological digs around the world was never frowned upon by his Jesuit superiors, nor were his early scientific papers which appeared in respected journals. However, when he began developing theories which accommodated both a Christian understanding and an evolutionary explanation of human existence, his attempts to publish were met with the Church's scorn and

eventual exile from his beloved France.

Aczel's book is a comprehensive overview of the paleontological discoveries of the twentieth century, and of the spiritual, professional, and personal pursuits of this fascinating, brilliant, and beloved man who throughout his life sought to marry the truths of Christian faith to the truths of science, as he understood them.

Reviewed by Susan Triplett

The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho (Fiction)

Paulo Coelho's enchanting novel has sold over a million and a half copies around the world. Occasionally a book is published that changes the lives of its readers, and *The Alchemist* is such a book. This simple and yet powerful parable explores the mysteries of the human soul.

The story centers around Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy, who one night dreams of a distant treasure

in the Egyptian pyramids. He decides to leave Andalusia and literally follow his dream. He travels from his homeland in Spain to the Egyptian desert in search of a treasure buried in the Pyramids. The journey is long, frustrating, and challenging. In Egypt, he meets an alchemist, who helps him complete the last part of the dangerous journey. Through his encounter with the alchemist, Santiago

gains self-understanding and spiritual enlightenment. What started out as a journey to find worldly goods turns into a discovery of the treasure that is found within.

Paulo Coelho once said: “Following your dream is like learning a foreign language; you will make mistakes but you will get there in the end”.

Reviewed by Pat Dalcher

Did you know that the Parish Library first opened in 1994, as a way to provide adult Christian formation to parishioners who wanted to expand and deepen their Catholic faith?



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Books:

A History of God

*A Woman Clothed
With the Sun*

*Jesus Wants All
of Me*

A People Adrift

*The Life You Save
May Be Your Own*

Will and Spirit by Gerald May, M.D. (Psychology)

Gerald May is a psychiatrist who is very interested in, and knowledgeable about, spirituality. He has also supervised training programs for spiritual directors.

The theme running throughout *Will and Spirit* is willingness and willfulness—the willingness of human beings to trust themselves to God, versus the willfulness of the individual, who is always afraid of losing his or her identity. It takes courage and a personality open to change and new experience, or alternatively, a person who has hit

bottom, to be able to abandon one's individual identity and to set sail into the unknown.

May is convinced that everyone has experienced or has the potential for experiencing the unitive experience—union with God and with all of creation. He cites hundreds of examples of such unitive experiences, as well as many other examples of people who are so full of anger or hatred or so protective of their fragile selves that they cannot experience this tremendous Joy. Of course, the great contemplatives, such as John of

the Cross and Teresa of Avila, are the prime examples of people who have totally surrendered their wills to God and have been able to remain active and useful in the world.

May contrasts our Western spirituality with Eastern spirituality, Zen Buddhism and Hinduism. We in the West are nurtured in an individualistic culture, which makes letting go, and just being, difficult. Also, freedom from attachments can be dangerous, if not "surrounded with guidance, discernment, tradition, scripture, critique, and prayer."

Reviewed by Clare Dinno

The Phenomenon of Man by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (Theology)

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is an important figure in both the scientific and the religious worlds. As a geologist and paleontologist, he knows intimately the language and methods of science, and he believes that there is no need for enmity between science and religion.

The theme of *The Phenomenon of Man* is "the within" and "the without" of things, things being the stuff of matter—the created world. Beyond the visible world, which is poked, prodded, and manipulated by scientists, including himself, de Chardin assumes a "pre-life, as far back as the eye can see" which accounts for the

fact of evolution, not just of all living phyla, but of all matter. He further assumes that all energy is psychic in nature.

He discusses at length the foundations of the world, crystals and minerals, which "have chosen" a closed road—they do not evolve beyond certain atomic groupings. For the rest of nature, he sees a certain elementary form of consciousness, with a potential for evolution, which led to life. No significant change can occur without an enormous lapse of time. The tree of life began aeons ago with the coming of bacteria. The advent of quantum physics appears to support

de Chardin's spiritual reading of matter, life, and evolution.

The second half of the book is a brilliant summation of human civilizations over the past 6,000 years. Some of these civilizations chose a closed road, failing to change or adapt; some disappeared into stronger societies; others, such as China and India, have only in our own explosive period learned to change and to adapt. The rise and fall of great civilizations is not a cause for pessimism. "An evermore highly organized consciousness of the universe is passed from hand to hand and glows steadily brighter."

Reviewed by Clare Dinno