



## How to (Not) Make the World Sacred: Congar's "Sacred Pedagogy"

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### Abstract

Fifty years ago, Yves Congar voiced concern over what he considered a serious point of confusion in the post-conciliar Church, namely, the meaning of “the sacred” in Christian faith and mission. This essay details Congar’s diagnosis of the problem and explores the continued relevance of his constructive response, or, what he calls “sacred pedagogy.” For Congar, *the world is not sacred in itself*, because the body of Christ is the only sacred reality. Yet *the world can become sacred*, if we approach it “pedagogically,” as filled with signs that can lead us to grace. In the end, however, *all present experience of the sacred will be transcended* in the eschatological kingdom of God.

### Keywords

Yves Congar, sacramental theology, Eucharistic theology, Teilhard de Chardin, Second Vatican Council, nouvelle théologie

In his essay, “Where does the ‘Sacred’ Fit into a Christian Worldview?”<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar seeks to inject some theological clarity into broader conversations taking place in the 1960s, around the ambiguous notion of the “sacred.” The essay intrigues for a number of reasons. In the first place, it was published soon after the Second Vatican Council, in 1967, and so provides a window on a number of Congar’s worries about the Church at the time. Secondly, Congar insists rather boldly on the distinction between the “world of grace, the source of our communion with God,” on the one hand,

<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit into a Christian Worldview?” in Paul Philibert, ed., *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010), 107-32; first published as “Situation du ‘sacré’ en régime chrétien,” in *Vatican II: La Liturgie après Vatican II—Unam Sanctam 66* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967), 385-403.

and the natural world of present human experience on the other, in which “[g]race is forced to appropriate suitable signs.”<sup>2</sup> Congar’s treatment of the sacred thus illuminates his place within Catholic debates about nature and grace, with which he was intimately familiar. Finally, Congar seems to walk a knife-edge in terms of his stated aim. In response to his guiding question, he insists that “only one sacred reality really exists, the body of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> But given the three-fold sense in which “body” could be employed here—i.e., as referring variously to Jesus’ physical body of flesh, the Church as body, and the Eucharistic body—we do well to follow Congar as he draws out the implications of this identification between the sacred and the body of Christ.

My purpose is to do just that. By following the way Congar triangulates the sacred in terms of Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology, I will present and expand upon what he calls “sacred pedagogy,” the snapshot of which is this: (1) *the world is not sacred in itself*, because the body of Christ is the only sacred reality; yet (2) *the world can become sacred*, as we learn to see it and use it “pedagogically,” as filled with signs that can “lead us to the grace of the Holy Spirit;”<sup>4</sup> but in the end, (3) *all present experience of the sacred will ultimately be transcended*, when “nature and the communion of grace will be rejoined within the final reign of God.”<sup>5</sup>

As we will see, Congar urges caution against an exaggerated integration of the orders of nature and grace, especially when compared with his fellow *nouvelle* theologians. Accordingly, I will set Congar next to two other thinkers, both of whom dealt with the Catholic sense of the sacred in the middle of the twentieth century: Henri de Lubac and Teilhard de Chardin. De Lubac’s 1942 essay on “The Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred” was written for a different time and place, but a number of comparisons can still be made, especially if we consider de Lubac’s thoughts on the topic in light of what he says retrospectively, after the Council.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 125.

<sup>3</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 123.

<sup>4</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 130.

<sup>5</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 125.

<sup>6</sup> Henri de Lubac, “Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred (1942),” in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 1996), 223-40; cf. Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Armandez (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984; Original French, 1980).

More importantly for my purposes, de Lubac was an avid defender of Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist and mystic, who sought to harmonize evolutionary science with Christian revelation.<sup>7</sup> For Teilhard, “everything is sacred,” but in a far less qualified manner than we find in either de Lubac or Congar.<sup>8</sup> Congar’s direct relationship to Teilhard is less evident in his writing than is his connection to de Lubac, though the Dominican does refer to him favorably on occasion, as someone who accurately discerned the spiritual longing of the times.<sup>9</sup> However, Congar drops a provocative hint of Teilhardian interest in the second volume of *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. In a section describing his personal interpretation of the Eucharistic doxology, Congar writes:

The Holy Spirit, who fills the universe and who holds all things in unity, knows everything that is said and gathers together everything that, in this world, is for and tending towards God (*pros ton Patera*). . . . After this doxology, we believers, who know the Father and the one whom he has sent, together with Christ make once again present among us the invocation that he taught us . . . In this way, the Eucharist, which is a great thanksgiving, is made fully present. That, at least, is my own daily Mass over the world.<sup>10</sup>

The last line here evokes Teilhard’s *La Messe sur le monde* (*The Mass on the World*).<sup>11</sup> But there are crucial differences between the two thinkers. Whereas Teilhard views the Eucharist as the causal power by which the Church “sacralizes” the rest of material creation, Congar contends that the Eucharist is the exclusive instance in which the Church can actually say she makes matter sacred.<sup>12</sup> As I will show, the implications that follow from these respective positions are as far-reaching as their presuppositions.

<sup>7</sup> De Lubac wrote on and/or edited numerous works of Teilhard, including *Teilhard Explained*, trans. Anthony Buono (New York: Paulist Press, 1968; Original French, 1966); *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning*, trans. René Hague (New York: Hawthorn, 1966; Original French, 1964); *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. René Hague (London: Burn & Oates, 1965; Original French, 1964); *Teilhard et notre temps* (Paris: Aubier, 1971); and multiple other collections.

<sup>8</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965; Original French, 1957), 66.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians: Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism* (London: Chapman, 1966), 329.

<sup>10</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2, ‘*He is Lord and Giver of Life*,’ trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 2015; Original French, 1979-80), 2:224.

<sup>11</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *La Messe sur le monde* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Yves Congar, *Jesus Christ*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966; Original French, 1965), 203 and 203 n.63: “The Church has not received the cosmic kingship of Christ, even though she participates in it to some degree. She does not transform the physical structures of the world;” “A single exception: the gift which is the Eucharist. . . .”

## 1. The World is Not ‘Sacred’ in itself

The world is not ‘sacred’ in itself, but it can and ought to be a symbol of the Creator for humans and because of them.<sup>13</sup>

Congar begins his essay by reminding his audience that the Bible itself teaches that the world is not sacred, in itself. In contrast with other ancient Eastern cosmologies, in which gods are interwoven with the world’s natural elements, the Old Testament emphasizes instead God’s radical transcendence over the order of creation.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of salvation history, however, the Bible gradually reveals God’s personal intention to dwell with humanity, such that he actually becomes one with human nature, in the Incarnation. But this act of divine intervention initiates something “totally original, new, and gratuitous by comparison with everything else in the created cosmos. . . . We call this initiative the supernatural order. Its apex, its center, its substantial totality is Jesus Christ, and it leads us to affirm that only one sacred reality really exists, the body of Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup> For Christians, then, the two points confirm each other: the world is not sacred in itself, for only the body of Christ is truly sacred.

I will explore what else there is to say about this relationship momentarily, but first the question of context: why is Congar so concerned to identify the sacred with Christ’s body in the first place? In 1967, the Council’s project of *aggiornamento* had succeeded in leading the Catholic Church to make an about-face—from a posture of antagonism vis-à-vis modernity towards a more positive posture of “dialogue.” Yet the character of this new relationship was far from settled. With the dust in the air, Congar voices concern over a certain tendency he sees developing in some circles, according to which the difference between the kingdom of God and the world was being effectively erased, leading to problems in the Church’s self-understanding.<sup>16</sup> For instance, he concatenates a number of false, misleading assumptions in circulation, such as: “the church is only the world as it knows God and Jesus Christ,” or “the church does not have its being in itself, but only in Jesus Christ,” or “the whole being of the church consists in its mission.”<sup>17</sup> By seeking to correct these false assumptions, one could argue, Congar was also seeking to correct false interpretations of “his Council,” as some have called it.

In a footnote, Congar praises a section of Jacques Maritain’s *The Peasant of the Garrone: An Old Layman Questions Himself about*

<sup>13</sup> Yves Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 110.

<sup>14</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 110.

<sup>15</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 122.

<sup>16</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 123.

<sup>17</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 123.

*the Present Time*, published the year before, in 1966.<sup>18</sup> As Congar puts it, Maritain's reading of what happened within the Catholic Church following the reception of Schema XIII, *Gaudium et Spes* "est decisive."<sup>19</sup> So what did the "old layman" say? Maritain's review of the actual text of *Gaudium et Spes* was basically positive: "an old Thomist like myself is cheered."<sup>20</sup> However, he also observes that, for many Catholics, a strange new sense of awe had been directed at the natural world, which led to "a kind of *kneeling before the world*, which is revealed in a thousand ways."<sup>21</sup>

Maritain clarifies that the "world" here is "the world in its natural and temporal structures, but insofar as it supposedly absorbs into itself the kingdom of God, and is itself—in a state of becoming, and, at the final end, in perfect fullness—the mystical Body of Christ."<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Maritain readily acknowledges that the "world" is essentially good, as made by God, but the "world" is also in rebellion against the kingdom of God as announced by Christ, and it must be converted even to attain to its own proper, if not to say, "natural" ends. Hence, those Christians eager to kneel before the world in its first aspect seem to be forgetting the second, which, as Maritain puts it, constitutes an "insane mistake" (*la folle méprise*).<sup>23</sup> Yes, we are called to love the world, but precisely by confronting it, "insofar as it is the enemy of the kingdom."<sup>24</sup> Maritain's conclusion is worth citing in full:

If there are any prophets of the avant-garde or of the rear guard who imagine that our duties to the world, such as they have been brought to light under the grace of the Holy Spirit by the Second Vatican Council, erase what the Lord Jesus Himself and His apostles have said of the world—*The world hates me, The world cannot receive the Spirit of truth, If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him . . .* I know well what must be said of such prophets (a saying of questionable taste but one which used to amuse an old Dominican dear to my heart): they are poking the *finger of God* in their eye.<sup>25</sup>

Needless to say, Maritain's "old Dominican" is not Yves Congar, but the theological continuity is certain, and Congar's voiced agreement with Maritain is illuminating. Although he played a central role in

<sup>18</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 123n.42. Jacques Maritain, *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1966); Citations of Maritain are taken from Cuddihy and Hughes's English translation. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

<sup>19</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 123n.42; cf. Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 50ff.

<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 53; emphasis original.

<sup>22</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 60-63.

<sup>24</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 62-63.

Vatican II, with its impetus to turn a fresh ecclesial face to the world, Congar is clear: he had no intention of dissolving the inherent contradiction between Church and “world,” nor did he ever relinquish a rather scholastic distinction between nature and grace.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Congar uses his essay to put a spotlight on where his contemporaries should be directing their wonder and awe, namely, at *Christ’s personal body*, which consummates the union of nature and the supernatural. He himself is the “new place” where we come to meet God.<sup>27</sup> This body “is amplified through what we call the Mystical Body, which is the church;”<sup>28</sup> but the mystical body is not the world. In another work written at this same timeframe, Congar reminds us that the Church has *not* received “the cosmic kingship of Christ, even though she participates in it to some degree.”<sup>29</sup> An important implication immediately follows: “[The Church] does not transform the physical structures of the world.”<sup>30</sup> The only exception, Congar states here in a footnote, is the liturgical transformation of the Eucharist—a point to which I will return.<sup>31</sup>

When compared with some of his other, *nouvelle* colleagues’ approach to the God-world relation and the implications of the Incarnation, Congar stands out, if for no other reason than that he preserved so much of his original training in Thomism. For Teilhard de Chardin, for example, the Incarnation has *de facto* united the orders of grace and nature in such a way that not a single element of material creation remains unaffected.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the Incarnation culminates a long-term process of preparation taking place *within* material creation, by way of evolution. This is not to say that the hypostatic union itself is the fruit of evolution, but when Teilhard uses words like “Christogenesis,” he does mean to suggest that (1) evolution’s trajectory created the necessary conditions for the Incarnation to take place, and that (2) Christ as “cosmic logos” actively and intrinsically directs this development. Consequently, Teilhard’s “cosmic Christ” does not

<sup>26</sup> See Fergus Kerr, “Yves Congar and Thomism,” in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, ed. Gabriel Flynn (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2005), 67–98.

<sup>27</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 115. “[U]n nouveau lieu est désigné où l’on rencontrera Dieu, à partir duquel son salut et sa sainteté seront communiqués: le corps du Christ immolé et vivant, du côté duquel sort pour le monde la source d’eau vive” (“Situation du ‘sacré’ en régime chrétien,” 390–91).

<sup>28</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 123.

<sup>29</sup> Yves Congar, *Jesus Christ*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966; Original French, 1965), 203.

<sup>30</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 203.

<sup>31</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 203n63.

<sup>32</sup> “[T]he Incarnation has so thoroughly *recentered* the universe within the supernatural that, in the *concrete*, we can no longer seek to imagine toward what center the elements of this world would have gravitated, had they not been elevated to the order of grace” (Teilhard de Chardin, “Note of October 17, 1918,” cited by de Lubac, *Teilhard Explained*, 59).

confront the order of nature with genuinely new, original resources for transformation and conversion, so much as he infuses the natural world's own resources with greater degrees of spiritualization.<sup>33</sup> For Teilhard, "incarnation" is an on-going process: "Since Jesus was born, and grew to full stature, and died, everything has continued to move forward *because Christ is not yet fully formed* . . ." <sup>34</sup>

As Teilhard's foremost defender, Henri de Lubac admits that his Jesuit colleague struggles to find adequate theological precision in his use of language, but he consistently denies that Teilhard conflates nature and grace, or that he collapses the eschatological kingdom of God into the same order of "the world." But de Lubac is not entirely convincing on this score. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for one, concluded that de Lubac's expositions served essentially as an attempt to keep Teilhard's books off the Index.<sup>35</sup> Coming from a different direction, another of Teilhard's interpreters objects that, while de Lubac may indeed "save the gratuity of the supernatural for Teilhard," he does so "at the expense . . . of the teilhardian insight that Christ is intrinsic and essential to the meaning of the evolutionary process."<sup>36</sup> I would agree. De Lubac's defense of Teilhard does not always represent the scientist's stated views, especially on some of the most significant theological questions, such as those with which we are concerned here.

As for de Lubac's own theology, he wants to maintain that "nature was made for the supernatural and . . . is not explained without it."<sup>37</sup> Nature is "intrinsically" ordered to the reception of grace. Creation is imbued with a "natural desire" for a supernatural end, even if, in itself, nature cannot muster the means of its own redemption. De Lubac's critics, especially those of a neo-Thomist sort, have complained that if God were to create such a creature—i.e., a creature ontologically structured with a natural desire for a supernatural end—then the creature's supernatural end *must* be satisfied by God, lest we make statements about God's character that surely no one would find comfortable.

I cannot deal with this immense debate adequately here. Suffice it to say that de Lubac raised many questions about the two orders that have not been resolved, which affect how Catholic theology interprets the role of the sacred. Thomas Joseph White, for example,

<sup>33</sup> De Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning*, 9n4: "Matter and spirit are no longer for Teilhard 'two compartments', or 'two things', but 'two directions.'"

<sup>34</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. by Gerald Vann (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 137; emphasis original.

<sup>35</sup> See Aidan Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 67-9.

<sup>36</sup> Eulalio Baltazar, *Teilhard and the Supernatural* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 30.

<sup>37</sup> De Lubac, "Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred (1942)," 231.

appreciates de Lubac's worry, that "the affirmation of an autonomous natural order will lead inevitably to a loss of our sense of the need for grace;" and yet, White notes, de Lubac's solution tends "to subsume nature prematurely and thus unconvincingly into the world of the supernatural."<sup>38</sup> In his own way, David Grumett agrees, but wants to correct de Lubac in the opposite direction: not by distinguishing the orders with greater clarity (as White would have it), but by moving further towards the integralism of Teilhard.<sup>39</sup> According to Grumett, the reason de Lubac was "unconvincing" was because the nature he typically has in mind is *human* nature rather than the created order in its entirety.<sup>40</sup> And so, by not extending his critique of pure nature to the cosmic dimensions of Teilhard, Grumett thinks de Lubac flattens the spiritual significance of the Church's social communion, and that he demystifies the Eucharist's significance as the summit and source of the world's transformation. How so? According to Grumett, de Lubac ultimately failed to show the continuity between the Eucharist's material transformation (transubstantiation) and the broader activities of the Church within the world at large. For Grumett at least, Teilhard is better equipped to make these connections, because the Eucharist is allowed to remain the *verum corpus* in the midst of a world itself being transubstantiated.<sup>41</sup>

Barring further exploration of the two Jesuits at this point, we can at least see how de Lubac's approach to the nature-grace debate is not as integrated as Teilhard's, even if there is a certain continuity between their thought. And we can also see how Congar veers closer towards an "extrinsic" approach, in the sense that nature must remain intelligible on its own terms, apart from its relation to the supernatural, even if the supernatural does no violence to nature in its application. For Congar, the order of redemption and the order of creation "have a like basis and spring from a like sovereignty, a like government—those of Jesus Christ . . ." <sup>42</sup> And yet he goes on to say, "This unity of source *does not entail a unity of structure,*" even if "it does unquestionably entail a unity of plan and of finality."<sup>43</sup> The point of this distinction seems to be this: Congar wants to dissuade his audience from thinking of the newly discovered natural world as more hospitable than the supernatural world in which the Church

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Joseph White, "Good Extrinsicism: Matthias Scheeben and the Ideal Paradigm of Nature-Grace Orthodoxy," *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) 11 (2013): 537-63.

<sup>39</sup> David Grumett, "Eucharist, Matter and the Supernatural: Why de Lubac Needs Teilhard," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008): 165-78.

<sup>40</sup> Grumett, "Eucharist, Matter and the Supernatural," 167.

<sup>41</sup> "The world is the final, and the real, Host into which Christ gradually descends, until his time is fulfilled" (Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* [London: Collins, 1968], 65).

<sup>42</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 175-76.

<sup>43</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 175-76; my emphasis.

presently participates and will someday enjoy entirely, when God's kingdom comes in its fullness. "In this life," he writes, "all that we have of that supreme indwelling is a beginning that is mediated by supernatural gifts."<sup>44</sup> To be sure, such gifts do indeed perfect nature, yet the supernatural must be allowed to serve as a distinctive complement to what we already know of the present world. "The world of grace, the source of our communion with God, is a distinct, original domain, never completely homogenous with the world itself."<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, if Teilhard thinks that "Incarnation" and "ascension" mean the cosmic Christ is now intimately involved in this world's natural development—and thus "everything is sacred"<sup>46</sup>—Congar insists against exactly such a view. He refocuses our sense of redemption squarely upon human nature and the life of the soul specifically. As concerns the "cosmic Christ" specifically, he writes in another work:

[T]he strong cosmic sense of St Paul is not a kind of optimistic, universal evolutionary theory. It is historical, it depends on a historical view of the economy of sin and of grace, and it is spiritual, linked to the work of the Holy Spirit, which assimilates us to God and is wrought chiefly in our souls, made in the image of God. This is why, once we have emphasized the mysterious and infinitely vast dimensions of the spiritual temple and then its very real cosmic dimensions, we must draw attention to its dimensions in depth and say that it is only fully and truly realized in the saints. The temple of God is holy and you are this temple, as St Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3. 17).<sup>47</sup>

In other words, the temple of God's presence, which the Gospel teaches us to identify with the body of Christ incarnate, has been extended through Christ's resurrection and ascension, so as to include all those who will be assimilated to God and joined to this spiritual temple. We can point to this body and identify it sociologically, but this does not imply that the mystical body of Christ is in any way embrangled in the internal processes of the natural world. Rather, the ecclesial body of Christ is a "hagiophany," which reveals "the reality and the presence of *another world*, an anticipation of the kingdom in which God will be 'everything to everyone' (1 Cor 15:28)."<sup>48</sup>

This present world, then, is not sacred "in itself," nor does the Church bear the responsibility for *making* it sacred. Apart from the Eucharist, which incorporates us into Christ's body and the worship

<sup>44</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:84.

<sup>45</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 125.

<sup>46</sup> Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple: Or, The Manner of God's Presence to his Creatures from Genesis to the Apocalypse*, trans. Reginal F. Trevett (London: Burns & Oates, 1962 [1958]), 201.

<sup>48</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:58; my emphasis.

of heaven, Congar does not allow that the Church has been asked to actively transform the rest of the created order in its ontological structure, as will be explained further; rather, she should aim to invite souls to share in the present, but partial, experience of the world to come.

## 2. The World Can Become Sacred: Congar's "Sacred Pedagogy"

Everything has an 'iconic' value, one to which the saints were particularly sensitive, and which Jesus perceived to the highest degree. Things are parables in potency, presenting the possibility of signifying the religious rapport and of inducing its realization. The universe, the things and the events within it, all can become sacraments of the active presence of God.<sup>49</sup>

Congar's Christology leads us to appreciate that Christ himself is the "place" of the worship that now relates us to God. And the Church consists of those who, through the Holy Spirit, have themselves become the temple of God, serving as priests of a new dispensation, in which "things" no longer constitute our sacral offerings to God, since we offer instead "the whole of life, according its character of filial obedience to God, as thanksgiving, as mutual service in the community, and as ministry and witness."<sup>50</sup> With this understanding firmly at hand, Congar's concern to dissociate from those who collapse the difference between Church and world now turns to a positive attempt to identify a functional role for the sacred in Christian faith and mission. He advocates a "sacred pedagogy" that can respond to both the loss of a sense of the sacred in culture in general, and to the muddled attempts made by others, to cajole the Church into a new sense of awe before the world as such.

Congar allows that the world can *become* sacred; but this is decidedly not an *ontological* transformation of the material world so much as it is a *functional* transformation. It implies both a shift in *perception*—according to which the universe and all its contents can be seen as signs of God's presence—as well as a shift in *intention*, according to which we set some things aside and use them "dispositively": a word that connects our interaction with created realities with the Spirit's own intention to lead us and others to the reception of supernatural grace.<sup>51</sup>

With this functional-versus-ontological criterion in mind, we may perhaps understand why Congar begins to let his terms slide at this point, between "symbol," "sacrament," and "sacred signs/forms." The

<sup>49</sup> Yves Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 71-72.

<sup>50</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 115.

<sup>51</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 130.

ontological distinction has already been fought for, namely, the distinction according to which the body of Christ is the only sacred reality in the midst of a world that is good, but also in need of conversion, and actively awaiting its consummate transformation. What remains is to explain how the functional, pedagogical aspect of the sacred plays itself out. Hence, he proposes that there are, in fact, four gradations of the sacred in the Christian order.<sup>52</sup> The three-fold body of Christ as spoken of in the New Testament is the veritable *substance* of the sacred (*un sacré en quelque sorte substantiel*). The sacred *sacraments* themselves, as embodied through specific liturgical rites, constitute another level (*le sacré des signes de type sacramentel*). Then there are the *signs* (*l'ensemble des signes*) that “express the religious relationship that we have with God in Christ” and prepare us to realize it fully—e.g., “particular words, gestures, customs, community rules, physical settings, moments of time” and even silence. And finally, there is the *totality of things* (*totalité des choses*) that we individually consecrate in our own way, as part of our own paths of holiness.<sup>53</sup>

It must be admitted that Congar explicitly identifies “sacred pedagogy” as being operative in the third, and by implication, the fourth, levels, as defined above. His reason is plain: the body of Christ is objectively sacred, as well as the sacraments he instituted. By virtue of Christ’s Incarnation and mission, these realities are sacred quite apart from our subjective perceptions about them. Yet when it comes to the “ensemble des signes” and the “totalité des choses” that we encounter in the modern world today, there is far more ambiguity, which leads Congar to proffer an approach that is at once pastoral and relevant today. Sadly, he does not elaborate here by way of specific cases how this “sacred pedagogy” ought to unfold; rather, he supplies the overarching framework through which the Church should understand its task.

Given the textual context in which this essay appears, the primary issue he has in mind is surely the celebration of the liturgy, which “est le domaine par excellence des signes: paroles, choses et gestes.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, Congar wants to insist that the liturgy is inclusive enough to allow all cultures to “contribute their own examples to the repertory of sacred forms, coherent with their spirit and their resources,” but without over-blowing these forms’ actual sacramental significance.<sup>55</sup> As for myself, Congar’s insights are especially potent

<sup>52</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 126-27.

<sup>53</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 126-27; “Situation du ‘sacré’ en régime chrétien,” 399-400.

<sup>54</sup> Yves Congar, Introduction to *Vatican II: La Liturgie après Vatican II—Unam Sanctam* 66 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967), 11-15, at 12.

<sup>55</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 131.

as we consider the meaning and efficacy of cultural products born out from the sphere of practical science and technology. Today's gadgets and gizmos are routinely overlaid with exaggerated spiritual significance that the Church needs to be able to unmask as just so much rhetoric, while nevertheless being able to approach them and incorporate them in some way, using them creatively and even subversively for the sake of our collective sanctification.

At any rate, Congar's most basic assertion here is that "the 'sacred' is what *we* discern in things, distinguishing them from what is ordinary, by formally referring them to *our* final end of union with God. This introduces into the notion of the sacred a relation to the *intention* and the *use* assigned by persons."<sup>56</sup> Put succinctly, then, the sacred is now understood as a reflection of the Church's active discernment of the Holy Spirit, through whom we are able to perceive and use the natural world "pedagogically," to perpetuate the relationship established by Christ between humanity and the transcendent God.

Again, at stake in all this is the Church's self-understanding of its own mission. Despite the present limitations of its experience of the supernatural, the Church is called to serve Christ's own mediation of himself, by inviting others to participate in the eschatological realities that the world as such cannot comprehend.<sup>57</sup> Were we to assume that Christ, in his incarnation and earthly ministry, had *already* accomplished such mediation, Congar fears that the Church would be "reduced to the role of revealing the meaning of the world."<sup>58</sup> In a statement echoing Maritain, Congar writes: "However intimately the church may be engaged with the world, the church always remains distinct with respect to its proper principles of existence and operation. Even if the energies of history have to be subsumed into the kingdom of God, the kingdom is not given to us through forces that belong to history or to the world."<sup>59</sup>

Thus, despite the efficacy of the Incarnation and the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, there still remains a distance to be bridged between nature and grace. In this present "time of the church," there is still a need for active mediation between the two orders of creation and redemption, until these are finally brought to complete unity in the kingdom of God, at the behest of God the Father alone.<sup>60</sup> If

<sup>56</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 109.

<sup>57</sup> William Henn, *The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, O.P.* (Rome: Edictrix Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987), 104.

<sup>58</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 124.

<sup>59</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 124.

<sup>60</sup> "The resurrection of Christ and his entry into his glory are not the total completion of the Christian economy, even if, in one sense, they achieve everything. These mysteries are actually a point of departure. Between his resurrection and personal triumph over death,

the Church were to fail to understand its own agency in the present stage of mediation, the collapse of the supernatural order into the natural would stultify the Church's mission of calling the world to conversion. This is, in fact, precisely the charge routinely laid against Teilhard, as Douglas Farrow puts it: "The same problem arises in ecclesiology as in christology: To assimilate the world, the church must first be assimilated by the world; to christianize, it must first be humanized. Who then is consecrating whom?"<sup>61</sup>

As we have seen, despite his theological opposition to the more creative proposals of his contemporaries, Congar does not avoid this important question about "how to make the world sacred." With a clear sense of limitation as well as opportunity, Congar's "sacred pedagogy" calls the Church's to exercise a more active discernment about how various cultural forms might be used to bring our contemporaries closer to the grace of Christ. The capacity for such discernment, according to Congar, is itself a sacred gift, made reliable by the Holy Spirit.

### 3. Everything 'Sacred' Will Be Transcended: Eschatology and the Sacred

[T]he body of Christ, the true messianic temple, is one stage in the process of mediation, a sacramental stage, which is to be transcended in the day of final Truth.<sup>62</sup>

This final section can be relatively brief since the basic ideas here have already been expressed above, in one way or another. Nevertheless, in order to complete the salvific narrative that Congar relates, we cannot neglect this point about eschatology, which features large in Congar's overall theological project. For Congar, the present gifts of grace, given through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, "still fall short of their consummation at the end of time. In the eschatological era," he goes on, "*there will be a new communication of the Spirit which will provide the grace, the gift and the indwelling, already part of our condition in the present messianic era, with their ultimate and*

on the one hand, and the accomplishment and restoration of all things . . . on the other hand, there exists a period of time about which Christ himself said that the Father alone in his omnipotence knows 'the times and the seasons' (Acts 1:7-8). This is precisely the time of the church. . ." (Yves Congar, "The Structure of Christian Priesthood," in Paul Philibert, ed., *At the Heart of Christian Worship* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010], 69-106, at 82).

<sup>61</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 212.

<sup>62</sup> Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, 235.

definitive fruit.”<sup>63</sup> Congar consistently preserves this eschatological tension throughout his work: the Church is already set apart from the world by the grace it has received and which the Spirit enables it to mediate, but the Church has not been given the task of transforming the world as such, for this is a thoroughly eschatological expectation, brought about not by our effort, but by God’s definitive and ultimate communication of himself.

As should be expected, Congar’s position can be again contrasted with the likes of Teilhard, who makes much of the way the “cosmic Christ,” presently ruling over material creation and its evolutionary development, has given the Church a far more active role in effecting the spiritual transformation of the natural world. Just as he described his own life’s work, Teilhard teaches all Christians to “Christify matter.”<sup>64</sup> What does this mean? It means that, as believers receive the Eucharist and conduct their work in the world at large, the “eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. Step by step it irresistibly invades the universe.”<sup>65</sup> The eucharistic transubstantiation “completes” itself through on-going human cooperation with each other and especially with the world’s evolutionary development, to such extent that the natural world is being *ontologically* transformed more and more into the universal body of Christ.<sup>66</sup> As Grumett explains, “For Teilhard, humanity is thus the agent of divine action on matter in a role analogous to the priest’s at the Eucharist.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Teilhard’s eucharistic theology obligates the Church, not just to *perceive* or *intend* our present milieu as symbolically “sacred,” but in fact, to *actively sacralize* it, as part and parcel of the eschatological transformation anticipated in Scripture.

By contrast, Congar is much more reticent about what we can humanly experience of the supernatural, let alone what substantive, ontological changes we can effect upon the natural world, even granting the opportunities presented by “sacred pedagogy.” To repeat what is a crucial point: the Church has not received Christ’s kingship, nor does the Church “transform the physical structures of the world.”<sup>68</sup> Instead, the Church has been given the more modest task of extending Christ’s announcement of a kingdom that is truly not of this

<sup>63</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:76; my emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York: A Harvest Book, 1978), 47: “To Christify Matter, that sums up the whole venture of my innermost being.”

<sup>65</sup> Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 125-26.

<sup>66</sup> Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 61: “Beneath our efforts to put spiritual form into our own lives, the world slowly accumulates, starting with the whole of matter, that which will make of it the Heavenly Jerusalem or the New Earth.”

<sup>67</sup> Grumett, “Eucharist, Matter, and the Supernatural,” 170.

<sup>68</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 203.

world. Even if all created realities can somehow become “signs” of God’s presence to us, Congar still encourages us to imagine how vastly *different* the supernatural order must be, and how limited is our own present participation in that world: “[T]he invisible realities of the other world”—that is, the realities which are “‘*non huius creationis*—not of this creation’ (Heb 9:11)” —have been adapted for us in our present condition. As such, they are “communicated to us under conditions adapted to our earthly nature, conditions of a spirit in flesh.”<sup>69</sup> In eschatological perspective, however, “the reality of the *beyond* transcends anything accessible to ordinary sense experience.”<sup>70</sup> Even the ecclesial sacramental system and the Eucharist itself should be seen as a concession to our current condition and context, pointing forward to a more perfect communion.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion

Congar’s “sacred pedagogy” represents a constructive, pastoral response to a particular condition affecting the post-conciliar Church. Fifty years have passed since he first published the essay, so I wish to conclude by asking about its contemporary relevance. It seems to me that we could veritably ask if anything about Congar’s original diagnosis has changed: “Our time and our culture are marked by a discovery of the world which sometimes takes on (in exaggerated fashion) the aspect of a conversion to the world. Sometimes we do not distinguish sufficiently the goodness of creation itself, on the one hand, from the yeast of sin that dwells in it, on the other hand.”<sup>72</sup> In view of the remarkable changes that science and technology have brought to our world since 1967, not to mention the utopian rhetoric frequently glossing these transitions, it may in fact be more important that we be able to “distinguish sufficiently” between creation’s goodness and the “yeast of sin.”

It is intriguing to note that, by 1980, de Lubac’s earlier concern about the “weakening and disappearing of the sense of the sacred” in post-War Catholicism had transmuted into its mirror opposite. Fifteen years after the Council, and over a decade after Congar’s essay, de Lubac admitted that the Church in his day had overcorrected the turn towards the sacred:

With no regard for genuine Christianity, today every species of the ‘sacred’ or even every tawdry imitation thereof, every religion, every

<sup>69</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 124.

<sup>70</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 124; emphasis original.

<sup>71</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 125.

<sup>72</sup> Congar, “Where Does the ‘Sacred’ Fit,” 129.

spirituality, every culture is being exalted, amid total confusion and with no effort at discrimination. Here and there clerics, who despite their name had been asleep in profoundest ignorance, are dazzled by the discovery of the vast universe; they are quite prepared to admire everything about it without understanding it and have no critical resources (or what they believe to be such) except against the faith which nourished them. They have become blind to the unique contribution of Judeo-Christian revelation, as well as to the lights, overpowering or discreet, shed by holiness.<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, Congar's and de Lubac's respective concerns can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Immediately after the Council, Congar was concerned about the Church being "reduced to the role of revealing the meaning of the world."<sup>74</sup> Not long after, de Lubac complained about the Church lacking all spiritual discernment about the world's new discoveries. Leaving aside the question of whether de Lubac unwittingly contributed to this phenomenon, I would still conclude that Congar's essay supplies some of the clearest and most practical considerations by which today's Church can engage the world at large, while avoiding the Scylla of blessing everything as sacred, and the Charybdis of presenting the world with an ultimately unconvincing interpretation of its own meaning.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Congar's particular brand of Thomism has shown its true colors. If we seek to cultivate a sense of the sacred today, then we need to be able to approach the natural order on its own terms, without assuming too hastily that any and every form of cultural expression is equally "dispositive," or, equally fit for leading ourselves and others to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps if we follow Congar's ideas about "sacred pedagogy," we might be able to address the complex realities of our own cultural moment (e.g., our technologies and inventions, our media, etc.) with a theological realism that is just as concerned with these forms' natural significance as much as their supernatural significance (or lack thereof).

As far as Congar is concerned, Christians actually need to be able to do this in order to be faithful to their Christ-given mission to the world. We need, that is, to be able to show how so many of the forms shared between world and Church can *become* sacred, even while others must be judged as decidedly antagonistic to our participation in God's kingdom. As we have seen, such a practical approach does not do any disservice to our confession of the uniquely sacred, three-fold body of Christ, for this body is *in substance* what

<sup>73</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, 99.

<sup>74</sup> Congar, "Where Does the 'Sacred' Fit," 124.

all other forms may only become in the way of *symbol, sign, etc.* In sum, Congar supplies crucial resources for how to make the world “sacred,” while at the same time, he supplies the pragmatism needed *not* to make the world “sacred” in more deleterious ways which, however dazzling, may ultimately blind us to our need for the grace of another order.

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