The Phenomenon of Rome: On Roads, Refugees, and Teilhard de Chardin

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Jon Radwan, Ph.D.

“All roads lead to Rome” is a famous description of the empire’s legendary infrastructure and the capital’s gravitational pull. In both concrete and cultural senses it rang true for ancients like Paul and Augustine, but looking back at Roman roads from the twenty-first century reveals many changes. Not only has history seen several large scale emigrations from Rome, today’s migration issues show how many roads have been barred. In principle ancient Imperial citizenship was possible for everyone, and now immigration, naturalization, and even tourism are permitted only within strict limits. To be fair Italy’s refugee policies match those of most developed countries, and simply saying “no” to desperate people seeking asylum appears humane in comparison with the terrific new low achieved by recent American migrant family separations, but the general lesson is the same: today only some roads lead to Rome, and only for some people.

In the summer of 2018 I was privileged with an opportunity to travel to Rome with Seton Hall’s Core faculty. Over the course of a week we visited major historical and religious sites with a special emphasis on migrant aid. We toured the Forum, Colosseum, Vatican, several colleges and churches including all major basilica, and we learned about relief work from the Sisters of Charity, Caritas Roma, St. Paul within the Walls, and the Community of Sant Egidio. In addition we travelled outside Rome to Ostia Antica to see both the excavation of the ancient port city and then several miles further to modern Ostia’s beautiful seacoast. In many ways it was overwhelming -- all of these wonderful places, all of these deep feelings and ideas, all in one week. To help process and write about them I’ve decided to use terms from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s famous book The Phenomenon of Man. Written in the late 1930s, it could not be published until his death in 1955 and even then controversy was so strong that in 1962 the Vatican, Rome, had to formally warn Catholic educators to work “effectively to protect the minds, particularly of the youth, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and of his followers.” Despite this admonition, by the 1980s the ranks of these dangerous followers was growing quickly and came to include theologians of the highest order -- John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis. When we toured the library at Rome’s Pontifical North American College I marveled at seeing his books on the end of a stack. Teilhard’s ideas were on a road to Rome, and Roman authorities actively worked to keep them out, yet still over time they were adopted by so many Romans that now they teach seminarians and inspire Popes. Teilhard’s focus on creation as an evolutionary process and humanity’s integral development offer a fascinating lens for studying Roman roads and refugees.

The Phenomenon of Man is incredibly comprehensive, outlining both a temporal and a depth perspective on all of nature and humanity. The world is described as a material geosphere hosting an emerging biosphere, and as it grows it becomes increasingly complex, moving from simple organisms through cephalization and eventually on to hominization. As life develops awareness and then a conscious capacity for spirituality and reflection, humanity begins to superpose a “noosphere” over material and biological reality. The noosphere is our “thinking layer,” a simultaneously individual and socio-cultural milieu that we lay out over the world’s geographic and ecological contours. Just as nature continues to grow more complex, the noosphere also develops through new levels of organization and integration. Everyone contributes the “psychic energy” driving cultural currents, and Teilhard argues
that the general future trend of noogenesis is toward a convergent hyper-personal and ultimately divine “Omega-point.”

Right now, for pre-Omegans advancing the future, human personalities transcend organic individuality as we participate in the relationships and networks that constitute our social reality. With this view, our evolving person-hood achieves complex unity by correlating individuation with systemic integration. In theological terms, genesis is a very long continuous process arcing toward re-union with God. In sum Teilhard’s unique contribution is to integrate scientific disciplines like geology and evolutionary biology with Pauline (and Johanine) Christianity, especially in its prophetic mode predicting end times. “Then, as St. Paul tells us, God shall be all in all. . . . The universe fulfilling itself in a synthesis of centres in perfect conformity with the laws of union. God, the centre of centres. In that final vision the Christian dogma culminates.” (294) Teilhard’s ideas about process theology and cosmoogenesis thus represent a powerful synthesis of immense scope; ideas powerful enough to make even mighty Rome fear them, and also powerful enough to make inspired Rome embrace them.

To interpret Roman roads, Teilhard’s vocabulary provides a clear set of descriptive terms. Geologically, Rome is situated on a set of hills beside the Tiber River at the midpoint of the long Italian peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean Sea. It is next to one of the Tiber’s only natural fords in the region, so for the early biosphere it’s fairly safe to say that animal paths pre-dated human settlement and their early routes. Human history in and around Rome begins approximately 10,000 years ago, so it is both a lengthy and incredibly rich and influential story driving the development of Western and Christian cultures. Civilized urban development of the area has advanced more or less continuously for at least 2800 years, and Rome had already been recognized as an “eternal city” by the first century BCE. In this historical sense Rome is a complex phenomenal event within the broader phenomenon of man; as a cultural epicenter no brief treatment of Rome can fully do it justice, and at the same time practically no discussion of the noosphere can avoid it.

To explain human migration and settlement patterns Teilhard characteristically adopts a big picture perspective and points to the planet Earth, a fact so obviously given that it feels odd to even mention. Because humanity grows on a single geosphere as we expand we are also destined to fold back on one another. Early waves of humanity met only natural frontiers, a pattern indistinguishable from growing on an infinite plane, but before long our finite globe guaranteed concentration and integration of humanity. As he explains “. . . from the Neolithic age onward these waves began, as we have seen, to recoil upon themselves. All available space being occupied, the occupiers had to pack in tighter” (240). From this perspective, ancient Roman roads are material traces of an important noospheric current, the imperial Roman idea that the human pack could and should be integrated by military occupation. Imperialism itself is not an exclusively Roman concept, but the very successful idea that a vast radial network of carefully designed and seriously constructed roads is the primary way to build and hold an Empire can be credited to the Romans. Road building and maintenance became a massive cultural investment, so much so that at its height Rome boasted nearly 30 military highways and eventually over 100 conquered provinces were all interconnected by nearly 400 major roads covering 50,000 miles, all of them fully paved and featuring advanced designs including drainage, sidewalks, and adjoining cart-paths. As the Imperial capital Rome was the central node for all of these roads, so in 20 BCE Augustus erected the milarium aureum or “golden milestone” to formally mark the 0 point from which all roads radiated and all distances were measured. Over time it came to be known in a living and embodied sense as the umbilicus Romae, the navel of Rome.
While the primary Roman view of roads was as a type of military fortification enabling swift deployment and facilitating communication, they were also used extensively for civilian and commercial transportation. It was in this context that we studied *Via Ostiensis*, the Ostian Way connecting Rome with the port city of Ostia.

The course of the Tiber River and the geography of the coastline has shifted away over time, so much so that the dry ruins of the ancient port are now known as Ostia Antica and the modern city of Ostia featuring beautiful Mediterranean beaches is located 4 miles to the south-east. We visited two important historical sites along this road, the Pontifical Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, and the archaeological excavation at Ostia Antica.

St. Paul travelled extensively to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean, both on land and by sea, so it’s clear he would have logged many miles on Roman roads. There are few records of his early time in Rome, and it is very likely migrants had already brought Christianity to Rome before he ever arrived, but ancient sources agree that for his final visit he was extradited from Jerusalem and beheaded a few miles from the basilica around 60 CE. His body was placed in a cemetery on the Ostian Way owned by a prominent Christian woman, and tradition holds that his head was brought to the Lateran. Over the years many pilgrims came to venerate Paul’s resting place, so in 324 the site was formally consecrated. Since that time there has been an active religious community there with a basilica that was built and rebuilt over his tomb as it was successively sacked by invaders, levelled by an earthquake, and accidentally burned to the ground. Today’s structure was built in the 1800s and it is magnificent, standing out even in a city over-crowded with legendary art and architecture. It’s the second largest basilica in Rome and features a wide range of beautiful artwork including a detailed fresco series on the life of St. Paul.
One of the most striking elements within all of this grandeur is a larger than life statue of St. Paul placed in the courtyard below the main facade facing the Ostian Way. The iconography of this statue can be difficult to interpret, especially for novices like myself. The book in his left hand is easy to associate with his many Biblical letters, but the large sword in his right seems much too aggressive for a tent-maker and preacher like Paul. While he could be stern and judgmental, violence was not his way, at least after he gave up persecuting Christians and converted. Our expert guide Dr. Robert White of Rome’s Lay Center explained that the symbol was appropriated. Much in the same way that the cross, the instrument of Jesus’s brutal end, came to represent Christianity and Christ’s triumph over death, so did the instrument of Paul’s beheading come to serve as a reminder of his martyrdom. These appropriated symbols express ideas, thoughts about how power works constituting noospheric currents, and this historical current emphasizes how long-term
victory and power belongs to martyrs witnessing to justice and peace, not forgotten emperors or their headsmen. In this way how two highly symbolic instruments of Roman domination, roads on the large scale and swords on the small scale, were transformed for Christian glory. Alive, Paul travelled the Army’s highways to spread the gospel, and dead he takes up the sword of his executioners to show God’s power over earthly death.

About a dozen miles away at the opposite end of the Ostian Way, the excavation and ruins of Ostia Antica are much less resplendent but still very impressive. The area was abandoned for centuries but is remarkably well preserved, and archaeologists estimate that up to two thirds of the ancient city is still buried beneath the topsoil that nature gradually deposited over the years. The ancient road is hard to see in today’s urban development around St. Paul Outside the Walls, but in Ostia Antica it’s easy to note how remarkably straight and well-designed Roman roads were. The Romans filled the spaces between large paving stones with sand and fine material to make a smooth surface, and it was amazing to see the ruts that had been worn into the stones over centuries of use.

The expert guide leading our tour of Ostia Antica was Father Brian Lowery, O.S.A. He focused on Augustine’s time in Italy as described in The Confessions. A successful North African professor of rhetoric, Augustine describes how he departed in 383 looking to work with motivated students instead of the abusive gangs that dominated the school in Carthage. He landed in Ostia, walking on the same exact stones we were standing on, and journeyed on to Rome. The Roman students were better, and also greedier, so they quit his class en masse before paying.

Augustine moved from Rome to take a government funded teaching position in Milan, and it was here that he began to unite two major noospheric currents, Neo-Platonism and Christianity. He was familiar with Greek thought before he left Africa and had read Aristotle’s Categories, but as a Manichee he was an avowed materialist, believing that everything in existence was physical and measurable. Reading the Neo-Platonists taught him a healthy Academic skepticism, and this gave him the final intellectual push he needed to abandon Mani’s self-contradictory and almost random myths. He began to believe that a spiritual reality was possible, that immaterial things could and did exist, and for the first time he knew he was stepping toward enlightenment, but ultimately he could not reach the light. Philosophy is light, and it is also cold. It was precisely at this time in Augustine’s intellectual and spiritual development that he met Bishop Ambrose. At first he listened to Ambrose’s preaching out of professional interest, to see why everyone said he was such a great speaker and to assess his rhetorical technique. This scenario sets up one of my favorite quotes from The Confessions. “As I opened my heart to appreciate how skillfully he [Bishop Ambrose] spoke, the recognition that he was speaking the truth crept in at the same time, though only by slow degrees.” It’s a fantastic moment because Ambrose’s
rhetoric unites the true, the beautiful, and the good. Augustine’s degrees of recognition creep in slowly because enlightenment takes patient effort, but the work is inspiring and he knows he is making spiritual progress. Ambrose teaches that the Gospels are not literal myths like Mani’s, but are instead allegorical teachings about timeless spiritual principles and with this knowledge Augustine begins his conversion, he begins to turn toward and with God. Soon after he reads the letters of St. Paul, and they carry him on to his famous crisis in the garden. Unlike the philosophers, Paul teaches that enlightenment cannot be achieved alone, we need God’s grace and as we devote ourselves to returning God’s love we become truly free in the warm light of faith. With this new synthesis, Greek philosophy and Christian love, Augustine takes up both Paul’s apostolic teaching and Plato’s rational ascent to create a noospheric river of thought and feeling so deep and so wide that it inspired the Church through Rome’s fall, across the long middle ages, and for many of us still today.

Augustine left Italy the same way he entered, along the Ostian Way, but his beloved mother Monica fell sick and died in Ostia before they could leave port. As a deeply passionate man, losing loved ones had caused him serious suffering in the past. Back in Thagaste when his best friend passed he wept for weeks, eventually moving to Carthage so he wouldn’t face painful reminders at every street-corner in town. He explains how “I believe that the more I loved him, the more I hated death, which had taken him from me; I hated it as a hideous enemy, and feared it, and pictured it as ready to devour all human beings, since it had been able to make away with him.” Augustine loved his mother even more deeply than his friend, and for much longer, but now his conversion provided new perspective on suffering and evil. His journey had brought him to realize that everything has its time and place within creation and that evil is the result of turning from God, not any material reality or malevolent force. Losing his mother was difficult, but not completely devastating because he now had faith and knew that her life of tireless prayer and devotion had already been rewarded. Monica herself reminded him that our souls are much more important than our bodies. In Ostia she told their friends she no longer wished to be buried in Africa next to her husband, because “Nothing is far from God . . . there is no danger that at the end of the world he will not know where to find me and raise me up.” Soon after, laying on her deathbed yet firm in her faith, she gave Augustine clear instructions to “[l]ay this body anywhere, and take no trouble over it. One thing only do I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be.”

One of the earliest criticisms of The Phenomenon of Man was that its abstract approach and long view ignored the problem of suffering and evil. In 1948 Teilhard responded by appending remarks on “the place and part of evil in a world in evolution” to correct this misunderstanding. In focusing on human development, on “evolution becoming conscious of itself,” it’s important to recognize that evil, wrong, and suffering constitute the structural context for growth. In nature death is the price for new life, and at the human level our noospheric drama “resembles nothing so much as a way of the cross” because sacrifice is required to advance toward unity. Teilhard identifies four specific evils inherent within evolution: disorder and failure, decomposition, solitude and anxiety, and finally growth itself. All growth requires work and effort, birth pangs both anguished and exultant. With this perspective we can begin to understand how to face immigration issues. Teilhard’s vision of human destiny is hyper-personal. Evolution is leading toward convergence, but this convergence does not melt together into uniform energy, instead each of us becomes more fully ourselves as we integrate into a tight “bundle” of humanity. This makes the challenge of human relations, including large scale immigration patterns, a
central issue. Because we are all approaching a divine Omega point, we must learn how to invert Babel and unite. This is the essence of Teilhard’s central “law of complexity and consciousness.”

ever more complexity and thus ever more consciousness. If that is what really happens, what more do we need to convince ourselves of the vital error hidden in the depths of any doctrine of isolation? The egocentric ideal of a future reserved for those who have managed to attain egoistically the extremity of ‘everyone for himself’ is false and against nature. No element could move and grow except with and by all the others with itself. – Also false and against nature is the racial ideal of one branch draining off for itself alone all the sap of the tree and rising over the death of the other branches. To reach the sun nothing less is required that the combined growth of the entire foliage. – The outcome of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the super-human – these are not thrown open to a few of the privileged nor to one chosen people to the exclusion of all others. The will open only to an advance of all together, in a direction in which all together can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth . . . (244-5)

Teilhard’s expansive vision calls for a broad path, a road where all of humanity advances into the future together. Managing the progress of an ever more packed human bundle thus becomes our primary challenge, and this is why refugee and migrant aid become crucial answers to the problem of evil. In Rome we visited and learned from four different aid agencies, each expressing love of neighbor in a different mode: Caritas Roma provides language education and connects migrants with government services; St. Paul Within The Walls offers both material help (shoes, clothing, food) and spiritual aid by sharing space for community fellowship; the Sisters of Mercy live directly with refugees to both share in and slake thirst with the least of our brethren; and the Community of Sant Egidio performs important advocacy work to establish “humanitarian corridors” enabling passage through increasingly rigid international borders. Each mode responds to social disorder, decomposition, anomy, and population growth in its own way, meeting the challenges of evolution with Christian charity until we perfect the law of union and achieve “all in all.”

In conclusion, Teilhard’s teaching on Earth’s evolution sheds light on the phenomenon of Rome. Ancient roads, Paul’s triumphant martyrdom, Augustine’s and Monica’s journey past materialism, and diverse migrant aid organizations all demonstrate that “[n]o evolutionary future awaits man except in association with all other men.” (246) To close, consider this early morning photograph of the road
leading to St. Peter’s Basilica at the heart of Vatican City.

The street itself and half of the buildings are in darkness, but the sun is rising so the opposite side of the street is well lit and at the center of the image St. Peter’s provides a distant yet bright and majestic focal point. The graceful dome contrasts with the plain angular buildings lining the street, its divine curves framed by clean but merely functional and ultimately mundane architecture. I like to imagine St. Paul on this road in the foreground, but really any of us could be there. Hopefully not many of us reach so dark a time that we are called to be martyrs, but here in the worldly foreground there is so much more than cold shadows if we can only look up and around. There, right over there on the side of the street there are regular people living regular lives in the light, like the migrant aid workers at Caritas Roma, and off in the distance St. Peter’s shines with dawn’s new light. The road may seem dark sometimes, but our forbears transformed the rough stones into pavement two millennia ago so the path forward is clear.

Andiamo!