

Maritain and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Light of Claudel, Péguy, and Bernanos

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During the summer of 1942, Maritain tells us, he wrote *Christianity and Democracy*.¹ As was to become his wont, he there vaunts American democracy, contrasting it with what he had known in Europe.

There is one thing that Europe knows well, that she knows even too well; that is the tragic meaning of life. After a thousand years of suffering she has learned to know what man is and at what cost the slightest progress is accomplished. . . . There is one thing that America knows well. . . . She knows that the man of common humanity has a right to the "pursuit of happiness"²

Seven years later Maritain was invited to give six lectures under the auspices of the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation. These 1949 lectures became the volume entitled *Man and the State*.³ Here again he takes up the phrase, "the pursuit of happiness," only this time in the best American tradition, referring to it as "an inalienable right."

¹Jacques Maritain. *Christianity and Democracy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary House, 1945), p. 7. For the recent American edition see, *Christianity and Democracy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

²*Ibid.*, p. 61. and Ignatius Press edition, pp. 79–80

³Jacques Maritain. *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). French translation, *L'homme et l'état* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953).

Speaking of human rights, he maintains that they have an “inalienable character.”

Some of them, like the right to existence or to the pursuit of happiness, are of such a nature that the common good would be jeopardized if the body politic could restrict in any measure the possession that men naturally have of them. Let us say that they are absolutely inalienable.⁴

While Maritain continues by distinguishing between the *possession* of “inalienable rights” and the *exercise* of them, the indispensable “open sesame” for immediate entry into the American heart has been uttered. Every American feels sure that he and Maritain cannot be all that far from one another; that here indeed at last is a Frenchman who understands America and Americans since he speaks of “the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.” Could Maritain’s long honeymoon with the United States not indeed be related to his willingness to articulate the great American shibboleth in such serious contexts?

II

As a student of French literature I have always been fascinated by the spiritual witness of French Christians, beginning with Maritain, long before I had even heard of Claudel, Péguy or Bernanos. Over the years I have observed repeatedly that a deep sense of the believer’s becoming a participant in the sufferings of Christ is, in fact, a feature of that spirituality, whether in a popular modern saint, such as Thérèse of Lisieux, or in that most French of French women, Joan of Arc, who so graphically incarnates redemptive suffering, and whose strange and wonderful story bears so many marks of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

Curiously, Rome’s canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920, or of Thérèse of Lisieux in 1925, did not seem to have much impact on Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. This curious fact, coupled with Maritain’s embracing American idealism as expressed in the phrase “the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness” therefore has puzzled me when trying to integrate Maritain’s own intellectual faith into what I believe to be France’s traditional Christianity.

Catapulted into Catholicism by Léon Bloy, Maritain shortly thereafter discovered Thomas Aquinas through Raïssa. Never again was he

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 101.

to look back, intellectually confident as he was in the Angelic Doctor's primacy. And, though he and Raïssa and Vera all became Benedictine Oblates, Maritain still went his own way to such an extent that when he finally attached himself to a Christian community at the end of his life, it was not to the Benedictines that he turned.

One thing that Maritain was ever mindful of, however, was the power of Rome, probably because of an early experience. Under Bloy's impact he had written a volume on Mélanie, visionairy of La Salette to whom secrets had been entrusted in her visions. With the naive good faith of a convert, Maritain, recently given the title of "Doctor" by Rome, wished to seek Vatican approval for his potentially explosive volume.⁵ His and Raïssa's pilgrimage to Rome in early 1918 while war was still raging, hoping to pilot this precious volume through Vatican red tape, proved a bitter experience. Undoubtedly, it sharpened Maritain's sensitivity to Rome's arbitrary power, making him aware of how the Vatican might react to works he would later publish in the two literary series he directed in Paris.

Thus, Maritain's neutral reaction to Rome's canonization of a Joan of Arc or a Thérèse of Lisieux seems somewhat paradoxical. Still, his experience with Roman bureaucracy does make it easier for us to understand why he contested the spirituality of Bernanos's first novel, *Under the Sun of Satan*, published in his *Roseau d'or* series in 1926. By effecting a veritable theological censoring of the text, Maritain probably wished to avoid Roman censure, even though it did throw Bernanos's creative vision as a Christian completely off axis.⁶

But then was it really fear of Rome that prompted Maritain to find Charles Péguy's poetry irreverent in regard to the most holy Virgin? Fortunately, Péguy did not depend on Maritain to get his work published. Claudel, of course, escaped critical assaults from Maritain

⁵Jacques Maritain. *Carnet de Notes* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), Chapter III, "Notre premier voyage à Rome," pp. 113–138. For the English edition see *Notebooks* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984).

⁶On this thorny question see my "Avant-Propos" in Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan: Première édition conforme au manuscrit original* (Paris: Plon, 1982) pp. 9–23; see also my: "Jacques Maritain and Georges Bernanos on the Problem of Evil in *Sous le soleil de Satan*," in *Notes et Documents* 4 (october-décembre 1983), pp. 91–105; plus my highly specialized scholarly volume on the question: *Genèse et structures de <Sous le soleil de satan> d'après le manuscrit Bodmer: scrupules de Maritain et autocensure de Bernanos* (Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes 1988).

who published a volume of Claudel's correspondence in his *Roseau d'or* series. Yet when texts were chosen for *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* it would not be the Christian verses of either Claudel or Péguy which would exactly overwhelm the reader.

Certainly, none of our three French literary giants resembled Maritain in flirting with the United States. Claudel, French ambassador to Washington, was never seduced by American ideals. Bernanos, I was told in 1957 by his widow, refused to set foot in the United States, something she herself lamented, though Bernanos did address a letter to Roosevelt and the Americans in his war-time volume, "*Letter to the English.*" And as for Péguy, one wonders if he even allowed that the United States existed, so terribly focused was he on the implications of France having once been saved by God Himself from a future of English Protestantism through the miracle of Joan of Arc.

Péguy's obsession with the mystery of Joan of Arc apparently left Maritain unscathed. Did she and her voices smack a trifle too much of royalist fervor to fit into the humanist philosopher's cool, republican vision of a modern, democratic world? Claudel and Bernanos, however, like Péguy, both wrestled with the mystery of Joan of Arc and of her divine significance for France. Bernanos would even marry a descendent of the saint's brother.

III

Though so very different on the surface, our three literary giants are bound by a deep and common French spirituality rooted in the glorification of that most noble, yet most mysterious reality of human existence, taught in the Gospels, incarnate by the Old Testament prophets as well as by the chosen people themselves; then taken up by St. Paul and all the Apostles, martyrs, and confessors who, throughout two thousand years, until our own time, have perpetuated it through their incarnation of the life of Christ in His Church: redemptive suffering. Put into a French Christian context, "the pursuit of happiness" could refer to nothing less than an ascetic pursuit of God in whom true and final happiness can alone be found.

But is an ascetic pursuit of God in the style of the desert fathers what the founding fathers of the American Republic had in mind in the seventeenth-century when they spoke of the pursuit of happiness? Such a possibility is preposterous, for the concept of the pursuit of happiness is, whether we like it or not, necessarily rooted in a basic, inveterate

humanism where man feels he is free to pursue his “inalienable right” quite apart from the saving action of God. In such an orientation, Christian practice can be nothing more than a slightly affected, slightly suspect embellishment, an option for those weak enough to feel the need of it. Never, however, can God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ be envisaged as constituting the one essential and indispensable element of human life. That, as every red-blooded American is taught, is found in the Creator-endowed inalienable right to pursue happiness. Man’s utter dependence upon God not only for life itself, but for the very breath he draws, for his every heartbeat, cannot but be eclipsed by the idea of the pursuit of happiness. Equally eclipsed is Christian man’s vast potential, that is his whole vocation to become, on this planet earth, a little incarnation of his God, Jesus Christ, through freely accepted redemptive suffering. Indeed, could a more subtly demonic toxin be injected into the psyche of a Christian than that of the concept that he is endowed by his Creator with the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness?

IV

For a very strong dose of French anti-toxin, I have chosen to begin with the most senior of our three twentieth-century Christian giants, Paul Claudel. At the end of his sprawling fifteenth-century medieval play, translated as *The Tidings Brought to Mary* (*L’annonce faite à Marie*), the father of the play’s heroine, Violaine, lays his daughter’s unconscious body on the family table so that she, devoured by leprosy, may die in their midst. At that point, just before the final curtain falls, he enunciates what he, through his daughter’s sufferings, has come to see as the purpose of life.

Violaine had assumed her suffering eight years before. Out of compassion for Pierre de Craon, master architect and builder of churches, as well as a secret leper, Violaine had knowingly kissed him on the mouth after he had revealed to her that the first mark of the disease had appeared under his clothing the day after he tried to rape her during his last stay at their country estate.

Violaine’s kiss thus concludes the drama’s all-important prologue where we have seen Pierre, obliged to return to the estate for masonry on the neighboring monastery, vainly trying to slip away at dawn without confronting her. She, however, has arisen early to open the door for him, wishing him to share in her joy on the eve of her engagement to her true love, Jacques Hury.

Pierre explains to Violaine that he has ecclesiastical dispensations to remain in society to build a church dedicated to St. Justice, a child virgin-martyr whose relics had been unearthed. Touched by the story of the child martyr, Violaine takes off an antique pagan gold ring given her in love by Jacques Hury. Passing it to Pierre, she says it is to buy a tiny stone for his edifice to God's justice. Then, anxious that Pierre be spared to complete this church to Justice, she lucidly opts to assume his illness, sacrificing her happiness with Jacques Hury through her symbolic kiss to the leper, Pierre. Kissing him she knows will make it impossible for her ever to marry Jacques Hury. Jacques, of course, will be quickly snapped up by Violaine's younger, black-hearted sister, Mara, bitterly jealous of Jacques's love for her older sister.

Eight years later, on Christmas eve, Mara journeys to the lepers's woods to visit Violaine, bearing in her arms the little dead body of the infant daughter finally born to her and Jacques. She has hidden this loss from Jacques, fearing to lose his love, for she knows he has never ceased loving Violaine. Therefore, hate her sister though she does, Mara desperately asks her help.

In her heart Mara admits that Violaine is holy and has never ceased *glorifying God's justice, even as a blind leper, and even though deprived of the esteem of the only man she has ever loved*. For Violaine has willingly allowed Jacques to believe, as Mara had told him, that she betrayed him with Pierre de Craon.

Mara, bearing her pathetic little bundle, says she has come to ask that she too be enabled to praise that God who had made her sister a leper. Her joy in possessing Jacques is great, she says, but she knows that her leper sister's joy with God is greater, even in her pain. Violaine answers:

The pain was caused by love, and love by pain.
Lighted wood yields not just ashes, but flame.⁷

To Mara's cynical question about what light or warmth she could possibly communicate to others in her blinded, exiled state in the leper's woods, Violaine answers:

God is a miser allowing no creature to be consumed
Without a little impurity's being devoured,

⁷Paul Claudel. *L'annonce faite à Marie* (Paris: Collection Folio, Gallimard, 1975), p. 165. This is translated from the French by the author, as are all the quotes coming from French sources in this article.

be it the creature's own, or that around him. . . .

Oh certainly, unhappiness is great at this hour. . . .

That is why my body is at work here in place of disintegrating Christianity.

How powerful is suffering when it is as voluntary as sin!

You saw me kiss that leper, Mara? Well, the chalice of suffering is deep, and whosoever touches it once with his lips will not willingly take them away again!⁸

Thereupon, the bells for the midnight mass of Christmas ring out; the sound of trumpets announces the procession of Joan of Arc leading the dauphin to nearby Rheims for anointing as France's Most Christian King; and Violaine restores the infant to life.

True to her bitter name, Mara rewards Violaine for the miracle by pushing her into a sandpit to die. There, three days later and at death's door, she is found by their father, Anne Vercors, as he returns home from his eight-year pilgrimage to Jerusalem, undertaken just as Violaine was undertaking her mission. He had told his wife of more than thirty years that he must leave for Jerusalem because he was too happy: he needed to put his hand in the hole made in the earth by the cross of Christ. The parallel with Violaine is strong, therefore, since she too, eight years before, at the moment of her formal engagement, had told Jacques Hury, that she too was too happy.

Thus, when he finds his leper daughter's dying body as he returns from Jerusalem, Violaine's father suddenly grasps that by her acceptance of what God had offered her, she, rather than he, had succeeded in putting her hand into the hole made in the earth by the cross of Christ. In climactic lines typifying Claudel's French spirituality, Anne Vercors says:

I wanted once again to press myself against the empty tomb, to thrust my hand into the holes made by the cross, as did that apostle into the holes made in the hands and feet and heart.

But wiser was Violaine, my own little girl! Is living the goal of life? Are the hands and feet of God's children attached to this wretched earth? The goal is not living, but dying! Not constructing a cross, but getting up on it and giving what one has with a laugh.⁹

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 204.

V

Our second example of French spirituality comes from Georges Bernanos's third novel, *Joy*,¹⁰ where Bernanos deliberately made Thérèse of Lisieux's spirituality that of his heroine, Chantal de Clergerie. Characterized by a profound sense of man's utter helplessness before God, this spirituality is succinctly enunciated in Thérèse of Lisieux's "*Act of Consecration as a Victim of Holocaust to the Holy Trinity*,"¹¹ where she states that she feels infinite desires in her, wanting to be a saint, but, knowing her impotence, can only ask God Himself to be her sanctity.

Joy, therefore, is not found in being happy, but, having discovered that we love God and that we are absolutely impotent before Him, joy is found in trusting Him to supply what is lacking in us. Just as the child can offer no present to his father without the father's first giving him the money to buy it, Thérèse recognized that she had nothing to offer God without His first giving it her. The "infinite longings" God put into her soul to be a saint were thus His gift, His own longings in her, as were also the often painful circumstances He provided her in which to bring these longings to fruition.

In *Joy* Bernanos's heroine, Chantal, constantly struggles, therefore, whether with her learned but *arriviste* father, or with her mad grandmother, or with a twisted psychiatrist friend of her father's, or with her father's drug-addicted Russian chauffeur, or, worst of all, with her father's learned imposter-priest friend for whom she will offer herself. Prior to her final sacrifice Chantal comes to understand that the whole dazzling center of her joy, lies in the absolute certainty of her own helplessness before God to win in her struggles. Only by accepting her helplessness can she know joy.

No inalienable right to pursue happiness is allowed for here. The drug-addicted Russian chauffeur assassinates Chantal, and her martyred body, with the chauffeur's, is discovered by the cook, a good simple woman, and the imposter-priest. Upon seeing the sorry spectacle before him, the imposter-priest, a celebrated writer on saints and

¹⁰*La Joie*, published by Plon in Paris in 1929, was awarded the *Prix Femina* that year. It is a sequel to Bernanos's second novel, *L'imposture*, published in 1928. The conversion of the imposter-priest hero of *L'imposture* terminates *La Joie*.

¹¹Thérèse of Lisieux. *Manuscrits autobiographiques* (Carmel de Lisieux: 1957), p. 318.

mysticism, realizes that the sacrifice has been made for him, for he had once unwittingly confided the secret of his loss of faith to Chantal.

Turning to the cook he asks if she is able to say the "Our Father." When she has finished the prayer once, he orders her to repeat it again. Then, suddenly he himself, with great effort, cries out "*Pater noster!*" and falls senseless to the floor. He, whose whole life had been devoted to putting spirituality and mysticism into words, can find but two when faced with the sanctity and justice of God in his own life: "Our Father." We are told he died without ever recovering his reason.

That such a tale should be entitled "*Joy*," indicates the extraordinary scope of Bernanos's spirituality. He, like Claudel, remembered that the Lord had said to Angela of Foligno, "it's not for laughs that I suffered."

VI

Péguy was ten years older than Maritain and knew him intimately. Péguy's lofty and noble effort to better the world through his prestigious but ever-financially-strapped pro-socialist review, *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, prior to World War I attracted many French intellectuals with socialist sympathies, among whom was not only Jacques Maritain himself, but also his sister, Jeanne. Both worked for Péguy's review, long before any of them even dreamed of converting to Catholicism. At one time Péguy even viewed the young Maritain as his successor.

Through her children's ties with Péguy, Geneviève Favre, ex-Madame Paul Maritain, republican and anti-Catholic divorcée though she was, became Péguy's most intimate friend. Virtually daily she received the outpouring of the secret sorrows of Péguy's great and irreparably wounded noble heart. His sufferings stemmed from his very pure love for a young Jewish girl, Blanche Raphaël, whom, to get out of harm's way, he encouraged to marry. This she did and had a daughter by her husband. Péguy himself was already the father of three children, none of whom, out of respect for his wife's family's republican heritage, had been baptized. Indeed, no child had been baptized in her family since the Revolution. Péguy had, after all, married Charlotte Beaudoin as a committed socialist in a civil ceremony.

Péguy's moral—and I would myself be tempted to say even "spiritual"—suffering gradually brought him to the conclusion that he was not fit to plan the coming of the "harmonious city" of the future, if he could not keep harmony in his own rebellious heart in the present.

Thus, did he come to sense man's utter dependence upon God to save him. However great his throbbing heart's love for Blanche Raphaël might have been, Péguy found in his morally strict upbringing by his widowed peasant mother the ballast needed in his great hour of need. He came to view himself as the prodigal son, who had so self-confidently forsaken the father's house as to wind up eating with the swine—just as Péguy as a youth had self-confidently abandoned the practice of the Christian faith for socialism. Péguy discovered not only a need but a desire to return to the Father's house as the lowest of servants.

To this highly charged drama of Péguy's, Maritain's mother was not only privy, but determined to assume an active role in its resolution. Early in this affair and prior to Blanche's marriage, Péguy's widowed mother had made the trip to Paris from Orléans, dressed in her peasant-best with starched white *coiffe* and apron. Geneviève Favre received her at her splendid Parisian apartment on the rue de Rennes, and had the temerity to suggest that with Péguy so unhappy, perhaps he should divorce his wife and marry Blanche. Pounding the table, the old Madame Péguy retorted that he already had a wife and three children. That was that.

Indeed, republican liberalism left the stoic rigidity of this remarkable old lady unscathed, she who, with the support of her own illiterate mother—of whom she was the illegitimate offspring—had reared Péguy as a widow, utterly dependent upon her own very humble craft of caning chairs to feed and clothe the three of them. How, then, had she swelled with pride at the extraordinary academic honors showered on her only child by the remarkable education system of France's Third Republic! She saw him, her little boy, catapulted from one elite school to one still more elite, then dispatched to Paris to be tutored for entrance to the most elite of all: the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. To her dismay Péguy abandoned the Ecole Normale, as well as the university career it promised, in order to marry Charlotte Beaudoin. This had entailed a previous trip to Paris by the old Madame Péguy in her peasant-best, where she actually slapped her son in anger in a Paris street, so great was her disappointment at his giving up the security of a brilliant academic future of which she, quite justly, would have been so proud.

Maritain, thus, was aware of Péguy's painfully throbbing heart. Ironically, it was when they once both found themselves confessing to one another that they had discovered Catholicism that Maritain's

intimacy with Péguy took on its most volatile dimensions. For Péguy, unlike Maritain, had been reared Catholic but had abandoned his faith. Being civilly married to an unbaptized woman with three unbaptized children meant that Péguy had no choice but to die outside the communion of the Roman Catholic Church. Paradoxically, however, Péguy was also destined to raise the cult of the virgin Birthgiver of God to heights never before attained in French literature, attaching it, through his very personal sorrow, to his abiding devotion to the Virgin's powerful presence at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, the great high holy place of the Beauce where Péguy was born.

As Maritain's intimate Péguy suffered from Maritain's inability to grasp the very delicate situation with his wife. Maritain's self-appointed personal mission to get Madame Péguy to allow her children to be baptized resulted in disaster on all sides and Maritain's estrangement from Péguy himself, plus the fury of Maritain's mother, distraught in seeing Péguy upset.

That Péguy begat another child, and that that child was baptized after his death at the beginning of the first World War, and that Madame Péguy herself and the other children were also eventually baptized, need not concern us here. It does concern us, however, to remember that in Péguy we see a remarkable, living example of the renunciation of what Péguy himself called "*the young man, Happiness*" in favor of "*the old man Honour*," immortalized in Péguy's long outpourings in his all-but-suppressed *Quatrains*.¹²

We shall not dwell upon the heart-rending conflict between happiness and honor in the *Quatrains*, but rather take one brief example from Péguy's very personal living out of unhappiness enunciated in his *Five Prayers in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres*.¹³ In those

¹²Charles Péguy. *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), pp. 1265–1388. Marcel Péguy, the poet's son, who prepared the notes for this prestigious edition, offers no comment whatsoever either on the origin or the significance of these searing *Quatrains*, where "*Old man honour*" and "*Young man happiness*" so contend. He did not, in fact, even include them in the main body of the book. As might be some minor, unfinished, and unimportant text, these more than one-hundred pages of quatrains are stuck, totally without comment, in an Appendix at the end of the volume. Madame Charles Péguy was in fact adamant in regard to the drama of her husband's suffering heart. During her life time she forbade the name of Blanche Raphaël to appear in print, regardless of whatever other candid details scholars might give regarding the strange origin of this noble poetry paying such high honor to Péguy's fidelity to his spouse.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 908–924.

five short poems Péguy lays bare his very unhappy soul to Our Lady of Chartres, praying for his children along with Blanche's child. He tells the all-powerful Virgin that when the moment came of finding himself at the crossroads, where one path led down toward happiness, while the other led toward unhappiness, she, the holy virgin Birthgiver of God, knew which path he had chosen. And she knew he had not chosen it out of duty, which he could not stand. Nor had he chosen it out of goodness, for he had none of which to boast. Rather, he had deliberately placed himself at the point of the crossing where the pain was greatest, freely renouncing life with Blanche out of honor, and yet never loving her any less. He had, thus, lucidly fixed himself at the very heart of his pain and in the midst of the cause of his distress. His only prayer to the holy virgin Birthgiver of God, therefore, was not that he be happy, nor even that he suffer less, but that she, his mighty protectress, might help him keep intact that deep and cherished tenderness he had genuinely felt for honor in opting for unhappiness.

Through this devastating affair of the heart at a mature age, Péguy discovered that fundamental conflict with the basic conditions of life which every spiritual man discovers sooner or later during his earthly pilgrimage. It is, therefore, all the more astounding to see that Georges Bernanos at age 18 had already grasped this truth and in a political context rather than in a personal affair of the heart.

In a letter written to a young priest friend, the youthful Bernanos mockingly opposed the Christian democrats since, in order to believe in Christian democracy, he observed:

You have to believe in the indefinite perfectibility of the human race, you have to skip over original sin and the common dilemma in which man finds himself.¹⁴

Man's "common dilemma" is indeed the key issue. Anyone determined to be Christian and, at the same time, to believe in "the pursuit of happiness" must sweep that dilemma under the carpet, trusting in an out-of-sight, out-of-mind orientation to life. The trouble is that the carpet of life will always be peeled back for each of us, sooner or later, by the hand of Death, revealing, sometimes repeatedly through the loss of those we love, all our vain illusions concerning man's

¹⁴Georges Bernanos, *Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1974), p. 1736.

immortality. Only in such God-filled and privileged moments of pain do we finally grasp what we have been told so many times by the holy ones of God: all in this world is utterly dependent upon God for meaning. The empty boast of being endowed by our Creator with an inalienable right to pursue happiness is then revealed for what it is: an unclean demonic illusion.

VII

But let us conclude with a return to the theme of redemptive and expiatory suffering. Of course, this was hardly a foreign topic in the little community of the three Benedictine oblates who together formed the Maritain household where Raïssa was supposed to carry out that very special and exalted function. Everyone in the Maritain circle, including Jacques and Vera themselves, recognized Raïssa as being, by vocation apparently, “the contemplative,” who was shielded from the troublesome matters of running the household, or from typing Jacques’s manuscripts, which the ever-valiant Vera took upon herself to do.

What marks for me the great turning point in Maritain’s own spiritual evolution, since it seems to bring him more into a typically French pattern, would occur only some four years after Raïssa’s death. In 1964, when writing his chapter on Vera¹⁵ in his *Carnet de Notes*, we find Maritain noting that Raïssa’s designation as “contemplative,” however well-founded it might be, still should not exclude Vera who, he insists, was *equally* contemplative. Yes, Vera, who was ever so popularly regarded—and even regarded by herself—as the “Martha” of the household! Let’s listen to Maritain:

It is easy to imagine Raïssa as a Mary devoted to contemplation, and Vera as a Martha, devoted to the active life, a super Sister of Charity. . . . But Vera lived from prayer as did Raïssa, she too knew that one had to *give everything* to Jesus, *everything, absolutely everything*; she too had achieved unity within herself in that peace which God gives.¹⁶

Maritain states that he is actually quoting from Vera’s own notebooks in underscoring that one has to give “*everything, absolutely everything*” to Jesus.¹⁷

¹⁵Jacques Maritain, *Carnet de notes*, p. 8.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, note 2.

This late insistence upon the high state of Vera's spirituality has always seemed to me an integral part of what I believe to be that other preoccupation of Maritain's in those years he survived Raïssa and wrote *The Peasant of the Garonne*. And I am still convinced of what I wrote in 1985 when I observed that

no aspect of Raïssa's Christian thought actually took on more importance for Jacques at the end than did her reflections on coredemption. Indeed, after he had devoted a dozen pages to it with substantial quotes from Raïssa in *Le paysan*, he came back the following year and, still quoting Raïssa, took up this question again in *De la grâce et de l'humanité de Jésus*.¹⁸

Thus, as profoundly certain as I am that at the end Maritain did come to what I would call a very French orientation in his spirituality, where co-redemption becomes the great theme, he had indeed pursued a very long and rather liberal, humanist, slightly modernist, and completely unorthodox route to arrive there, including his flirtation with the whole American concept of the Creator-endowed right to the pursuit of happiness. On this liberal and so humanist route, the philosopher had opposed both Péguy and Bernanos on matters which confirmed their, and not his, theological rectitude, and which set both writers's artistic genius against Maritain's aesthetic reservations.

But by the time Maritain arrived at that point, all three giants had long since left this world. Péguy was killed at age 41 at the very beginning of World War I. Bernanos died of cancer of the liver at age 60, in 1948. Claudel, born in 1869 before both of them, outlived them and, after having achieved an illustrious diplomatic career and the literary status of an "immortal" of the French Academy, died as recently as 1955 at age 86.

VIII

Each of our three French literary giants did, in fact, discover that the dilemma of man's fallen state can shatter the confident pride of the self-sufficient and haughty human heart. Yet—sweet miracle of grace!—it is from such broken and lacerated human hearts that the

¹⁸William Bush. "Raïssa Maritain . . . et Jacques," in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini. *Understanding Maritain: Friend and Philosopher* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 68.

most wondrously authentic artistic expression emerges, as well as the greatest manifestations of holiness. “*A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise,*” a broken King David cried out to God in the *Psalms*. Only after more than fifty years of marriage and only after he had suffered the loss of first Vera and then of Raïssa, did Maritain finally arrive at such a point. As he himself wrote in *The Peasant of the Garonne* speaking of Raïssa and Vera:

They taught me what contemplation in the world is. As for me, I was a dawdler, a worker with the intellect, and thereby likely to believe that I was living out certain things because my head understood them a little, and that my philosophy discoursed about them. But through experience I was instructed, and well instructed, in the suffering and light of these two faithful souls. That’s what gives me the courage to try to bear witness to them in speaking here of things which are above me, even though I know very well that being instructed through example, and while working side by side, does not make it any easier—far from it—to translate into ideas and words what I learned through them.¹⁹

Time proves relevant only for those of us allowing ourselves to be bound by its illusions and refusing to look beyond its apparent limits. What difference, then, if Maritain only got there at the end, and long after his three contemporaries were dead? The important thing for me as a student of French literature is that for Maritain at that point, the great French tradition suddenly, and almost supernaturally, seemed to well up from the depths to sustain a disheartened and very lonely Jacques as he gradually grasped what St. Thomas Aquinas had grasped before him. Whatever might be the intellectual games played by a Christian philosopher, all that is but a heap of straw unless the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ has been assumed personally by the believer whom God Himself has stooped to create in His own image, redeem with His own blood, and heal by His stripes.

¹⁹Jacques Maritain. *Le paysan de la Garonne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966), p. 286. English edition, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (London: Godfrey Chapman, 1968), p. 196.