

## *Jacques Maritain, Heroic Heroism and the Gospel\**

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We ought not listen to those who counsel us, *O man, think as man should* and *O mortal, remember your mortality*. Rather ought we, so far as in us it lies, to put on immortality, and to leave nothing unattempted in the effort to live in conformity with the highest thing within us.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

History is us—and there is no alternative but to shoulder the burden of what we so passionately desire and bear it out of the depths.

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *From Under the Rubble*

That the post-enlightenment world is in crisis there can be no doubt. The question before us is obvious: “Is the illness fatal or can something be done to treat it?”

According to many of our contemporaries, there is no hope. All that they can offer is the well-known existentialist nostrum: the human condition is irretrievably unjust, wretched, absurd and hopeless. Our only consolation is in our courage not to be negated by what we know.

Others respond more optimistically, finding in human intelligence, historical determinism, and technology the promise of a brave new world. Unfortunately, the prescription they offer is the main cause of the pathology they hope to cure. Tried again and again from Machiavelli to Marx and beyond, the secular solution has failed repeatedly and catastrophically. It has not been found wanting and discarded because it retains mankind’s position at the center of the universe and preserves the fiction that we are the masters of our fate, the captains of our souls. Modernity’s man might be alone in the universe, an evolutionary and

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social “construct” without an essence, but the world is nonetheless his and he will fashion it in his own image, doing or defining.

There is no taste for principle in the modernist universe, only for values, which are notoriously subjective. The values preferred by one generation are torn down by the next. The consequences have been devastating. Look in any direction and we see ruthless acquisitiveness and conscienceless addiction to power. Military and economic aggression are commonplace, conducted in both hemispheres with merciless ferocity. Western obsession with pleasure is no less intense. In the last century one of de Sade’s fictional characters boasted that he had “destroyed everything in my heart that might have interfered with my pleasures.” A singular fiction then, he is a prevalent reality now, most tragically and inhumanly objectified in the West each day by the willful destruction of thousands of children in the womb of their mothers. In this ethos, God is obviously *persona non grata*, and religion is honored only in the breach.

When religion appears in contemporary literature or art, it is usually as an object of ridicule or as an instrument of oppression. The majority of modern philosophers make no effort to conceal their disdain for religion. In a world that desperately needs direction, we are offered a postmodernist menu of opinions, often intellectually impressive but startlingly ephemeral and of little practical use. Jacques Maritain proposes an alternative that reunites philosophy and faith and offers the only viable solution to the crisis which afflicts our age: “Civilization can only survive,” he wrote, “if it is imbued in its secular substance by a genuine and living Christianity [restoring] a world in which the inspiration of the Gospel will orient common life toward an heroic humanism.”<sup>1</sup>

By humanism Maritain meant that which “tends essentially to render man more truly human, and to manifest his original greatness by having him participate in all that can enrich him in nature and history . . . [I]t at once demands that man develop the virtualities contained within him, his creative forces and the life of reason, and work to make the forces of the physical world instruments of his freedom.”<sup>2</sup> This is a consummation devoutly to be wished but very difficult to attain, as Maritain readily acknowledged: “There is nothing that man desires so much as a heroic life; there is nothing less common to man than

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy & The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph Evans, revised Otto Bird in *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence*, ed. Otto Bird, *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), vol. 11 p. 153.

heroism.”<sup>3</sup> To defeat this irony, Maritain proposed a “new humanism . . . oriented toward a social-temporal realization of the Gospel’s concern for human things (which ought not to exist merely in the spiritual order, but to be made incarnate) and toward the ideal of a fraternal community.”<sup>4</sup> For Maritain, the Gospel’s true objective is “a humanism which leads man to sacrifice and to a truly superhuman grandeur” not rooted in the ideals and destructive self-concern of warrior heroism but in love and suffering, which is, paradoxically, “joy’s exaltation.”<sup>5</sup> Courageously and consistently lived, this new humanism would provide for the material and spiritual needs of the individual and “the concrete good of the community of human persons . . . in the social order and the structures of common life.”<sup>6</sup>

This is undoubtedly what Maritain meant by a new Christendom in the modern age, “no longer sacral but secular.”<sup>7</sup> This undertaking, Maritain declared, demands nothing less than “a heroic humanism . . . nourished at the heroic sources of sanctity.”<sup>8</sup> Like the great Catholic humanists of the Renaissance, Maritain believed that “The sources of Western humanism are both classical and Christian” and that there is “fundamental agreement between Christianity and humanism seen in their essences.”<sup>9</sup> Taking this position, he showed the same respect for culture that we find in the writings of Augustine and Basil the Great. Both attest that in Homer and Virgil there are virtues which prepare people to understand Scripture and embrace Christianity. “All of Homer’s poetry,” Basil contended, “is an encomium of virtue, and all that he wrote, save what is accessory, bears to that end.”<sup>10</sup>

One may safely assume that the virtues which Basil admired in Homer’s heroes are magnanimity (greatness of spirit), commitment to honor, *areté* (skill or excellence in all things deemed important), courage, piety, steadfastness, wisdom, self-discipline, eloquence, and endurance. While not so vital for Christians as faith, hope, and love, these virtues were rightly considered by the Church Fathers to be essential components of authentic Christian character, a conclusion implicitly revalidated in *Gaudium et Spes* and the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, both of which view life as “a hard battle” and history as

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 156.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Basil the Great, “Address to Young Men on Reading Greek Literature” in *Letters IV* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 395. Augustine assured nervous readers that “where truth is, it is the Lord’s.”

“the story of dour combat with the powers of evil, stretching, our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day.”<sup>11</sup>

Maritain’s insistence that “the great pagan wisdom cannot be cut off from the humanist tradition” must be attributed in part to its philosophical and aesthetic power. But only in part. His main reason was theological: the classical postulate, he wrote, refuses to let modern man “define humanism by the exclusion of all references to the superhuman and by the denial of transcendence.”<sup>12</sup> Underlying everything in Maritain’s *Integral Humanism* is the belief that the distance between mankind’s desire to be heroic and heroic actuality can be closed by only one thing, “a new type of sanctity . . . which of its very nature” can fulfill the Gospel’s demand that justice—as Christ defined it—“penetrate everything . . . take possession of everything [and] make its way into the innermost recesses of the world.”<sup>13</sup>

In Maritain’s philosophy, this type of sanctity is virtually synonymous with what he calls “theocentric humanism,” which has its determinative paradigm in the saint and “can be realized only if saints set their hands to it.”<sup>14</sup> While stipulating the crucial importance of a theocentric humanism, Maritain did not precisely explain its relationship to heroism, beyond saying that it depended for its power on a “spirituality of the Cross.”<sup>15</sup>

Because of the possibilities that inhabit Maritain’s argument, “heroic humanism” should be systematically explicated if it is to get a hearing in our time, which has allowed the traditional concept of personal responsibility to be redefined in accordance with the postmodernist doctrine of pleasure-obsessed self-fulfillment.

When Maritain wrote that humanism must be reoriented toward “a socio-temporal realization of the Gospel’s concern for human things,” he was in all likelihood anticipating what his renowned contemporary Henri de Lubac wrote somewhat more explicitly several years later: “In the present state of the world, Christianity *must* become a heroic Christianity . . . We must recover the *spirit* of Christianity. In order to do so, we must be plunged once more in its well-springs, and above all in the Gospel.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello, 1975), 37, 21; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mission Hills, California: Benziger, 1994), 409.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley (New York: New American Library, 1963), pp. 72-73 (Emphasis his).

The theme of heroism in the Gospels has been virtually unnoticed for centuries, probably because Jesus himself denounced violence and armed conflict, but earlier ages saw it very clearly. In *The Book of Revelation*, Jesus is the Warrior-God of heaven leading the forces of his Father against the legions of darkness: "I saw heaven wide open, and there was before me a white horse, and its rider's name was Faithful and True, for he is just in judgment and just in war . . . the armies of heaven followed him on white horses . . . From his mouth went a sharp sword with which to smite the nations" (Rev.20:11-15). Justin Martyr saw Jesus as the new and transcendent Hercules, probably because the twelve legendary feats of Hercules were interpreted to symbolize the conquest of death. Moreover, after his death, Hercules, like Jesus was taken up into heaven while his companions watched and was welcomed into Olympus by his father, Zeus.

The anonymous Tenth-Century author of the Old Saxon *Heliand* warriorized the Gospel, depicting Jesus as "the powerful Christ . . . the Chieftain of mankind" born in the "hill-fort at Bethlehem" and subsequently commissioned by his Father, "the Victorious Chieftain . . . King of Heaven" to "win the heaven-kingdom for people." The Apostles are Christ's "warrior-companions," "heroes" and "earls," Satan, "the perdition-leader . . . the people-injurer."<sup>17</sup>

### I. THE HEROIC STRUCTURE OF THE GOSPELS

Read as a single story, the four Gospels have the same modular framework as the main heroic narratives of Greece and Rome. They portray Jesus as the redeemer of mankind resolutely moving throughout the three years of his ministry toward Jerusalem, the cross, and the most decisive of this world's battles. In the Gospel, it is possible to find the primary components of the heroic model brilliantly brought together for the first time in Homer's *Iliad* and subsequently appropriated for all the heroic narratives written into the foundations of modern culture.

Each of the Gospels insists on Jesus' divine ancestry, a crucial requirement for the hero in virtually every society (Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:24-38). Matthew introduces Jesus as "son of David, son of Abraham," both of whom epitomize essential parts of God's plan for humanity—David for "the people he chose for his inheritance" (Ps 33:12) and Abraham through whom "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3). Luke's genealogical table is the most extensive, beginning with Joseph, his father "so people thought," and finishing with the

<sup>17</sup> *The Heliand/The Saxon Gospel*, trans. G. Ronald Murphy, S.J. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 3, 5, 6, 15, 38, 134, 149.

declaration that in reality Jesus is “son of Cainan, son of Enosh, son of Seth, son of God.”<sup>18</sup>

Nearly all major mythological heroes have a divine parent, male or female. So does Jesus, but the similarity goes no further. In the world of myth, human beings are violated by gods seeking to appease their sexual appetites. The Gospel shows a woman given a choice to embrace the will of God or to refuse. Mary is gently overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and the only pleasure implied is God’s pleasure in conceiving a new dispensation for humanity. The virginity of Mary, a sign of her son’s unique status (son of God, son of man) accentuates God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation and simultaneously emphasizes Jesus’ role as “Second Adam,” spiritually separated from the sinfulness of his human ancestors and therefore qualified as the “new man” to change the course of history by restoring to mankind the inheritance that Adam and Eve forfeited in the Garden.

In the Gospel as in other heroic narratives, supernatural phenomena attend the birth of the hero, proclaiming superhuman status and foreshadowing lifelong conflict with relentless adversaries (Lk 2: 10; Mt 2:2). Fittingly, Jesus’ birth was announced by the angel Gabriel, whose name means “warrior of God.” The host of angels that appear in Luke testify to the heavenly origin of Jesus and in so doing identify him as the anticipated Messiah.

Matthew’s infancy narrative includes several other events common to the heroic literature that populates other cultures: dreams as a means of divine communication (1:20; 2:13, 19); an attempt to kill the infant hero foiled by divine intervention (Mt 2:3-18), and flight from danger to another country, in this instance Egypt, where the Hebrews had found refuge from death in the time of Joseph.

Like nearly every other heroic narrative in the ancient world, the Gospels have little to say about their subject between the account of his infancy and the first act of the great drama that is the rest of his life. As soon as Jesus starts his war of liberation, the heroic paradigm becomes an increasingly important part of the Gospel’s narrative structure. Dramatic incidents always mark the beginning of the hero’s adventures—frequently initiated by the sudden appearance of a god bringing assurance of divine favor and support in the battles that lie ahead. So it is in the Gospel: “When Jesus had been baptized and was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove; and there came a voice from heaven, ‘You are my Son, my Beloved, and on you my favor rests’” (Lk 3:21-22).

<sup>18</sup> Mark provides no genealogy. The sparse directness of his words makes his introduction the more dramatic, confidently, uncompromisingly throwing down a gauntlet to all the world’s other theologies: “Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (1:1).

After the hero crosses the threshold of risk, his resolution is immediately tested by hostile powers waiting to destroy him or subvert his effectiveness by deception or bribery, before he can become a serious threat. Accordingly, Satan tries to compromise Jesus by offering him at the outset everything that ordinarily comes only at the end of the heroic quest. Rejecting the principal means by which men have always tried to gain power and dominion over the earth, Jesus served notice that he embodied a radically new concept of greatness and intended to reshape the structure of human desire and acclaim (Lk 4:1-13). In further correspondence with the familiar heroic paradigm, Jesus is rewarded with divine approval and recognition subsequent to his first victory. "Angels appeared and waited on him" (Mt 4:11).

From Homer to modern times, the arming of the warrior-hero has been a standard ritual. Luke simultaneously appropriates and revises this convention, reporting that after Jesus repulsed Satan he returned to Galilee "armed with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 4:14) and fully equipped to commence his ministry of redemption (at the age of thirty, David's age when he became king of Israel). No less common to all heroic literature is a daring manifesto at the start of the hero's adventure identifying his main objectives. Luke not only specifies Jesus' objectives but unmistakably identifies him as the preeminent messianic hero foretold by Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Lk4:18; Is 61:1-2).

Every heroic quest is dramatic, magnificent like the person who undertakes it, but Luke's narrative unmistakably claims this to be the greatest of all heroic adventures, transforming history forever through the salvation of mankind and the establishment of the kingdom of God (Lk 16: 16; 17:21). It was good news unimagined in any other culture, brought first to Israel and then to all who had ears to hear.

Since the heroic manifesto boldly assumes divine favor, it must be validated by extraordinary displays of power. Within days of the Nazareth manifesto, Jesus began to drive out demons and heal the sick—the centurion's servant in Matthew (8:5-13), Peter's mother-in-law in all three of the synoptic Gospels, a leper and a paralytic in Mark (1:40-45; 2:1-12), a demoniac in Luke (4:33-35). Matthew reports that Jesus "cast out spirits with a word and cured all who were sick" (8:16). The reaction of the people present on these occasions went beyond astonishment. "'Nothing like this has ever happened,' they said" (Mt 9:34).

Having established his power and authority, Jesus proceeded to gather followers and summon them to adventure (Mt 4:18-21; Lk 5:1-11). His call echoes God's command to Abraham: "*Lekh lekha*"; not just, "Go," but "Go to a land which I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Likewise Jesus tells Peter, Andrew, James, and John to get up and go: "Leave your nets and come follow me," but not by themselves and not without a compelling objective, the eternal destination toward which all mankind began to move from the moment Adam and Eve walked out of Paradise and entered history. Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew, James and John was a new beginning, not only for four Jewish fishermen but for the entire human race.

Coincidentally, or perhaps intentionally, Matthew replicates the roll call of heroes that unflinchingly appeared at some point in the heroic literature of other cultures: "These are the names of the twelve apostles . . . , " the number of apostles corresponding to the number of tribes in ancient Israel (10:2-4). God was making a new beginning, without nullifying the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. "They will be grafted in again" to the tree which is their own (Rom 11:23-25).

In subsequent parts of the Gospel there are numerous other similarities between the life of Jesus and the lives of the major mythological figures presiding over the culture of gentile societies. The evangelists carefully describe Jesus' progress toward Jerusalem through a series of minor battles with various unnamed demons and his Jewish antagonists leading to the decisive conflict with Satan, sin, and death outside the walls of Jerusalem on the day known in the English-speaking world as Good Friday (Lk 16:14; 20:1-8; Mt 9:1-8; 12:1-14; 22:15-22; 23:1-36).

The ascent of the Mountain of Transfiguration where Jesus "was invested with honor and glory" (2 P 1:16) is a prelude and preparation for the ascent to Calvary and "the destiny he was to fulfill in Jerusalem" (Lk 9:31). On the mountain Jesus is assured that his Father is near, that he will not go into battle by himself, and that at the moment of his death he will triumphantly restore the glory of his Father's kingdom in the world. Spiritually and symbolically linked to the first appearance of the Father and the Holy Spirit when Jesus was baptized at the Jordan, the Transfiguration is "the sacrament of second regeneration," the hope of all mankind's resurrection signified by the presence of Peter, John, and James.

Like so much of the Gospel, the event mirrors and eclipses the sudden arrival of gods or goddesses in secular literature to confer opportunity and protection on their favorites. Not surprisingly, it is in Homer that we find the closest approximation to the transfiguration of Jesus:



Now Diomedes' hour for great action had come.  
 Athena made him bold, and gave him ease to  
 tower amid Argives, to win glory, and on his  
 shield and helm she kindled fire most like  
 midsummer's purest flaming star in heaven  
 rising, bathed by the Ocean stream. So fiery  
 she made his head and shoulders as she  
 impelled him to the center where the  
 greatest number fought.<sup>19</sup>

In the Gospels, as in epic literature and the practice of historical heroes such as Alexander the Great, a meal is the context for gift-giving and the designation of battle strategy. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised his followers a kingdom but warned them they would have to fight their way to it: "If you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one," sword and cloak respectively symbolizing the different priorities that necessarily obtain in war and peace (Lk 22:29,36.)

Every heroic narrative moves through a series of increasingly dangerous conflicts to a winner-take-all battle in which the hero overwhelms his main adversary and frees his people from tyranny and the constant fear of death. In many of these stories, the hero is mortally wounded in the struggle. This is, of course, exactly what happens in the Gospels. On the cross, Jesus wins freedom for mankind and turns history in the direction of entirely new possibilities. As Jesus breathed his last, death was "swallowed up in victory," its dominion ended, and with it went the fear of death and all that the terrified human imagination envisioned thereafter. Humanity was a new creation with immortal prospects and the promise of eternal happiness in the kingdom of God, mystically and wonderfully, prefigured at the moment of Jesus' death: "The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Mt 27:50-51).

Gauging the immensity of this victory, St. Paul acclaimed Jesus as a warrior-hero without equal on earth or in the heavens: "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross, and paraded them in public, behind him in his triumphal procession" (Co 2:16). It is this victory, above all, that made Jesus of Nazareth in the eyes of his early followers the true and unique hero of history, "the image of the invisible God," the one who has "primacy over all created things" (Co 1:15).

To the victors belong the spoils—arms, armor, captives held for ransom, or,

<sup>19</sup> *Illiad*, trans. R. Fitzgerald (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1963), V 1-9.

following a successful siege, non-combatant men, women, children, and all their possessions. On some occasions, a war would be fought to liberate captives. St. Paul sees Jesus' victory on the cross in precisely these terms. After Adam's defection, all men were captive to Satan in a closed and desolate world. Through Jesus, God provided the way out, a new exodus that parted the darkness and brought all Christ's followers into new and everlasting life: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" (Eph 4:8; Jn 8:12).

In heroic mythology, ascent to heaven and apotheosis are rewards for none but the greatest of heroes. The New Testament writings clearly indicate that early Christians believed Jesus to be the consummate actualization of legendary heroes and their accomplishments. His work finished, he rose heaven-ward, like Hercules, while his friends watched and "a cloud removed him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). The similarities between Jesus and the most renowned of mythical heroes ends at this point. Hercules is the gate-keeper of heaven; Jesus sits in glory "at the right hand of God" (Mk 16:19), a position that symbolizes the "sovereignty, glory, and kingship" foretold for the Messiah by the prophet Daniel (7:14). Hercules will not return to the earth. Jesus, the apostles were assured, "Will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there" (Acts 1:11).

## II. THE HEROIC ATTRIBUTES OF JESUS

In addition to the structural components of heroic literature just enumerated, the Gospel representation of Jesus exhibits all the paramount virtues extolled by Homer, Virgil, and their many imitators. The four Gospels together identify Jesus as the Word of God summing up in himself the entire vocabulary of heroic characterization, excepting egotism, rage, cruelty, and vengefulness.

Jesus demonstrated astonishing power from the first days of his ministry to the last: he enabled the deaf to hear, the blind to see, the lame to walk; to Jairus' daughter, he gave new life and brought Lazarus out of the tomb; he crafted parables that display a combination of wisdom, skill, and compassion that has never been equaled. In debate, Jesus' adroitness and wit left his adversaries speechless. The harder they plotted, the worse their defeat. "Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" A shrewd question that the Pharisees who asked it would never answer themselves for fear of reprisal from their own people or the Romans. Jesus turned the argument back on them as effortlessly as he had repulsed Satan in the wilderness: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Mt 22:15-22; Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26). The rest is silence, on that occasion at least.

No military or political leader gets very far without verbal prowess. History

and literature abound with speeches, boasts, and taunts designed to encourage comrades and intimidate enemies. In the simplicity, truth, and compassion of the beatitudes, the parables, and nearly everything else that he said, Jesus epitomized eloquence. Of all documents at the foundation of Western culture and thought, the Gospel stands foremost because of Jesus' unmatched insights into human nature and all that philosophy means by the good, the true, and the beautiful. It is not difficult to understand why his disciples believed him to be the Word of God.

For good reasons, courage has always been synonymous with heroism. The English word descends from the Latin *cor* and the French *coeur* which mean "heart." The hero is the great-hearted man or woman inherently disposed to great risks for the sake of extraordinary accomplishments. In Homer's *Iliad*, the Trojan Hector provided a hero's definition of courage. Courage, he declared, is "to go forward always" regardless of the odds (6, 518). Is it simply a cultural coincidence that when Jesus saw his enemies approaching through the Garden of Gethsemane, he said to his disciples, "Up, let us go forward" (Mt 25:46 and Jn 14:30)? There can be no doubt that Jesus knew full well where he was going and that each moment on the cross would pulsate agony to every part of his body. To go forward to that part of his destiny was an act of supreme courage.

Gift-giving was a routine practice among warrior-heroes and kings who used gifts to assure themselves of support in times of need—no gift given without strings attached nor without strict observation of heroic protocol, which required an arithmetic correspondence between the status of the recipient and the value of the gift. Needless to say, common people did not figure at all in these transactions. Jesus exceeded the generosity of any hero before him or after because he had more to give and more desire to do so, regardless of the recipient's standing in society and ability to return the favor. The Gospels are essentially a record of Jesus' generosity: he gave his love, "the greatest gift of all" (2 P 1:8), expressed in the compassion of his teaching, in healings and miracles that went beyond words to make love real and faith possible, and in the willing gift of his life for the life of the world (Jn 6:51). Finally, Jesus gave what humanity most desires, the assurance that we are not alone in the universe and that life does not end when our bodies go into the grave: "I give them eternal life and they shall never perish" (Jn 12:28). There was much given for the uses of this life, too: peace (Jn 14:27); wisdom (Lk 21:15); the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26; 20:22; Ac 2:4), and the multiple gifts of the Spirit provided for the perfection of each person and for the welfare of the world.

As in every heroic narrative, authority is a major issue. It is the inevitable outcome of heroic accomplishment. The authority of Jesus, however, extends far beyond anything claimed for other heroes, historical or mythological. The

force of Jesus' authority was evident from the moment he overcame Satan in the desert and started his campaign against the kingdom of evil. People realized immediately that something extraordinary was happening. This man had more than words for them: "They were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!'" (Mk 1:27) As Jesus pressed ahead, his authority extended to every area of material and moral concern. One by one Jesus took authority over mankind's most formidable enemies. He took authority over nature by calming a furious storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 8:26-27; Lk 8:22-25); by walking on water (Mt 14:25; Mk 6:45-52)); and multiplying the loaves and fish (Mk 6:41).

If many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries denied his authority, the demons did not. As soon as he confronted them, they yielded. The exorcism in Capernaum explains why. They knew well what they were up against. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God." For three years, Jesus systematically attacked evil. During that time, not a single demon stood its ground.

Minutes after Jesus routed the Capernaum devil, he proved that he had just as much authority over sickness. Leaving the synagogue he went to Simon's house and rebuked the (malarial) fever that had been afflicting his mother-in-law (Lk 4:38-39). During the three years that followed, Jesus overcame blindness, leprosy, deafness, hemorrhaging, epilepsy, and as Matthew writes at one point, "all kinds of diseases and illnesses" (9:37).

Not even death was beyond the reach of Jesus' power. First, he cured the centurion's servant, who was paralyzed and apparently beyond recovery. For the centurion as well as the evangelists, this was clearly a matter of authority. "For I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me; and I say to one man go, and he goes; to another: Come here, and he comes; to my servant: Do this, and he does it" (Lit 7:8-9). Soon afterwards, Luke writes, Jesus restored the son of the widow of Nain to life. Again, there is an unmistakable display of authority: "Young man, I tell you to get up" (7:15). The story of Lazarus is longer, but the underlying theme is the same: when Jesus speaks even death listens and obeys. "He cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out.' The dead man came out" (Jn 11:43-44).

In one of the most telling episodes reported by the synoptic authors, Jesus took authority over sin, undoubtedly realizing as he looked at the scribes nearby that he was crossing his personal Rubicon and there could be no turning back. "Then some people appeared bringing him a paralytic stretched out on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Courage, my child, your sins are forgiven.'" The paralytic's friends must have been astonished. Why had Jesus mentioned the man's sins at all? His friends brought him for healing not

forgiveness. Forgiveness was not an issue until Jesus made it so. The scribes understood, however. The real issue was authority. Jesus had come to take moral authority over his father's creation. "To prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—Get up, and pick up your bed and go home" (Mt 9:5-7). To the crowd that had gathered, this was undeniably a miraculous demonstration of power; to the scribes it was blasphemy. There was more to come. When Jesus drove the profiteers from the Temple, he was not only punishing the violation of sacred space, he was also recapitulating his claim to "all authority in heaven and on earth" and in the process enacting a preview of the Last Judgment.

### III. JESUS AS ANTI-HERO

In all cultures, heroism is measured by great risks taken and antagonists overcome, by accomplishments that last. The greatest heroes are those who by the force of their personality, prowess, and vision beget events that could not have been made by anyone else and that change the world forever. Given this universal understanding, Jesus is exactly what Raniero Cantalamessa recently claimed him to be: "the unique, the true hero of the world, of history."<sup>20</sup> Yet it is equally true that Jesus introduced a revolutionary concept of greatness which repudiated the Homeric model of heroism and displaced the city of man (Rome and all its analogues) with the kingdom of God. In the vocabulary of modern cultural studies, Jesus was ultimately anti-heroic. To say this is not to say that he was not a hero. It is to say that he rejected the image of warrior-heroism established in the *Iliad* and perpetuated throughout history by those who have defined heroism by war and conquest (a vision of greatness as evil, summarily dismissed in the Bible almost as soon as it is introduced). The extent of his power is evident throughout the Gospel narratives. But he used his power as no hero had done before to complete a task that no mythmaker had ever dreamed of. His heroism was completely different from anything found in the epic verse of Greece and Rome or in the expectations of Israel. From the beginning, Jesus is represented as a hero singularly appointed to serve God's purpose not man's. At his birth the angels sing of peace on earth not war. Undoubtedly that is one reason why in the second recognition scene, Simeon foretells that the child is "destined to be a sign of contradiction" (Lk 2:35).

Starting with the beatitudes, almost everything that Jesus said or did had the purpose of redefining the heroic. The anti-thesis of self-absorbed ambition, he

<sup>20</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God*, trans. Alan Neame (Middlegreen, England: St. Paul Publications, 1991) p. 6.

never boasted of his divine ancestry or his prowess, never sought admiration by demeaning another, and never took up arms to attain his ends. It is surely significant that in the Gospel of John the words that usher Jesus into the narrative identify him as “the Lamb of God” (1:29), a symbol far removed from the beasts of battle in Homer’s *Iliad* and the Roman eagle that was all too familiar to the Jews in occupied Palestine.

Although descended from David, Jesus had no interest in restoring David’s kingdom. (“My kingdom is not of this world.”) He revolutionized the common notion of authority by redefining it as service and self-sacrifice. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Jesus methodically disavowed most of the attributes which had been standard components of the warrior-hero profile for seven centuries (and far longer if we consider the chronological lag between human conduct and cultural inscription in the ancient world).

In Jesus, *arete*, the most admired of heroic attributes, was remodeled to mean far more than skill and success in battle. Transcendently personified by Jesus, *arete* became strength of character and offered compelling evidence that men and women were, indeed, created in the image and likeness of God. “Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right . . . Happy the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers” (Mt 5:5-9). Just as the warrior-heroes of secular culture spurned concession and mediocrity in war, Jesus insisted that there be no compromise in the pursuit of excellence, but he meant moral not military greatness. “You must be perfect just as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

In epic literature, love is not a primary concern but an obstacle. In the *Iliad*, it stands in the way of personal honor; in the *Aeneid*, it stands in the way of Rome. For Jesus, it was everything, “the greatest commandment. It comes first” (Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:30; Lk 6:27; Jn 15:9-17). Homer’s heroes and their many descendants throughout the ages loved life and reveled in it, but they loved honor more and would unhesitatingly die for it. But not for another human being. Jesus proposed just the opposite: “This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). This is the great divide between Christ’s concept of heroism and the rest of the world’s.

In radical contrast to the pride of Homer’s heroes in the *Iliad*, and the self-emphasis of almost all history’s great men, Jesus mandated humility as the foundation of true greatness (Jn 13:5; Lk 9:49; 14:11; Php 2:6-7). And all that he said, he exemplified in deed. Jesus cared nothing for this world’s power, prestige, or material comforts. He pointedly informed a would-be disciple that “Foxes have their holes, the birds have roosts, but the Son of Man has nowhere

to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). Completely disavowing the priorities of the warrior-hero paradigm, Jesus insisted that men must humble themselves until they are like children (Lk 14:11; Mt 18:4). Unapologetically cutting against the grain of human nature and aspirations, Jesus went further: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mk 9:35). This is a long way from Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, and their gods and from the secular assumption that—in Thomas Hobbes' words—"We must suppose to have no other goal, nor other garland, but being foremost" (*Leviathan* I.IX.21). No less foolish and contemptible to the ears of any warrior-hero was Jesus' declaration that "I am gentle and humble-hearted" (Mt 11:29).

John's Gospel indicates that Jesus shared fully in the glory of his Father (5:23; 17:5; 24). Yet, in further contrast to Achilles and the legions of warrior heroes who lived for "the strife that brings men honor," Jesus was totally indifferent to human adulation. "Human approval means nothing to me" (Jn 5:40). He lived for goodness not glory, for reconciliation not conquest. This world's acclaim, more precious to the warrior-hero than life, was for Jesus merely something else to give away for the benefit of his followers: "Father . . . I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one" (Jn 17:21). Furthermore, Jesus warned that "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled" and urged his disciples to remember that "The least among you is the greatest" (Lk 9:48; 14:11). No wonder that the Gospel seemed madness to the Greeks (1 Cor 1:23).

Wisdom, used more often than not by Greek and Roman heroes to entrap and destroy their enemies, was for Jesus an instrument to set men free and show them the way to life as God intends it to be. Jesus' magnanimity and delight in the accomplishments of others separates him from self-interest to an extreme that the honor-oriented heroes of his or any other time would consider unthinkable: "Whoever believes in me will perform the same acts as I do myself; he will perform even greater works" (Jn 4:12). Jesus deliberately put gift-giving into a context of morality (Lk 6:37-38), human need, and service (Mt 10:8). In contrast to the Homeric environment where gifts were rarely given and never without strings, Jesus gave recklessly and urged his disciples to do the same: "Give to everyone who asks, and if anyone takes what belongs to you do not ask for it back" (Lk 6:30). No person mattered more than another and there was only one condition: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10:8; Lk 6:38). Even life itself was to be given if required. The bread and wine blessed at the Last Supper symbolized life given at the host's expense. Taking into his hands the redemption of mankind through the pain of the cross, Jesus made the Eucharistic metaphor real. Through the new Passover he offered to all mankind the gift of eternal life. Deliberately revising the heroic economy that had prevailed

from pre-Homeric times, Jesus repudiated wealth: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Store up treasures in heaven . . . You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6:19, 24). "None of you can be a disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions" (Lk 14:33).

As it unfolded, Jesus' teaching became a provocative litany of anti-heroism. He renounced boasting and the pursuit of praise (Mt 6:2-6; 8:4; 9:30; Jn 5:44). He renounced arms: "All who take up the sword die by the sword" (Mt 26:52). He renounced vengeance (an heroic imperative in the *Iliad* and virtually all the literature written after Homer): "Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left" (Mt 5:39). "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:37). True to his teaching, Jesus concluded his work on earth with a prayer for those who made certain that he died in indescribable agony: "Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). With these words, Jesus demonstrated that in this world love goes by the name *forgiveness*.

It is the death of Jesus that definitively challenges the warrior paradigm found in all other cultures and testifies to the uniqueness of his heroism. Entering Jerusalem "riding on a donkey" (Mt 21:5), a beast of burden and a well-known symbol of humility and peace, Jesus deliberately separated himself from the common emblem of military leadership, the hero astride a white horse, and set in motion the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Isaiah (52:14-53) and Zechariah (9:9-16).

He yielded to his enemies only five days after entering the capital of his nation amidst shouts of acclamation betokening enormous popular support. All Jerusalem had watched and waited. On the day that came to be known as Palm Sunday, the atmosphere was vibrating with messianic fervor. When people spread their cloaks on the road before Jesus and cried out "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were deliberately repeating the actions of their ancestors who welcomed Jehu as the deliverer sent by God to free Israel and destroy its enemies:

They hurried and took their cloaks and spread them on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, 'Jehu is king.' (2 Ki 9:13)

But Jesus ignored the invitation. Instead of rallying an army around himself to end Israel's seven hundred and fifty years of captivity, Jesus denounced the nation's religious leaders: "hypocrites, you shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in men's faces . . . blind guides . . . white-washed tombs . . . snakes, vipers" (Mt 23: 12, 16, 27, 33). He drove the Jewish profiteers out of the Temple precincts but left the Roman garrison alone. Then he withdrew to Bethany and spent his days telling parables. The people had no time for parables; they wanted



war cries and revolution. Disappointed in Jesus and afraid of their leaders, they fell silent. (Later, when Pilate gave them their chance, they avenged their disappointment by choosing to liberate Barabbas, a true revolutionary, instead of Jesus.) As Jesus' enemies took the offensive, Jesus did nothing to resist. When it became obvious that defeat was imminent, he did not go down to death gloriously. To the eyes of everyone in Jerusalem at the time, Jesus of Nazareth was a consummate disappointment, faint-hearted and afraid, like a sheep before the shearers.

Jesus did nothing remotely heroic. He refused to fight for his kingdom or his life. Nor would he allow his followers to fight for him. The one blow struck in his defense brought not praise but immediate rebuke: "Put up your sword" (Mt 26:52). Realizing that there would be no display of messianic power, Jesus' demoralized followers fled into the night. Showing no will to resist, Jesus let himself be outmaneuvered by his enemies, who forced Pilate's hand by making loyalty to Rome the main issue (Jn 19:15; Mt 26: 59-66). Taunted by his captors, he showed none of the defiance that should ornament the last moments of a hero's life. Nailed to a cross and immobilized, he was to all appearances powerless and totally forsaken. Except for the two thieves crucified next to him, there was no one at his side.

The dying Jesus was a spectacle of weakness, humiliation, failure. This was a death for a foolhardy zealot who had lost his nerve, not for a warrior. Certainly not for a warrior-hero of the kind featured in prevailing mythologies. As far as anyone at Calvary could see, the story of Jesus ended on the cross. For the Jews, a theological outrage had been duly punished; for the Romans, another potentially troublesome pretender had got what was coming to him.

For the evangelists, as they looked back, all that ended when Jesus died was their misunderstanding of his mission and the rhetoric of paradox composed by a God who does not see things as men do (Mt 16:23), a God who was turning the world upside down, radically reconceptualising heroism and humanity, victory and defeat, life and death.

Nothing was what it had seemed to be. Abandoned by his followers and dying, the Warrior-God of the Gospels turned defeat into victory (as Robert Graves noted, "at the precise time when the Levite butchers began their slaughtering for the Passover").<sup>21</sup> Fixed to a cross, he set mankind free. Configured like a sword, the cross was the weapon that conquered the world, the flesh, and the devil once and for all. On that cross was the goodness of God most magnified. For those who had eyes to see, the cross was a sign of contradiction which completely reshaped the definition of heroism, becoming

<sup>21</sup> Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (London: Cassell, 1946), p. 346.

the primary symbol of a kingdom not of this world but in the world nonetheless and more real and powerful than anything forged by human hands. Before Jesus, heroes had been willing to face death, but no one had defeated death until Jesus embraced it on the cross and crushed it forever. Face to face Jesus battled fear, pain, despair, and all the evil powers that inhabit the universe. As he breathed his last, the future slipped out of Satan's hands. The children of Adam and Eve were again the children of God, and death was transformed into new and everlasting life.

Looking on from a safe distance, all that the disciples could see at the time was emptiness. Jesus was defeated, gone. He who had commanded death to release Lazarus from the grave was now death's captive. He had been great in heart and mind, truly good but not God. On the third day, they understood. When Jesus emerged from the tomb clothed in glory as the Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the holy one of God who brought a new order of being for all mankind.

#### IV. THE CALL TO HEROIC HUMANISM

What Jesus started he intentionally did not finish. That is for mankind to do "by persistence in doing good . . . shining in the world like stars and offering it the word of life," completing "all that still has to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his Body, the Church" (Rom 2:7; Php 2:16; Col 1:24). As Maritain doubtless understood, Jesus ignored the messianic passions of contemporary Israel because he was sent by his Father to build a new model kingdom not to make Israel the world power that it had been during David's reign. ("The kingdom of God is within you." Lk 17:21) Christ calls his followers to transform society by a "spiritual revolution" validating itself "in the just and devout life called for by the truth" (Eph 4:23-24). It is a revolution that promises a new day "where light is, and all the goodness that springs from it, all justice and truth" (Eph 5:9). St. Paul and Maritain differ only in their choice of metaphors. The apostle's world-of-light language translates readily to Maritain's "new Christendom" and his "just and devout life called for by the truth" can only be what Maritain meant by "theocentric humanism."<sup>22</sup>

In its outward reach, the work of this revolutionary humanism is the unconditional affirmation of life and of the claim that each human being has on humanity at large. It is unyielding opposition to those who hate others merely for being what they are, and in so doing disavow the first and greatest of God's commandments. The work of redemptive humanism is steadfast repudiation of

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, pp. 155, 197ff., 335. Theocentric humanism, which "has its type in the saint," rehabilitates mankind in God.

injustice, violence, and revenge; of the multiple inequalities separating technologically advanced societies and the rest of the world. It is a personal and collective assault on the reality that nearly a billion human beings are chronically underfed or starving. It is an effort undertaken in the name of God to protect women everywhere in the world from the horrors that men have inflicted upon them for centuries, most tragically the murder of infant girls in the womb or at birth, rape, slavery, compulsory prostitution, genital mutilation, and physical disfiguration (defended as ethnic tradition).

In the circumstances of our time an heroic humanism is a commissioned responsibility. No less obvious is the realization that, as Maritain repeatedly insisted, it will never be accomplished by humanity on its own. For Maritain, if I read him right, the power that drives heroic humanism into being is the power of the Holy Spirit, integrating, in his words, “the created person and the divine Person” by the “descent of Uncreated Love into the depths of the human in order to transfigure it without annihilating it.”<sup>23</sup> Put another way, any strategy of renewal must begin where the Church began, at Pentecost. There the well-spring is fire and from it flows an uncontainable commitment to Christ, to honor, to excellence. From this well comes the eloquence that is truth, the courage never to submit or yield, and the heroic temper that makes men and women “alive for God in Christ Jesus,” every part of their being “a weapon fighting on the side of God” (Rom 6: 11, 14).<sup>24</sup>

Surely, this is what Maritain was urging a half-century ago when he wrote that the only force on earth that can defeat the spirit of this horrifying age is Christianity, that is, the Church *militant*. Tragically, too few Christians have taken Maritain’s warning to heart, and the world has paid an awful price for indifference and inaction. The situation will continue to deteriorate until Christians realize that the Gospel does not call us to personal prosperity and comfort but to heroic struggle against everything that turns us against our humanity, our hope, and our destiny.

Much must be acknowledged and overcome, not only the evils of the present

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1996 edition of *Integral Humanism*, the editor notes that Maritain took a “deep interest” in the Pentecostal movement which began to enliven the Catholic Church in the late 1960’s (p. 149). (This movement is known today as the Charismatic Renewal, featuring new life in Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.) What Maritain found seems to have reflected his enthusiasm for “an ardent and purified faith, a passion for the absolute, a fervent presentiment of the liberty, of the amplitude, and of the variety of the ways of God, a lively desire for the perfection of charity” which motivate people when they search for “new ways of giving one’s life in order to bear witness to the love of Jesus for all men and to the generosity of the Spirit of God.” (p. 149) See the French edition of *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (1966), p. 15.

age but those of the past, too many of which were instigated or condoned by ecclesiastical authority. Alexander VI and his Medici dynasty, the specter of the Inquisition, and the all too familiar sight of Church leaders feasting with the rich when they should have been feeding the poor bear strong witness against Christianity. Only insofar as the attributes that define the greatness of Christ are recapitulated in his followers will mankind find reason to look toward Christianity again. The modern world will have Christianity heroic or not at all. And without a new Christendom, there will be neither joy, nor love, nor light, and men will go on destroying one another in the darkness.

It need not be so. As Maritain said near the end of *Integral Humanism*, "The Christian is not imprisoned here in a tragedy without issue."<sup>25</sup> Characteristically reminding us that "New births will come to be," Maritain concludes that "The worlds which have arisen in heroism lie down in fatigue, in order that there may come in turn new heroisms and new sufferings, which will cause other worlds to arise" and human history to grow as "an expanding sphere, drawing near at one and the same time to its double consummation—in the absolute from below where man is god without God, and in the absolute from above where he is God in God."<sup>26</sup>

History will be as God wills it to be. In the process, we are all free to choose our part. For Maritain, the only part that a Christian can honorably take is the one that defines life as Christ means it to be, heroically and triumphantly human.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.