

“REDEEMING MODERNISM”:  
JACQUES MARITAIN AND THE CATHOLIC VOCATION

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In the winter of 1965, having been recognized by Pope Paul VI for inspiring the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Jacques Maritain left a euphoric Rome and returned to his stark quarters in the community of the Little Brothers of Jesus on the Garonne River in Toulouse.<sup>1</sup> There, he started writing *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*—his “last testament,” as he called it. It was to be a “blunt” work and certain to create controversy.<sup>2</sup> It did.

In the book, Maritain describes himself as being “at one and the same time [as a] *person and member*” of the Church.<sup>3</sup> The distinction suggests two forms of communion: natural and supernatural. With its emphasis on renewal and on making the Church relevant to things human, the Council had given legitimacy to ideas that were troublesome on both counts: philosophically and spiritually. Maritain saw philosophy as a vocation. At its center, was a commitment to truth that saw in the principles of Thomism the only path to universal holiness. *The Peasant* is his critical and at times caustic response to theological, philosophical and cultural trends that threatened to undermine these principles. It also reflects Maritain’s conviction that the authentic initiatives of the modern age could not be captured without first exposing the fallacies of modernist thought. This paper takes a closer look at his ideas on this subject and offers a brief outline of their key components.

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Kernan, *Our Friend, Jacques Maritain* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 165-66.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke Williams Smith, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern: An Historical Analysis of his Critics, his Thought and his Life* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. M. Cuddihy and E. Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 219.

*The Peasant* has been studied mainly for its biographical significance and particularly for Maritain’s modernist (or anti-modernist) leanings. In my view, it becomes a more coherent and challenging work if it is read in the context of two movements.

The first is Maritain’s life-long effort to use the realist philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as an instrument for constructive cultural criticism and renewal. In this regard, *The Peasant* attests to his unique interpretation of Thomism and his critique of modernism that dates back to the 1920 publication of *Art and Scholasticism*.<sup>4</sup> Modernism in this context is mostly an intellectual phenomenon affecting Catholic theology and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Maritain uses the term in a more comprehensive way to include avant-garde developments in the arts where, as it is well-known, he had many friends and admirers. His observations in this area suggest that his approach to modernist art was often selective and unduly influenced by his interest in artistic creativity and intuition.

The second movement is more complex. It combines the Thomist concept of connaturality as a key (intuitive) source of knowledge in religious and artistic experience with the belief that supra-conscious prayer and contemplation, centered on love, are the *sine qua non* of Christian life.<sup>6</sup> Prayer and contemplation give rise to a variety of gifts and vocations. Without them, neither art nor philosophy can meet their true ends.

Maritain’s discussion of contemplation in *The Peasant*—a work that is “more Raïssa’s than mine”—focuses on what he sees as the most grave problem affecting the Church and his times: the reduction of the Christian vocation to social activism, of theology to anthropology. Faith that becomes too concerned with reflecting its times (and its thinkers)

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. J.W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> For the meaning assigned to “modernism” in Catholic theology, its official condemnation in 1907, and the debate that ensued between its adherents and critics see Michael Kerlin, “Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange: Defending the Faith from *Pascendi dominici gregis* to *Humani generis*,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 25 (1) (Winter 2007): 97-113.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 223.

ends up losing its proper object and form of activity.<sup>7</sup> The problem is not social activism as such but the pursuit of moral action without contemplation and without a deep identification with the objects of one's work.

Maritain elaborates on this relationship of "immediate connivance" between subject and world in his discussion of analogies between mystical and ethical experience in *Degrees of Knowledge* (1932).<sup>8</sup> A disposition toward virtue, acquired as a result of virtuous actions, generates spontaneous moral judgments. Despite the fact that it lacks certitude, this connatural form of practical knowledge "creates a certain affinity in the soul for the *spiritual order*, in the most indefinite sense of the term."<sup>9</sup> In prayer and contemplation, similar dispositions toward divine things are formed. Both should be at the center of Christian life. Overconfident and temporal in its aims, Christian activism overlooks this dimension of human experience that allows poet, philosopher, artist and layman to gain insights in action and (analogically) into mystical contemplation—the poet "connaturalized ... with the mystery that is scattered in things."<sup>10</sup> Its effect on the spiritual life is detrimental.

According to Maritain, *The Peasant* is inspired by a book that Raïssa always wanted to write, but never did: *La contemplation sur les chemins* (*Contemplation on the Roads*). The reference to Raïssa in this context is significant, because it serves to underscore the spiritual nature of the work. Raïssa credited the idea for this book to *la petite voie* of St. Thérèse of Lisieux who saw the salvation of souls through prayer as a form of spiritual activism—and herself as a missionary of the cloister. While away from the world, Thérèse practiced contemplative love and surrender to God in all things. The idea had a powerful impact on Raïssa and Jacques who understood their intellectual mission in similar terms.<sup>11</sup> In a spiritual manual that they wrote together, they argued

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-33.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge (Distinguish to Unite)*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 299.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-35.

that prayer is indispensable to the intellectual life: it brings a peace of mind which clears the intellect and rids it of redundancies.<sup>12</sup>

The basic arguments of *The Peasant* date back to *Art and Scholasticism* (1920) and *Antimoderne* (1922), a collection of essays and lectures that is most often read in connection with Maritain's initial support of *Action Française* (until its condemnation in 1926 by Pope Pius XI).<sup>13</sup> In *Antimoderne*, Maritain set the foundations of his critique of the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of modernism. These were to remain unchanged. *The Peasant* is a testament to the consistency of Maritain's views on the significance of the spiritual life in all aspects of human knowledge and action.

In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain made it clear that aesthetics would be an integral part of his philosophical mission. The reason was his belief that at the basis of Thomistic realism is "an inexhaustible center of intuitivity" that precedes and grounds discursive reasoning.<sup>14</sup> In 1927, he wrote in "The Frontiers of Poetry" that a true artist will access this center and discover "the secret rules of being."<sup>15</sup> Artists pursued unconsciously a hidden intimacy with Christ while living in the midst of the world.<sup>16</sup> Many were (unwitting) contemplatives. Contemplative artists, philosophers and poets can intuit in their own activities the signs of the divine presence "scattered throughout nature."<sup>17</sup> Like poetry, love has the same effect on its objects. It creates images of mystical realities in the natural world. In this respect, the one who loves senses metaphysically what the mystic experiences supernaturally. Maritain calls the relationship between metaphysics and

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1928), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Editions de la revue des jeunes, 1922).

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 131. For a critical reading of Maritain on this point, see Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1988), 61-63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>16</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 231-32.

<sup>17</sup> Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 300-01.

mysticism "vital."<sup>18</sup> It is this vitality that he tries to tap in modernist thought and art.

Criticized as anachronistic and reactionary, *The Peasant* made the eighty-three year old Maritain the target of ungracious attacks that questioned his moral and intellectual integrity.<sup>19</sup> The book's subtitle, *An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, suggests a simple man, perhaps puzzled and weary of words, writing in reflective solitude somewhere in the countryside. By assuming the position of a layman and a peasant, Maritain makes it clear that he speaks from the margins rather than the center of ecclesiastical power. This stance is reminiscent of the contemplative who ponders in solitude the mystical life of the Church. But Maritain is ever eager to invite dialogue. A made-up Chinese proverb serves as an example of his intractable and self-deprecating humor. Appearing on the dedication page, it seems to admonish both the author and his readers: "Never take foolishness too seriously."

These moments of Socratic irony reflect Maritain's affection and admiration for the iconic philosopher and tenacious servant of truth. Early in the book, Maritain describes the Socratic mission in these terms: "But Socrates saved at once reason, the future of culture and the rights of Truth."<sup>20</sup> The mission of the Catholic philosopher was identical. It was more important than ever in times of crisis to speak the truth and speak it from the heart. This included going to the roots of the philosophical enterprise, to a view of philosophy for which integrity of intellect and integrity of life were indistinguishable. We are reminded of Jude Dougherty's observation that Maritain had a "Greek confidence in the human intellect and the intelligibility of nature," which made him discern in modernist theology and philosophy a "call to de-Hellenize Christianity."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern*, 21-28.

<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Jude P. Dougherty, *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 38. The de-Hellenization of Catholic and Protestant theology is also a main theme in Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 Regensburg address. See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/bene](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/bene)

As early as 1963, Maritain had been apprehensive about modernist trends in the Council.<sup>22</sup> Having observed its proceedings from a prominent position, he was now certain that the reforms it embraced ran the risk of being misinterpreted. There were dangerous visions of renewal that would undermine the very essence of Catholicism if left unchallenged: “When one is dealing with the great idols of the day, it is one’s duty toward what is highest in the world to use the knife (and there is no point in being too gentle).”<sup>23</sup> Maritain’s certainty was based on Church teaching. According to *Aeterni Patris* (1879), a Thomist revival was necessary if the Church were to counter the philosophical ideas that threatened its doctrine and the cultural values it had promulgated for centuries.<sup>24</sup> The encyclical was so important to Maritain that it was reprinted in its entirety in his biography of Saint Thomas, *The Angelic Doctor* (1931).

It was followed in 1907, under Pope Pius X, by *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Under the term “modernism,” *Pascendi* condemned agnostic, immanentist, anti-intellectualist and fideist trends in philosophy, theology and other areas of intellectual and religious life.<sup>25</sup> Modernism was therefore associated with the assertion of secular humanistic values, the emphasis on the contribution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to human knowledge, and the marginalization of Church authority in the social realm.

Of special relevance to philosophy, and to Maritain’s project in particular, was the significance attached by adherents of these ideas to the vital experience of dogmatic truths. It became the standard by which their validity was to be measured. Maritain, too, wanted a vital faith, but not at the expense of truth. As his writings on religious and

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<sup>22</sup> Ralph McInerney, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain: A Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 203.

<sup>23</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor: The Life and Thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (New York: The Dial, 1931).

<sup>25</sup> Papal Encyclicals, “On the Doctrine of the Modernists,” (September 8, 1907) <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10pasce.htm>.

aesthetic experience show, he was fascinated by vitalism and shared the modernist emphasis on an activist, timely and engaging faith. But, for Maritain, the path to a vital faith is Thomism. Thomism is providentially equipped with openness to the particularities of different eras and cultures. It can reconcile any tensions that might arise between society and the Church. In fact, to be a Thomist is to seek in the cultural trends of the day a deeper, existential and spiritual significance. Philosophy, theology and art that are genuinely contemporary draw from the hidden ground of human culture, where the truths gifted to the Church by Christ live forever. Only a theology or an art that is informed supernaturally with grace can renew and restore the intellectual, moral and spiritual integrity of the human person and society. While faithful to *Aeterni Patris* and *Pascendi*, Maritain's Thomism was in essence creative and mystical. It sought to bring to Scholastic discourse unprecedented vivacity and energy, the kind of Platonic *mousike* that he associated with the very essence of poetry. According to *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), poetry is "the free creativity of the spirit, and the intuitive knowledge through emotion which transcends and permeate all arts."<sup>26</sup> Maritain's philosophy was a philosophical poetics.

Yves Simon said about Thomism before Maritain that it had evolved into "at best an academic and ecclesiastical affair." In his view, Maritain re-infused Thomas' work with the epistemic, poetic and existential vitality that it had lost in its long history as the official philosophy of the Catholic Church.<sup>27</sup> Simon's essay in *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* is an eloquent and penetrating study of philosophical character. It reminds us that what makes Maritain unique is the fact that he brought to the Scholastic enterprise his extra-ordinary ability for "intuitive, poetic and thought-provoking expression."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1953/1981), 393.

<sup>27</sup> John H. Griffin and Yves R. Simon, *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* (Albany: Magi Books, 1974), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Griffin and Simon, *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures*, 5.

Simon writes characteristically: “Maritain was the first non-scholastic among the disciples of Saint Thomas.”<sup>29</sup> And we might add: and the first (with the possible exception of Newman) to define modernism in Catholic terms, re-orientate its spiritual yearnings, and give them a home in Christian thought and culture. Intuition, contemplation and the mystical life are inextricable aspects of his philosophical activity. He shared all three with Raïssa. Maritain stood with one leg in art and poetry and the other in Thomist philosophy. He kept the dialogue with modernism open throughout his life.

Some examples from his early writings highlight the spirit of this dialogue and show a connection to the arguments of *The Peasant*. Maritain approached modernist ideas in the same manner that Thomas approached Greek antiquity and the Church Fathers. Fully aware of their errors and limitations and unrelenting in his criticism, he engaged them in order to integrate and advance the unity of truth. It was in some ways an inclusive approach, but not a relativist one. Essential in this project was the mystery of the human person. Characteristically, Maritain wrote in *Integral Humanism* (1936): “In the scheme of Christian humanism there is a place not for the *errors* of Luther and Voltaire, but *for* Voltaire and Luther, according as in spite of the errors they have contributed in the history of men to certain advances (which belong to Christ as does every good among us).”<sup>30</sup> The Church had the truth. Those outside who intuited or sensed it were already partaking of its life. It was important to make that known. Maritain characteristically wrote: “The saints who visibly belong to the Church enable us to recognize their far-off brethren who do not know Her and yet who belong to Her invisibly—St. John of the Cross enables us to do justice to Ramakrishna.”<sup>31</sup>

There are many examples of Maritain’s attempts to open Catholic philosophy, art and culture to the secular world. Bergsonian intuition, he observed in *Antimoderne*, may be “entirely unacceptable” when

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of A New Christendom*, trans. Joseph E. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 92.

<sup>31</sup> Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 292.



applied to epistemology, but it can become “particularly interesting if we apply it to the domain of art, to practical intelligence, and to the dynamic vision with which the artist creates the work of art.”<sup>32</sup> Another example comes from *Art and Scholasticism*. According to Thomas, beauty is a transcendental, whose qualities of integrity, clarity and proportion please the intelligence when perceived through the senses. Maritain gives the concept sufficient latitude to apply it to works of artists as different as Leonardo da Vinci and Georges Rouault.<sup>33</sup> He is not exact in his criticism when it comes to the plastic qualities of the works he considers, and there is also a tendency to wash over significant differences for the sake of a unitive approach. What is significant, however, is the (Aristotelian) emphasis on the uniqueness of the aesthetic object at hand.

Thus, what determines whether a work is beautiful or not is not a fixed universal standard, such as Hegel’s Idea. It is, rather, how the dynamics of individual compositions reflect Thomistic principles. “Integrity and proportion,” he wrote, “have no absolute signification, and must be understood solely in relation to the end of the work, which is to make a form shine on matter.”<sup>34</sup> The principles are the same but the configurations in which they appear vary with each individual work. They have a distinct and specific form. Context matters.

Maritain did not hesitate to criticize modernist artists for intellectualizing art. In *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, he uses the concept of “poetic intuition” to question modernism’s claim for authenticity and truth. According to Maritain, poetic intuition is based on the natural sympathy between imagination and the *intellectus agens*. The artist’s mind gets hold of things directly without the use of abstraction. Creative inspiration and action originate in the non-conceptual, spontaneous union of intelligence and being. Through poetic intuition, the artist’s perceptions acquire a depth and density that will make the work of art existentially vital and meaningful. How

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<sup>32</sup> Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8.

exactly this happens is not clear, but it is certainly mediated by grace.<sup>35</sup> The finished work communicates objectively what the artist experienced subjectively. Without this transformation on the subject's side, the work is lifeless.

Aesthetic solutions based on theories are not acceptable. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1896) and Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) argued that “non-objectivity” can free the artist from servitude to reality and create an art of pure forms.<sup>36</sup> For Maritain, such efforts were doomed to fail. Objectless art hinders genuine creative expression. He calls it “the proper perversion of fine arts,” a recipe for stagnation and academicism.<sup>37</sup> The judgment relies on generalization and seems not to observe the contextual application of concepts that he set as a standard. Avant-gardes said a lot of things about their art that their art did not reflect. It is the art rather than its theory that matters. But despite these problems, this and related statements give us a good idea of how eager Maritain was to part with art that was dominated by rationalist priorities. In *Creative Intuition*, he uses the term “academic” to describe works that use their plastic elements as conceptual devices. He is especially critical of Surrealism.<sup>38</sup>

Art's missteps are philosophical in origin. It is therefore the task of philosophy to elucidate them. There is a shade of Hegelianism in this position that gives thought a reflective and corrective function over art. Maritain's objective, however, is the reverse of Hegel's aesthetics. He wants to keep the work of art in touch with nature and the world of things and persons. With few exceptions, modernist art in his view is the sensuous analog of “ideosophy,” philosophical thought that

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<sup>35</sup> It remains controversial whether this is a direct contact between intellect and sensible that is unmediated by the senses and whether Maritain is interpreting Thomas loosely on this point. See Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 60-63.

<sup>36</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 220-22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. For a discussion of the role of the object in photography based on Maritain's interpretation of connaturality see, Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, “The Connatural Eye: Photography without Representation,” *Philosophical Inquiry: International Quarterly* 29, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2007): 41-57.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 26-27, 63, 82-83.

discards extramental reality and is based on thought alone.<sup>39</sup> Husserl, for example, is an “ideosopher.”<sup>40</sup> The phenomenological position that thought cannot carry its object except as phenomenon—as something thought rather than as something that *is*—has its parallel in modernism’s fascination with formal abstraction. For Maritain, the rejection of realism begins in philosophy and extends from there to the entire realm of human activity. Deeper yet, it begins from the loss of spiritual life.

In 1922, Maritain had outlined his vision of Thomist renewal in *Antimoderne*. Chapter III of the book (“On Certain Conditions for a Thomist Renaissance”), reprints his address to the *Institut Supérieur de Philosophie*, in Louvain in January of 1920. Its basic thesis can be encapsulated in this statement: “a Christian renaissance...will be ephemeral and without vigor if it is not primarily a Thomist renaissance.”<sup>41</sup> He makes the exact same argument while discussing Vatican II in chapter VI of *The Peasant*, titled “The True New Fire: The Requests and Renewals of Genuine Knowledge.”

According to *Antimoderne*, a return to Thomism is needed to combat “the maladies of modern thought.”<sup>42</sup> These include naturalism, subjectivism, individualism, scientism and egocentrism. They are the combined errors of Cartesian, Kantian and Comtian philosophies condemned in *Pascendi*.<sup>43</sup> Even though centuries old, Thomism is perennially relevant to human culture. This is why Maritain refused to add the prefix “neo” to the term. Ten years later, in *The Angelic Doctor*, he explained: “Thomism is a form of wisdom. Between it and the particular forms of culture *incessant vital exchanges* must be made, but it is rigorously independent in its essence of those particular forms.”<sup>44</sup> It is an “indefinitely progressive” philosophy because it remains “in *vital*

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<sup>39</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 101-02.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>41</sup> Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 124.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-24.

<sup>43</sup> Dougherty, *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile*, 57-58.

<sup>44</sup> Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor*, vi, xiii; my emphasis.

communication with the superior wisdom of theology and contemplation."<sup>45</sup>

Modern ideas and conditions can be met creatively only when they are not met exclusively through the consciousness and thought of their times. For Maritain, the sources of intellectual and artistic vitality are transtemporal, the forms they take contemporary, and their significance perennial. Without this kind of origination, ideas and works of art are only temporal constructs, relative and transient.

*Antimoderne's* goal was to prove that Thomist philosophy is the "natural philosophy of the human spirit," a spirit that errs but also plows creatively into the circumstances of its time, unafraid to engage the world.<sup>46</sup> According to Maritain, modernism's intellectual errors can be traced to the demise of Scholastic thought.<sup>47</sup> A reformed, dynamic Thomism will cut through the history of Western thought like a "knife" to reveal its "partial truths and good intentions" and remove all else.<sup>48</sup> This analogy reflects its supernatural, charismatic character. Thomism is the intellective life of the Church condensed in what appears to be a philosophical system. In essence, it is much more. Its "principles are truly *comprehensive*" and its "discriminating light superior" to any other system of thought. It is uniquely equipped to "understand in depth

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., xvi; my emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Maritain considered modern philosophy to have grown out of the gradual decadence of Scholasticism that begins with Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1280-c.1239). Scotus introduced the supremacy of the will over the intellect; Ockham excluded reality and the truths of faith from conceptual knowledge. Renaissance individualism disrupted the organic unity of thought that linked Aristotle and Thomas. The worship of physical nature through a combination of occultism, myth and science prepared the ground for the union of fideism and rationalism that followed the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Scholasticism failed to clear Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy from the outdated scientific material that it used to demonstrate its metaphysical principles. As a result, its ability to respond critically to the challenges of scientific inquiry and discovery was seriously undermined. See Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 123-24.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

modern philosophy better than the moderns themselves.”<sup>49</sup> Without Thomism, the Church cannot have a genuine renewal. In fact, Thomism is not an instrument. It is *in* it rather than through it that the Church can encounter and inform contemporary culture.

Maritain’s critical openness to his times and his enthusiasm about Thomism’s modernity is echoed in the remarks of Pope John Paul II at the centenary (1979) of *Aeterni Patris*: “This realistic and historic method, fundamentally optimistic and open, makes St. Thomas not only the *Doctor Communis Ecclesiae* ... but the *Doctor Humanitatis*, because he is always ready and available to receive the human values of all cultures.”<sup>50</sup> In an address given on the same occasion at the Angelicum, John Paul II remembered Maritain “as one of the best interpreters of Thomistic thought” who introduced Thomism into the most challenging intellectual, moral and cultural debates of his generation.<sup>51</sup> In this opinion he was preceded by Pope Paul VI. In the winter of 1965, Maritain was convinced that elements in the Church were straying away from its tradition.

At the same time, he remained committed to the idea of transforming modernist ideas into opportunities for genuine renewal and dialogue with secular culture. The task of preserving and assimilating what he poetically called “all the riches being accumulated in modern times” was very important to him. It was in this spirit that he declared himself in *Antimoderne* to be “ultramodern.”<sup>52</sup> And it was in the same spirit that in the winter of 1966 he took on the “pseudo-renewal” that was threatening the achievements of the Council.

*The Peasant* warns that the creative energies underlying the modernist quest for an intellectual and cultural renaissance will be squandered if Thomism is abandoned, and renewal becomes synonymous with “chronolatry,” the worship of ephemeral rather than perennial truths.<sup>53</sup> He terms this tendency “neo-modernism.”<sup>54</sup> Neo-

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-49.

<sup>50</sup> John Paul II, *Two Lectures on St. Thomas Aquinas* (Niagara Falls, New York: Jacques & Raïssa Maritain Institute, 1991), 269.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-17.

<sup>52</sup> Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant*, 12-14.

modernism is a mutation of modernist thought. What makes it more subversive than the set of ideas confronted by Pius X (and *Antimoderne*), is the fact that it is not as direct and upfront about its objectives. Having usurped the spirit of the Council, it hides behind the clichés of change and relevance.

Maritain notes with apprehension the popularity of theological trends influenced by form criticism and phenomenology that interpret the sacramental and historical truths of Christianity in mythical and symbolic terms, consistent with anthropological and psychological theories.<sup>55</sup> Their objective, as he puts it, is “to empty the faith of any content.”<sup>56</sup> He remembers Socrates, who also opposed “verisimilitude,” and he calls “Grand Sophistry” the claim that “we know Being on condition that it is put in parenthesis and abstracted out of sight.”<sup>57</sup> Putting faith and spiritual life in a parentheses is not different from denying to art an intimate contact with the world. We can see here why (with what rationale) Maritain objected to certain types of avant-garde art. He was, of course, principally criticizing how artists expressed themselves about their work rather than the works themselves. Still, the fundamental idea remains that Catholic philosophy (and life) is committed to the radical love of all beings. The Catholic artist also begins from this premise.

The incompatibility of neo-modernist ideas with Catholicism is defended in philosophical and theological terms that repeat the theses of *Antimoderne*. But Maritain is most compelling when he reaches into the existential, poetic and mystical aspects of this problem. What he has to say on the subject resonates with the words and presence of Raïssa (she had died in 1960), his spiritual muse: “For to love is to give what one is, his very being, in the most absolute, the most brazenly metaphysical, the least phenomenizable sense of this word.”<sup>58</sup> The existential, realist conception of love is unmistakable, as are its sacramental underpinnings. If love becomes a metaphor, so will life, so

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 5, #6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 9.

will Christ (and the Church). The philosopher, like the artist, gives himself Eucharistically to being. Being, in turn, reciprocates. Maritain saw this movement in the thought of Thomas and pursued it in his work.

With a mixture of sadness and sarcasm, he goes on to ask: "But we must put all this [love] in parentheses, too, mustn't we, if we are to follow the new golden rule?"<sup>59</sup> Next to the demise of extra-mental reality and truth, what troubled Maritain the most about neo-modernism was its reduction of love to sentiment. He saw with great concern the emergence of a "truly visceral Christianity," marked by a superficially charitable anthropocentrism, a parody of Christ and humanity.<sup>60</sup> He recalls Pilate's indifference to truth. The question "*Quid est Veritas?*" was asked (tragically and ironically) in the presence of Christ. Like Pilate, some advocates of renewal "have simply ceased to believe in Truth, and believe only in verisimilitudes pinned to *some* truths..."<sup>61</sup>

In the 1920s, Maritain had written to artist and playwright Jean Cocteau that art arises from the convergence of supernatural truth and love. Their union is so pure in form that, like the saint, the artist has a deep sense of truth.<sup>62</sup> Creation is spontaneous rather than self-conscious. When art arises from this unitive moment, it lacks artifice. It springs from the depths of human experience rather than from its surface. In *The Peasant*, he borrows from Raïssa and Father Victorino Osende the notion of "prayer-love" or "prayer of the heart."<sup>63</sup>

The term describes the ongoing unconscious and unformulated act of love in the contemplative soul. Osende compares it to Bergson's image of a mother watching over her child even when she is asleep. It is love that has been existentially incorporated or incarnated and must be

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 7, 9, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, trans. J. Coleman (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1948), 108-09.

<sup>63</sup> This is not the Orthodox ascetical prayer associated with theophany. See Maritain, *The Peasant*, 228-29.

met concretely, in its act of existence. There is nothing phenomenological or mythical about it. Maritain's focus is principally on the subjective side of this experience. There is a psychological emphasis that is hard to miss. But we can also see what he has in mind. What differentiates love from sentiment is its concrete interaction and inherence in its objects.

This inherence runs deeper than reflection or thought. Maritain quotes Osende: "We cannot continue to think always, whereas we can love always."<sup>64</sup> According to Osende, the maternal act of loving centers on the one loved rather than on the action undertaken to that end. This is an important distinction. A spirituality that is centered on action (intention) and ultimately on the self—a false, egoistic love—cannot really center on the other. Or, if it does, it can only do so superficially. Lacking a metaphysical ground and an intuition of the mystical life, this type of love is easily satisfied with facile precepts expressed in spiritual clichés (e.g., the need "to see Jesus in our brothers").<sup>65</sup> The inner life of the heart and its intimacy with the mystical Christ have no place in it. In this regard, there is an obvious resemblance between certain modernist artists and neo-modernist theologians.

The key theme of *The Peasant* is that a Church driven by intellectualist and historicist ideas will suffer in its capacity to love. Or, it will love in a superficial way only. The exchange of the profound realities of spiritual life with intellectual constructs will deplete thought and devastate the soul. Maritain's question, "*Quid est veritas?*," is principally aimed at Catholic intellectuals. For those caught in their own versions of renewal, unfounded in the Catholic spiritual and intellectual tradition, *The Peasant* has a simple message. Thought uninformed by spiritual life loses its objects and itself. Being in this way loveless toward being, it is also loveless toward the One who brings all things to life.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.