

Maritain as Model of the Catholic Scholar

Ralph McInerny

A VISIT TO MEUDON

On September 14, 1932 four German philosophers, who had come to France for the *Journée d'études de la Société Thomiste* meeting on the theme of phenomenology, paid a visit to the Maritain house at Meudon. Jacques was then fifty years old but he already had an international reputation as a Christian philosopher. Jacques recorded the visit in his diary: "Wednesday 24. Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Visit of Edith Stein, Dom Feuling, Rosenmoeller and Soehngen."¹ It was more than gallantry that caused him to list the woman before the men. Edith Stein, like Raïssa, was Jewish and a convert to the Catholic faith. It would be nearly a decade after her conversion that she would enter the Carmel of Cologne where she took the religious name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. It was a shared sense of the nature of Christian philosophy that created immediately a special rapport between the Maritains and Edith Stein.

The conversion of the Maritains had taken place more than a quarter century earlier and it was not long afterward that they came to blend their pursuit of sanctity with their pursuit of truth under the tutelage of Thomas Aquinas. Edith Stein would say that it was while reading Thomas Aquinas that she first saw the unity of the spiritual and intellectual lives, that the pursuit of truth was a way of loving God. "It became clear to me in reading Saint Thomas," she wrote, "that it was possible to place knowledge at the service of God and it was then and only then that I could resolve to take up again my studies in a

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984), p. 165.

serious manner.”² Her meeting with the Maritains could be brought under the heading: *Spiritus ad spiritum loquitur*.

In Jacques Maritain there was an intimate bond between who he was and what he taught.

LES CERCLES D'ÉTUDES THOMISTES

A student of Jacques Maritain who fell during World War I surprisingly named his old professor as a beneficiary of his will. This unexpected money created new opportunities for the philosopher. The Villard bequest not only enabled him to continue his philosophical work. He would also be able to conduct a center of spirituality at Meudon in a large house the Maritains were able to buy with their new and unexpected post-war windfall. But both objectives were pursued at the same address. It was at Meudon that Maritain began the Thomistic Study Circles.

An indication of the importance Maritain attached to the study circles and retreats that were held at his house in Meudon is the fact that he devotes nearly one quarter of his *Carnet de Notes* to the subject. This project, which would continue until the beginning of World War II when Jacques and his wife left France for the United States, represents one of the most sustained efforts on Maritain's part to influence the culture of his native land as a convert to Catholicism. The effort met with both successes and failures.

The meetings at the Maritains' seem to have begun without any thought of regular recurrences. Jacques tells us that he found in a notebook this entry, "First reunion of Thomistic studies at the house, with Picher, Vaton, Barbot, Dastarac, Massis."³ The date of the entry was Sunday, February 8, 1914. There was no immediate sequel to that meeting, not surprisingly: World War I broke out in 1914. It was five years later, in the fall of 1919, that regular meetings devoted to Thomistic studies began at the Maritain home in Versailles. Jacques

² In a letter written February 12, 1928, she said, "It was through St. Thomas that I first came to realize that it is possible to regard scholarly work as a service of God. Immediately before, and a long time after my conversion, I thought living a religious life meant to abandon earthly things and to live only in the thought of the heavenly realities. Gradually I have learned to understand that in this world something else is demanded of us, and that even in the contemplative life the connection with this world must not be cut off. Only then did I make up my mind to take up scholarly work again. I even think that the more deeply a soul is drawn into God, the more it must also go out of itself in this sense, that is to say in the world, in order to carry the Divine life into it" (Edith Stein, *Self-portrait in Letters, 1916-1942 in The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 5 [Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1993], p. 54).

³ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, p. 133.

had been on leave of absence from the *Institut Catholique* during the academic year 1917–18 (the last year of the war), engaged on writing two introductory books in philosophy.⁴ The names mentioned as attending the first meeting were hardly household words, and Maritain describes the participants of the second meeting, which would indeed begin a series, as personal friends and students of his from the *Institut Catholique*. It was still an informal gathering, and stayed that way until 1921 when the decision was made to formalize the meetings and to stabilize their focus. The participants were those “for whom the spiritual life and the pursuit of wisdom (philosophical and theological) had major importance. . . .”⁵

From the time of their conversion, the Maritains’ household had lived on a schedule that took its rationale from a dual purpose—the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of sanctity. In Germany, there had been only an accidental connection between the two, with prayer merely surrounding studies more or less unrelated to the goal of the spiritual life. The discovery of Saint Thomas had opened up the possibility of a more integral connection between the life of the mind and the spiritual life. This was exactly the discovery that Edith Stein too would make.

When the Maritains became Oblates of St. Benedict, their regimen of prayer and study had taken on a particular stamp, but the Thomistic Study Circles acquired their own character. There was the continuation of the conviction that laymen too were called to sanctity, but the spirit of Versailles was more Dominican than Benedictine, a movement prefigured in a way in Thomas Aquinas’s move from Montecassino to the Order of Preachers.

Most of the participants were lay people—old and young, male and female, students and professors—but there were priests and religious as well. The lay people represented a wide range of vocations, not just professional philosophers, but doctors, poets, musicians, businessmen, scientists. Catholics were in the majority but there were also unbelievers as well as Jews, Orthodox, and some Protestants. As for Thomas, some were already experts in his thought, others mere beginners. It was interest in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, albeit of different degrees, that brought them together.

What was the atmosphere? It was not a class or a seminar, the participants did not come as students in that sense, nor was it a *soirée* with drinks

⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Éléments de philosophie, I: Introduction; II: Petite logique*. These appeared in English as *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Sheed & Ward), and *An Introduction to Logic* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937).

⁵ *Notebooks*, p. 184.

and cigarettes, although people came as guests to a home. Jacques insists on the need for feminine influence for the success of such a venture, and characterizes the participants as guests of Raïssa. There were three women hostesses, Raïssa, her sister Vera, and their mother. The samovar was readied and later there would be dinner. Writing as a lonely widower many decades later, Jacques insists that Raïssa was the “ardent flame” of the reunions, taking an active if discreet part in the discussions. And she prayed constantly for the success of the reunions. “It is clear that without her—or without her sister—there would have been no Thomistic Circles, anymore than there would have been a Meudon (or for that matter a Jacques Maritain).”⁶

The discussion would go on throughout the afternoon, through tea and on into dinner, though not all stayed for that. At midnight, the hosts bade good-bye to the last guest, then collapsed with fatigue.

It is significant that Jacques insists on the role of Raïssa in the reunions. The motive was certainly the dissemination of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, but of course there was also a wife promoting her husband’s career and influence. As time went on, the reunions became the occasion for conversions to Catholicism, and the relevance of Thomism for all aspects of culture gave the reunions the air of a salon which sought to exert influence on the artistic and literary life of Paris. The very public *contretemps* with Jean Cocteau and the effort to rival the literary influence of André Gide are facets of this. But all that was far in the future when the effort began.

For the first ten or twelve years, the topics were the great problems of philosophy and theology, treated technically. Texts of Thomas would be read, the great commentators consulted—special mention is made of John of St. Thomas, of course—and an effort made to “disengage from the intramural disputes of Second Scholasticism the truths whose appeal transcended the prison-like setting of the texts.”⁷ What were the themes? Faith and reason, philosophy and theology, metaphysics, poetry, politics, indeed all the issues raised by the culture around them.

Jacques was the leader, as we learn when he tells us that he prepared his expositions of the texts the night before or Sunday morning, “hastily, but carefully.” Among his papers, he found notes for the meetings and we are not surprised to hear that these took the form of synoptic tables and great schemata on large sheets that could be affixed to the wall. The subjects he treated, by way of analysis of texts, included the following. Angelic knowledge. How

⁶ *Notebooks*, p. 135.

⁷ *Ibid.*

angels know future contingents, singulars and secrets of the heart. Intellectual knowledge. The agent intellect. Knowledge of the singular. The vision of God and the light of glory. The desire for that vision. Theoretical and practical knowledge. Is sociology a science? In what sense? Medicine. Politics. Justice and friendship. The Trinity: subsistence, person, the divine persons. Original sin. The Incarnation. The human nature of Christ. Free will. . . .

Maritain recalled these topics from the first decade of the reunions, which should mean through 1929. These were tumultuous years—the public flap with Cocteau, the attempt to dissuade Gide from publishing *Corydon*, the establishment of *Roseau d'or*, the Golden Reed, a series of books meant to rival Gide's influence on French culture. And it was also during this decade that *L'Action Française*, with which Jacques had long been associated, was condemned by Rome.

Perhaps there is no better way to get a sense of the flavor of this effort than by examining the little book Jacques and Raïssa co-authored to express the vision of the intellectual life which lay behind the Circles as well as the Constitution that governed its meetings.

PRAYER AND INTELLIGENCE

The Statutes governing the Thomistic Study Circles can be found in an appendix of Maritain's *Carnet de Notes*, published many years afterward, in 1964. Section 1, which states the general principles of the Circles, is of more interest than the section devoted to organization.

"In making Saint Thomas Aquinas the Common Doctor of the Church, God has given him to us as our leader and guide in the knowledge of the truth."⁸ Maritain's mind had been formed by the philosophy of the day, negatively, for the most part, but more positively in the case of Bergson. After his conversion, he did not immediately see the significance of Thomas Aquinas in the intellectual life of the Catholic. It was nearly four years after his conversion that he began to read the *Summa Theologiae*. Doubtless motivated by docility at first, he quickly became personally convinced of the wisdom of the Church's designation of Thomas as chief guide in philosophy and theology. Thomas has pride of place among the Doctors of the Church and professors should present his thought to their students. Maritain's characterization of Thomas's doctrine stresses its formality. "It addresses the mind as a chain of certitudes demonstratively linked and is more perfectly in accord with the faith than any other."⁹ It carries with it the pledge of a sanctity inseparable

⁸ Ibid., p. 290.

⁹ Ibid.

from the teaching mission of the Angelic Doctor who all but effaced his human personality in the divine light. However attractive the person of Thomas is, however much a model of the Christian life, Maritain quotes with enthusiasm the statement of Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris: Majus aliquid in sancto Thomas quam sanctus Thomas suscipitur et defenditur.* "There is in Thomas something greater than Thomas that we receive and defend."¹⁰ It is because of his sanctity as well as his intelligence that Thomas can be a vehicle of the truth and a model for the pursuit of it.

One of the purposes of the *Cercles d'études* was to enlist lay people in the Thomistic Revival. The aim was not to obtain members of a philosophical or theological sect within the Church or indeed beyond it. Maritain taught us to see Thomism, not as a rival of other equally valid ways of doing philosophy, but as the name for doing philosophy rightly—philosophy *tout court*. It is sometimes said that Thomas was not a Thomist, and of course he was not. No more was Aristotle an Aristotelian. Neither man saw what he was doing as hewing to a party line and narrowing his interests. The most notable thing about the thinking of Aristotle is the attention it pays to whatever had been said on a topic before he took it up. This led him to look for truths lurking in doctrines which on the surface might seem merely bizarre. A good example of this is the careful analysis and balancing of early naturalists in Book One of the *Physics*. He discerns beneath the jumble of conflicting claims a common recognition. It is facetious to see in this a tendency to hold that his predecessors were lisping Aristotelians, inchoate Stagirites. Philosophy is a common enterprise, no person alone can do it well, and everyone has standard cognitive equipment and could scarcely miss the truth entirely. In much the same way, what is called the Thomistic synthesis is an effort to bring together what strike the historian of ideas as radically different systems and find in them contributions to the common task of the pursuit of truth.

John Paul II, in *Fides et Ratio*, confronts the scandal of philosophy, the bewildering variety of philosophical systems and asks how one might adjudicate between them. His answer is found in paragraph four—there is an implicit philosophy held by all which provides criteria of acceptance and rejection. Anyone who reads the list of components of that Implicit Philosophy will recognize the starting points and principles from which Aristotle and Thomas proceed. Since these principles are a common human possession, philosophizing that moves off from them—rather than doubting, denying or ignoring them—will not be a *kind* of philosophy, but simply philosophy. No one owns the starting points.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Maritain's vast and many-faceted *œuvre* reveals this same anchorage in what anyone may know and an interest in what every philosopher has said—at least in principle. Thomism is unique in this unlimited openness—what other philosophy seeks sustenance anywhere and everywhere? The result is not a pastiche, an eclectic hodgepodge. Nor does this openness preclude rejection of what has been said. Well, one could go on. But my topic now is different.

To be a Thomist is to follow the lead of one whose intellect was strengthened by supernatural grace and whose study was a species of prayer. So Maritain wrote, “[W]e think it is impossible that Thomism can be maintained in its purity and integrity without special recourse to the life of prayer.”¹¹ If the intellectual life has its virtues, it also has its vices. It is to avoid the latter and acquire the former that prayer must be an integral part of the life of a Thomist. Maritain suggests that we are called to have intellectual reparation to God for the errors the human intellect has committed lest we add to them ourselves. “It is important that intellectuals dedicate themselves in a special manner to give to God the homage that modern philosophers refuse to give and at the same time to intercede for the voluntary and involuntary victims of error.”¹² Lay Thomists are asked to commit themselves to at least an hour of prayer each day.

De la vie de l'oraison has two parts: The Intellectual Life and Prayer, and The Spiritual Life. Anyone acquainted with the *opusculum* called *De modo studendi*, attributed to Thomas Aquinas, will be reminded of it when he opens this little book by Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. Each of the nine chapters, three in part one, six in part two, bears as its title a Latin citation on which the text is a brief commentary. But, of course, it is the conjunction of the intellectual and spiritual lives that gives the book its stamp, and one which, in the modern world, causes surprise.

The progressive secularization of philosophy has had its effect on the sense of what the vocation of a philosopher is. Of Descartes's account of knowledge Maritain famously remarked that it bore a peculiar similarity to Thomas Aquinas's account of angelic knowledge. Methodic doubt led Descartes to his first certainty that, even if he were deceived about any and everything he might think, of one thing he could not be deceived, namely, that he was thinking. From this starting point the Cartesian project of reconstruction began. Descartes regards himself as a thinking something, a *res cogitans*, and his project is to see if he can get outside his mind, mind being

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹² *Ibid.*

all he is at this point. This is the origin of the so-called mind-body problem. It is not surprising that such an understanding of the philosophical task has influenced the philosopher's notion of his calling. It is almost exclusively cerebral, the pursuit of knowledge unrelated to the wider life which, presumably, the philosopher leads.

This impoverishment of the pursuit of truth is something to which Maritain responded in a variety of ways. The later discussions of Christian Philosophy are obviously related to it. The distinction between the nature and the state of philosophy, between philosophy and philosophizing, obviously addressed this issue. But from the beginning, after their conversion and consequent pursuit of a spiritual life under the guidance of a director, any philosophizing by the Maritains would necessarily be seen in the context of the spiritual life. The book on the life of prayer—in English it would be called *Prayer and Intelligence*—was first published anonymously in 1922, reprinted under the names of the authors in 1925, and then with changes in 1933 and with more changes still in 1947. The basic text of the book remained the same, with the variations occurring in the notes and addenda. This history of the book may be taken to underscore that its subject represents a profoundly abiding concern of the authors. "O Wisdom, which proceeds from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end mightily and sweetly disposing all things, come and teach us the way of prudence," is the book's motto, followed by an excerpt of Peter Calo's *Life of Thomas Aquinas*:

After the death of the Doctor, Brother Reginald, having returned to Naples and resumed his teaching, cried out while weeping copiously: My brothers, while he lived my master kept me from revealing wonderful things of which I had been the witness. One is that he acquired his knowledge not by human effort but by the merit of prayer, for each time that he wanted to study, to dispute, to lecture, write or dictate, having recourse to prayer first of all, he begged with tears to find in the truth the divine secrets, and by the merit of this prayer, having been prior to it in uncertainty, he arose instructed. . . .

Verbum spirans amorem: the Word breathing forth love. It is necessary that in us too love proceeds from the Word, that is, from the spiritual possession of the truth in Faith. And just as whatever is in the Word is found in the Holy Spirit, so too what is in our knowledge must pass into the affections by way, and to rest only in it. Let love proceed from truth, and knowledge be made fruitful in love. Our prayer is not what it should be if either of these two conditions be lacking. By prayer we mean above all that which takes place in the secret of the heart and is ordered to the contemplation of and union with God.

That is the complete first chapter of the little book and it sets its tone. The Christian vocation is one of union with and contemplation of God, who is Truth. Any pursuit of truth should be linked to the primary goal. It is by acting under the impulse of grace or some more mystical gift, that the soul will attain this ultimate end. The soul must depend totally on the divine action, suspending its human mode of acting. Until God favors us with repose in Him, we must work to dispose ourselves for the reception of this gift. Our intellectual efforts must therefore be ordered to knowing God and our will to the love of Him. Only when fortified by prayer can intellect develop its highest virtualities, and the closer a soul approaches God in love, the more simple and luminous will intellectual vision become.

There is, moreover, a quite special relation between the intellectual life and the life of prayer, in that prayer requires the soul to leave the realm of sensible images and rise to the purely intelligible, and beyond, and, reciprocally, the activity of intellect is more perfect to the degree that it is freed from these same sensible images.

Only a life of prayer can give us an absolute fidelity to the truth, without diminution and diversion, and a great charity towards our neighbor, especially a great intellectual charity. Only it allows us, by naturally rectifying our faculties of desire, to pass from truth to practice.

CONCLUSION

I have already suggested how foreign such thoughts would seem to a typical contemporary philosopher. He is trained to think of himself as pure intelligence, uninfluenced by any antecedent convictions, with religious faith being the first thing to be put in escrow. The privatization of religion could be said to follow from the privatization of thought, the turn to the subject which makes the first philosophical problem: How can I go out of my mind? The Cartesian project is of course make-believe. Kierkegaard wrote an unfinished story *Johannes Climacus*, or *De omnibus dubitandum est*, in which he followed the fortunes of someone who tried to follow this advice, forgetting that he was a creature of flesh and blood, an incarnate spirit. It was one of Maritain's canniest insights that the intellectualism of Descartes falsified the pursuit of holiness.

Of course, any mention of pursuing holiness rings tinnily in the contemporary philosophical ear. Doubtless some of the resistance to the resurgence of interest in the virtues stems from uneasiness at the thought that even in philosophy character matters. Of course, one can be good as gold and dumb as a post and not every scoundrel fails to catch hold of a truth or two. But the

ideal is to unify our lives in terms of an ample understanding of the ultimate end. The Greeks in their wisdom saw contemplation as the goal of the philosophical life. For the Christian that truth is transformed by its elevation to the supernatural order and the realization that we are called to friendship with God, to seeing Him even as we are seen.

The divorce between life and thought began under Christian auspices—Descartes was a good Catholic—and it led to the almost complete secularization with which we are surrounded. Surrounded, and therefore influenced by. There are many benefits to be had from turning to the thought of Jacques Maritain. But surely one of the greatest is that he makes impossible for us to separate study and the pursuit of truth from its orientation to our ultimate end, the vocation to which we have been called. When Maritain worked a variation on St. Paul—*Vae mihi si non thomistizavero*—he had in mind, not membership in a club, joining one philosophical sect among many, but the unified pursuit of truth and holiness that characterized Saint Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain.