

To Philosophize for the Faith: Jacques Maritain's Intellectual Vocation

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The title of this paper indicates a conclusion my researches have forced on me: I do not think that Jacques entirely understood himself. Unquestionably, he presents his vocation as that of a Christian *philosopher*. I believe his vocation was rather that of a lay *theologian* engaged as a Catholic apologist with the culture of his day, pre-eminently with its philosophical ideas. I will try here to make the case for this interpretation.¹

If that is where I am headed, it is not where I must begin. In seeking to fulfill my announced topic, I find myself having to go back: back to the early years of Maritain's time at the Sorbonne, of his marriage and his conversion; and back to my own first American Maritain

¹ That Maritain was a theologian is not a novel idea. See Charles Journet's "Jacques Maritain Theologian," *The New Scholasticism* 46 (1972): 32-50. Rightly, I believe, Journet notes that his theology is more "intuitive" than "scholastic" (49)—a theology not "burdened with the heavy equipment" (of one scholastically trained in theology). Ralph Nelson also notes Maritain's tendency towards theology (in contradistinction to Simon's) in his "A Controversy Reconsidered": see *Maritain and America*, eds. Joseph Allan Clair and Chris Cullen, S.J. (American Maritain Association: Washington, D.C., 2009), 114-28. In truth, Maritain had always been a "research worker" for theology. Now, a "research worker" in a field is someone whose work is achieved according to its norms and lights, even if subject to higher authority (as Maritain no doubt saw those more highly, and "scholastically," trained than he as being): thus, a role analogous to the one a para-legal possesses relative to attorneys. Nevertheless, all theologians are subject to a higher authority: namely, the working of the Spirit in the Church and her Magisterium. Thus, however humble may be a research worker's own work in the field, it is a work of theology, and its greater "subservience" to higher authority is only one of degree, not of kind. When Maritain denies he is a theologian, he is thinking of one "scholastically trained" or he is thinking of "exegetical" or "dogmatic" theology; but theology is wider and freer than that!

Association meeting 20 years ago. For, if we are to understand the meaning and significance of Jacques Maritain's intellectual vocation and its present challenge, we must understand its context and empathize with how it came about.²

Truth to tell, it is not easy to get a handle on Maritain's early years. Despite the many things Raïssa (and Jacques himself) has shared with us concerning their lives, there is much left unsaid about which we would like to know. Nor, as far as I have been able to discern, have his biographers been of much aid. Let me cite several instances. Jacques was baptized. What was his Christian upbringing? From what we would gather from his *Notebooks* and from Raïssa, it would seem to have been

² Before beginning, I wish to acknowledge those who have written before on his person and work. I have read with profit and enjoyment and been helped in my reflections by the following: Gerald Phelan, *Jacques Maritain* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937); Charles A. Fecher, *The Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1953); Henry Bars, *Maritain en Notre Temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1959); Donald and Idella Gallagher's introduction to *The Achievement of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962); Yves R. Simon, "Jacques Maritain: The Growth of a Christian Philosopher," in *Jacques Maritain*, ed. Joseph Evans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 3-24; Julie Kernan, *Our Friend, Jacques Maritain* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); John Dunaway, *Jacques Maritain* (Boston: Twayne, 1978); Olivier Lacombe, "L'itinerario spirituale di Jacques Maritain," in *Jacques Maritain E La Società Contemporanea*, ed. Roberto Papini (Milan: Massimo, 1978), 26-40; Bernard Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1983); Judith Suther, *Raïssa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham, 1990); James Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Jude Dougherty, *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003); Ralph McInerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain: A Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2003); but especially Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain: Les Mendians du Ciel* (Paris: Stock, 1995), for the wealth of information he provides. Nevertheless, it seems to me that an intellectual biography of Maritain adequate to the science of history remains to be written. (None of these authors, or any other, appears ready or willing to defend the thesis of this paper: that Maritain should best be seen as a Catholic lay theologian and apologist, and not as a Christian philosopher [but see Dougherty, op. cit., 42].)

non-existent, rather like that of his friend Ernest Psichari. We are told his "introduction to religion stopped short with his baptism"³ and that his family "did not fight Christianity," believing instead that one had "assimilated it and outgrown it" (*WHBFT*, 52). Yet this seems to be said by way of contrast to his own case. Jacques certainly seemed much more ready to "fight" Christianity,⁴ regarding it as "Bourgeois:" unjust to the working class and on the side of unjust and entrenched interests in the Dreyfus affair. These views of his adolescence are clear enough; but his earlier exposure to Christian things is not. His mother, described by Raïssa as possessing a "religious loyalty to the passionate ideal which animated the republican opposition under the Empire... [and] a fervent hope for the *spiritual* future of mankind" (*WHBFT*, 49: my italicizations), had given over her son's early education to a liberal Protestant, Jean Réville. What kind of Christian faith or intellectual formation did he seek to impart? We would like to know more about this than we do.⁵

³ Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1942), 50. This work is hereafter abbreviated *WHBFT* and placed within the text.

⁴ He writes the following to Ernest Psichari on September 26, 1899: "Pour établir la Religion nouvelle, pour supprimer ce qu'il y a de mauvais dans le catholicisme, pour détruire le pape, il faudra attaquer, détruire tout le catholicisme (avec ce qu'il a de bien et ce qu'il a de mal):" see Barré, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁵ Maritain is hostile to Protestantism even before his conversion (albeit under the influence of Bloy): see his *Notebooks* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 26-27. He comes to see Luther, and German Protestant thought in general, as the chief cause of modern Europe's intellectual and spiritual malaise, and World War I as more or less a holy war to save Christian civilization: see his "Le Rôle de L'Allemagne dans la Philosophie Moderne," *Oeuvres Complètes*, I (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1986), 891-1043. Raïssa even describes these lectures as "combat duty, a sort of intellectual contribution to the war" (*Adventures in Grace* [New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1945], 213: this work is hereafter abbreviated *AIG* and references to it are placed within the text). To the best of my knowledge, Maritain never visited Germany after 1908, save for a week's passage through it in 1931, and he remained relatively uninvolved in its philosophical trends after both of the World Wars, e.g. Husserl, Heidegger, Habermas. (An interesting exception to this was an offer he made to Heidegger after World War II to use his office as

More directly to my purpose, what was Jacques's early intellectual background or his philosophical "formation"? For example, I have tried (but so far in vain) to ascertain just what he studied to obtain his Sorbonne *agrégation* in philosophy. Just what were his courses? What was he reading? Barré tells us of his plan to read modern philosophers in his first year at the Sorbonne (1900-1901), a program that included Bergson.⁶ Yet Raïssa informs us that he had *not* read Bergson's works before attending his lectures, over a year later (1902), and that neither of them were to do so until "a little later" (*WHBFT*, 83). One has the impression of them attending a weekly lecture, with many another

Ambassador to the Holy See to help locate his sons, who were still being held prisoner in Russia at the time: see Maria Pia Benini, "Maritain ambasciatore a Roma," in *Jacques Maritain E La Società Contemporanea*, 50-59, p. 57, #15, quoting from E. Castelli's *Il tempo invertebrato* [Padua: CEDAM, 1969], 51, #4.) In any case, it is somewhat curious that he never seemed interested in Protestantism prior to his conversion, and (as far as I can tell) he had very few Protestant friends prior to his coming to the United States. His mention of the minister Paul Vergara (*Notebooks*, 189) is the only one I know of. (Indeed, during the Meudon period, Gabriel Marcel found Raïssa, in particular, to be hostile to his own Protestant wife, and described her religious attitude as that of a "fanatic": see *En Chemin, Vers Quel Eveil* [Paris: Gallimard, 1971], 156. While it is hard not to believe that he may be exaggerating here, his judgment is nonetheless striking.) By contrast, while Maritain appears not even to have considered Orthodoxy prior to his conversion, he came to have various Orthodox friends (especially via Nicolas Berdyaev) and to feel much closer to Orthodoxy. (After all, the greatest friend of his youth, Ernest Psichari, had been baptized as an Orthodox.) In relation to Orthodoxy, he says, "Greek and Russian piety, which differs apparently from Catholic piety not so much in divergences of dogma as in certain characteristics of spirituality, is much less hostile, in my opinion, to the philosophy of St. Thomas than might at first be supposed. It approaches the problems from another angle and the scholastic presentation as a rule irritates and offends it. These are merely questions of modality; and I am convinced that a proper understanding of the Thomist system would dispel innumerable misunderstandings and facilitate unexpected encounters" (*St. Thomas Aquinas* [London: Sheed and Ward, 1931], 40-41). Again, while Orthodoxy tended to remain "within herself" as a result of the schism, this was "not so completely as is commonly thought" (42). He speaks of "our Orthodox friends" in *Notebooks*, 160.

⁶ Barré, *op. cit.*, 65.

interested Frenchman. They must, after all, have been rather busy with Péguy and his *Cahiers*. They followed Bergson more closely in his course on Plotinus, but Raïssa tells us that she read Plato only *after* this (*WHBFT*, 98), and that seems likely for Jacques too. (From what we can tell, it appears that neither of them read Aristotle at the Sorbonne.)

Raïssa tells us that Jacques's "artistic cultivation had already reached a *very high level*" (*WHBFT*, 42), but perhaps this statement owes much to her ability to enter vividly into her memory of 40 years previously. She is, after all, referring only to a young 18-year-old, and the only evidence she gives for her judgment is that he knew the Louvre better than she.⁷

When we think of Jacques at the Sorbonne in 1905, obtaining his *agrégation*, we should not think of him as at a level equivalent to an American ABD; rather, we should think of his intellectual training as closer to that of a fine, but ambivalent, American student earning a BA in Philosophy.⁸ Nor did he *ever* receive a formal philosophical

⁷ The difficulty faced by any biographer is how to treat Raïssa's memoirs (and also Jacques') as a source of their life. Given how important these are, this question deserves to be faced squarely and treated in depth. To the best of my knowledge, this task has yet to be accomplished. For myself, I am reluctant to contradict their *considered* judgment, but I am ready to query one where little evidence is supplied or to correct an idea that could lead to a misimpression (see my next footnote). McNerny goes further than this, I believe, when he argues that Maritain's commitment to *Action Française* was greater than he affirms (cf. *The Very Rich Hours*, 60-65). Maybe. Certainly Henri Massis thought so (see Barré, *op. cit.*, 212), but he was deeply involved in this matter and is not an impartial witness. If one is to argue otherwise, it seems to me one needs to supply convincing evidence. The speculation that Villard would not have bequeathed his legacy to Maritain except that he was deeply involved in *Action Française* is just that: mere speculation. (One could just as well argue that he saw something importantly different in Maritain from Maurras...or otherwise why not just bequeath everything to Maurras?) To my mind, this is not sufficient evidence to question his account, which seems basically credible, given the evidence presently at hand.

⁸ Raïssa says that he already had a "master's degree" in philosophy before he entered the Sorbonne, at 18 (*WHBFT*, 41); this must refer to his degree from the lycée. No doubt the Lycée Henri IV was more advanced than an American high school, but we should not think of it as equivalent to an American MA.

formation. By his own admission, the six years following his conversion had very little to do with philosophy.⁹ And his later doctorate from the Angelicum was purely honorary. The truth is that he was entirely an autodidact when it came to his formation in Thomistic Philosophy, one decisively directed by Father Clérissac (and then by Father Dehau and Father Garrigou-Lagrange). Notably, he was directed and informed in his personal studies by Dominicans, and he would remain faithful to

⁹ He, Raïssa, and Vera entered the Church on June 11, 1906. When he showed his first article to Fr. Clérissac on April 13, 1910, he did not yet know scholastic philosophy (*Notebooks*, 62). He first reads the *Summa* only four and a half years after his entrance into the Church (September 15, 1910), and it is notable that his only further reference to it throughout the remainder of that journal (to October, 1911) refers to Raïssa's reading of it (August 9, 1911) and not his. (We may thus well wonder whether his remark of 1954 on his first reading—"an inundation of light. The intellect finds its home" [*Notebooks*, 65]—does not slightly exaggerate its impact. Even if true, there is no evidence that he then began a systematic study of Thomas. It seems quite likely that the "violent temptations against the faith" he experienced sometime in 1911 or 1912 [*Notebooks*, 73] preceded his full attention to Thomas, and the "inundation of light" of which he speaks.) His "profoundly discouraging" work for Hachette's *Dictionary of Practical Life* (*Notebooks*, 72) will preoccupy him for another two years. It is again Raïssa, not he, who first begins the philosophical article on Bergson, to which he only seems to turn his full attention in September, 1911, and which is largely expository, rather than critical (even if his preference for Thomas and difficulty with Bergson is evident). His article for the *Thomist* a year later evinces a knowledge of Thomas (and the work of Garrigou-Lagrange), but it is very brief. He began to teach at the Collège Stanislas in October, 1912, and it is from *then* (which is also the date of his becoming an oblate of St. Benedict and taking his vow of celibacy) that we should date the true beginning of his formation in Thomistic philosophy: a date confirmed both by Raïssa's account—he then ceased his work for Hachette and began a full-scale study of Thomas (AIG, 199-201)—and by his own statement in his *Notebooks* (68) that his "spiritual childhood" lasted "for six or seven years:" thus up to 1912-13, just when he first begins teaching Thomistic philosophy. (His in-depth course on Bergson at the Institut Catholique was only given in the Spring of 1913. Even after it, and before "their" book on Bergson, Raïssa will describe herself as "still under ... [his] influence" [AIG, 209].)

their perspective all his life;¹⁰ yet, even more notably, his philosophical studies were directed not by Dominicans with a *philosophical* degree, but rather by priests renowned chiefly as spiritual directors and by a theologian.

In noting his absence of philosophical formation, I do not wish in any way to minimize the depth of his intellectual struggle. If we ask ourselves what generated the sense of meaninglessness that was clearly present when he and Raïssa made their famous vow in the *Jardin des Plantes*, I believe we should answer: a conflict between his heart and his head, between *praxis* and *theoria*.¹¹ From his mother, his youth, and his connection with Péguy, he inherited a deep and abiding commitment to rectify social injustice. He was deeply committed to the laboring poor. Nor was he ever to lose this commitment, in that way showing himself to be his mother's son (and no doubt maintaining an important bond between them). His political passion was all the stronger for his absence of religious passion; something of what properly belongs to our commitment to God was no doubt displaced upon politics. Yet that commitment was undermined at root by the theoretical philosophy he was encountering "in full flower" at the Sorbonne. For, if we were no more than the accidental product of blind forces, what could ground a commitment to justice? And, if we were determined by physical forces, how could one reasonably be outraged at iniquity or inequity? After all, our action was ultimately outside our control.

¹⁰ It is interesting that, as one of the first Catholics favorably to welcome Étienne Gilson's thesis (1913), he nevertheless criticizes his account of the *de auxiliis* controversy: see "L'Ésprit de la Philosophie Moderne: La Réforme Cartésienne," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, 823-52, p. 832, n. 8. (This article was first published in June, 1914, in the *Revue de Philosophie* XXIV, no. 6: 601-25.) Significantly, from the very beginning of their work, Maritain defends the great Dominican interpreters of Aquinas, whereas Gilson does not or with greater qualification.

¹¹ He himself was aware of this; on March 19, 1899, at least six months before attending the Sorbonne, he wrote this passage to Psichari: "J'ai comme toi une sort de religion du progress humain. Mais ... je pretends bâtir ma foi sur la raison et ... je sais que la Raison est chancelante et que la Science ne me donne pas encore de suffisantes certitudes." See Barré, *op. cit.*, 57.

Maritain himself was later to describe his fundamental dilemma in eloquent words:

A man is bound to die for justice. That means that he stakes *his all* on the moral order of justice. To stake all, to give my life, I need to know the intrinsic value of justice and the obligation of justice are unconditional or absolute ... a thing which no mere statement of fact, as are all statements of phenomena, and no possible consideration born out of Empiricism, can ever establish.¹²

The greater our moral outrage at injustice and our desire to rectify it, the greater the importance of explaining to ourselves how our stand is not simply a "relative opinion," no more defensible than the next. Nor will it find itself satisfied in front of any species of naturalism that is inevitably driven towards subjectivism and relativism, however much its sophisticated defenders might desire otherwise. When we imagine Jacques at 16 hurling himself on the rug in despair because "there was no answer" (*WHBFT*, 67), I believe that we should see the question he faced as being of this nature: what account can I give myself that justifies the course of my life's action?

This question is, we might say, a theoretical one. It points towards the Absolute and towards theism, as providing an *intellectual* answer to an intellectual problem. Perhaps finding such a philosophy might have satisfied Jacques, at least for a while. It would not by itself, however, have satisfied Raïssa;¹³ for *hers* was not simply a theoretical problem. To understand this, we must recall one who is without name in her

¹² Jacques Maritain, "The Cultural Impact of Empiricism," in *From An Abundant Spring: The Walter Farrell Volume of the Thomist* (New York: Kenedy and Sons, 1952), 448-66, p. 465.

¹³ Jacques' mother, Geneviève Favre, with a mother's instinct, senses that he has been very much changed by his relation to Raïssa, that he is now "hard to penetrate" (as she wrote to Psichari [Barré, op. cit., 88-89]). This change occurs before Bloy. Is it not because he has come under the influence of Raïssa's search?

memoirs: her maternal grandfather.¹⁴ She describes him in these moving words:

Concerning my maternal grandfather I have preserved memories of a great goodness, and of a gentleness which even to my childish eyes seemed extraordinary... [these] came from his great piety, the piety of the *Hasidim*.... My grandfather's religion was one altogether of love and confidence, of joy and charity.... The hospitality of my grandparents was proverbial, and often belated travelers knocked on their door in the middle of the night. My grandfather would then get up in great haste and awaken his wife as joyfully as if God Himself had come to visit them, and the unknown guest would be received as well as their modest means allowed.... When the guest was refreshed and rested and wished to leave, my grandfather himself always went with him to see that he took the right road, no matter how late the hour (*WHBFT*, 2-4).

A combination of Tevye and the sweet and holy *Rebbe* of Anatevka,¹⁵ this man imparted to Raïssa's mother a deep sense of the mystery and holiness of God, a sense which she maintained in her household, faithfully keeping *Shabat* and celebrating the great feast of *Pesach* with all the mystery and solemnity proper to it. Raïssa's childhood was that of Chagall's paintings: the mystery of God was deeply present in her life. It was just this presence she had lost, and that the "learned of the Sorbonne" told her was an illusion.

¹⁴ Another important person, a contemporary of her grandfather, is unmentioned by her and unnamed by Jacques: the mother of Léon Bloy. This remarkable woman offered her health to God that her wayward son be protected by the Virgin's care, an offer apparently accepted: see "Homage to our Dear Godfather Léon Bloy," in *Untrammelled Approaches* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 26-45, p. 28. This was in 1866, when Raïssa's mother was newly born. Another unnamed person of the same generation, the deeply religious, Orthodox, grandmother of Ernest Psichari, had seen to his being baptized (*WHBFT*, 50). How truly we do not see with God's eyes nor understand the secret workings of His Providence!

¹⁵ The comparison is more than evocative, for both the time and the place of *Fiddler on the Roof* was his.

Should her reaction to Plotinus surprise us, then, that she should find herself on her knees kissing the book of the *Enneads* (WHBFT, 97). For, as she says, his philosophy is "as much in the character of a mystic as in that of a metaphysician" (WHBFT, 97). I rather imagine her as reading a passage such as this one, on the vision of Absolute Beauty:

Seeing, with what love and desire for union one is seized—what wondrous delight! If a person who has never seen this hungers for it as for his all, one that has seen it must love and reverence it as authentic beauty, must be flooded with an awesome happiness, stricken by a salutary terror. Such a one loves with a true love, with desires that flame. All other loves than this he must despise and all that once seemed fair he must disdain.¹⁶

If Bergson had brought her to Plotinus, she could not be satisfied with the fare his own philosophy offered; for he had awakened in her a desire to find again the *divine presence* that had so filled the heart of her childhood. She wanted to *experience* the living God.

Léon Bloy comes as an answer to the desire of her heart and it is again difficult not to see her "taking the lead" in wanting to see him and in being caught by him. With Bill Bush, we should recall the importance of Maritain's tombstone, the degree to which he owed *everything* to Raïssa, perhaps indeed his faith above all else.¹⁷ In entering Bloy's house, in which "all values were dislocated... [and] one guessed that only one sorrow existed... —not to be of the saints" (WHBFT, 119), she was "returning home:" to the presence of God in her childhood and to one who would talk as intimately to St. Barnabas as Teyve (and no doubt her grandfather) would talk to God about his hardships. Let us also recall the image that Erasmo Leiva also has given us of Bloy: "a Hasid dancing for joyful woe at the foot of the cross."¹⁸

¹⁶ Plotinus, "Beauty," in *The Essential Plotinus* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 41.

¹⁷ See William Bush, "RAÏSSA MARITAIN ... et Jacques," in *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, eds. Deal W. Hudson and Matthew Mancini (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1987), 57-70. (This book is based on essays given in the first AMA conference that I attended, in Atlanta, in 1985.)

¹⁸ Erasmo Leiva, "Léon Bloy and Jacques Maritain: *Fratres in Eremo*," in *Understanding*, 71-90, p. 78.

Here was a man heaven-sent for them as a couple: someone whose love of the poor and whose anger at bourgeois Catholics was as great or greater than Jacques'; and whose love of Israel, and his appreciation that God's promises to her remained irrevocable, revealed a love for Raïssa's people as deep as her own. Yet, in both cases, a man whose judgments and inner life were founded upon his burning love of The Poor Jew—Israel's and mankind's dispossessed and crucified Savior—and upon his filial devotion to His mother, who gave Him to the world, and to His Holy Catholic Church: that Jewish Mother who continued to offer Him to us, nowhere more deeply and personally than in the Holy Eucharist, the partaking of which, each morning, fortified him to face the penury of his prophetic life.

What they both came to want, then, was not simply the surety that God existed, but to discover the Word He had *spoken*, that they might be guided surely back to Him. They found themselves having to "test this out," to discover whether the Church's claim was credible. This is philosophy at its limit: looking at the claims of religion "from the outside," to see if they are believable. They found them so, being unable to resist the imperious witness of their godfather,¹⁹ and soon crossed Her threshold, thereby leaving behind forever the light of philosophy alone. From the Spring of 1906, they will walk by the light of Catholic faith and be a devoted son and daughter of the Holy Roman Church.

Raïssa herself emphasizes their mutual love of the Church, and its importance in their conversion: speaking of their experience at baptism, she writes that "the Church kept her promises. And it is *she whom we first loved*. It is through her that we have known Christ" (*WHBFT*, 178, my italics). Their spiritual itinerary followed a classic path: in the

¹⁹ Raïssa quotes the following passage from one of Bloy's first letters to her: "The importance, the DIGNITY of souls is beyond utterance, and your souls, Jacques and Raïssa, are so precious that it took no less than the Incarnation and the agony of God to ransom them—exactly as my own...*Empti estis pretio magno*, you have been bought at a great price. That, my friends, is the key to everything, in the Absolute. We have been ransomed, like most precious slaves, by the ignominy and the willing torture of Him Who made heaven and earth. When we know this, when we see and feel it, we are like Gods, and we do not cease from weeping" (*WHBFT*, 139). This excerpt gives us the power of his prose; but they believed his truth because he lived it.

spirit, through the Son, to the Father. As Jacques later told Jean Cocteau, like many a convert, he was “a man God had turned inside out like a glove.”²⁰ From an 18-year-old who had written his friend Psichari that they had to “destroy the pope and all of Catholicism” (see n. 3), he became the Church’s ardent champion.²¹ In Her he had found his Saviour; from Her hands he daily received Him. His love for Her was irrepressible.²²

If we ask what his first, deepest, and most important intellectual and spiritual formation was, the answer lies in the title of their last book: liturgy and contemplation. This altogether remarkable “little flock” of three souls, all three consecrated to Mary, was formed first on the liturgy, and soon the habit of daily communion. Later, Father Clérissac’s greatest witness, and greatest gift to Jacques, was the recollected and holy way he celebrated the Eucharist. Through Fr. Pègues (another Dominican), their house would soon even have its own chapel. Daily reading of the Missal and *lectio divina* became a staple of their life. And their life was formed in the second place on the saints, upon contemplative mystics and spiritual writers. As Jacques said, “for

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 73.

²¹ Raïssa says that “It was as a man of the Church and with the weapons of the Church militant that this layman confronted the public of the universities” (AIG, 215). Even earlier, in his teaching at the Collège Stanislas, she remarks that “there was something worse than his Thomism: from the first day of class Jacques undertook to begin his classes with prayer—an Ave Maria, followed by an invocation to St. Thomas” (AIG, 200). One thus cannot help but wonder how he would regard today’s Catholic universities!

²² Raïssa writes: “Jacques has not feared her [the Church], he has loved her and given himself to her with complete trust” (AIG, 215). Psichari relates his journeying towards “the Catholic apostolic and Holy Roman Church” as a “dwelling of peace and joy... one could desire nothing more than to live eternally in its shadows,” and Raïssa comments: “All those who with a sincere heart cross the threshold of the Church have this vision at one time or another” (AIG, 131). And, commenting on his vision of the Church as the mystical Jerusalem, she writes, “[although] this inspired, real, and mystical vision might later pale ... we shall never lose—unless by mortal faults of infidelity—the knowledge of the essential goodness of this protecting mother of souls, of this city ‘shining with the glory of God’” (AIG, 132). They never did.

six or seven years, we *devoured* the lives of the saints, books of spirituality and the works of the mystics."²³ Tellingly, Maritain says of them:

[T]he most profound and the most lasting—*definitive*—impressions are those of the years during which the child accomplishes this prodigious task: to conquer the visible world. It is the same for the years of spiritual childhood which follow conversion, when the intelligence throws itself on the world of divine truth.²⁴

We would do well to take him seriously here. He was shaped first and definitively not by philosophy, but by Holy Tradition, by the liturgy and the mystical witness of the saints.²⁵ Nor, of course, should we forget the constant and deep influence of his godfather, as well as his spiritual interests, such as in Anne Catherine Emmerich or Our Lady of La Salette.

I come now to my promised thesis. I have heard it said that Maritain the philosopher turned to matters theological only at the end of his life, when he came to the Little Brothers. This won't do. It is important that we recognize the constancy of his theological reflection. I trust there will be no argument that one who reflects upon the mysteries of the

²³ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 68. Here are some that he had mentioned: St. Ignatius's *Exercises*, St. Francis de Sales's *Treatise on the Love of God*, Denis the Carthusian's commentary on John, the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Ruysbroeck, Angela of Foligno, the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena, and various saints' lives: St. Francis Xavier, St. Catherine of Genoa, [St.] Catherine Labouré, St. Frances of Rome, St. Catherine of Bologna, St. Mary Magdalen of Pazzi, St. Lydwine (*ibid.*, 39-53).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68; my emphasis.

²⁵ In fact, because of the bequest of Pierre Villard, their spiritual life displayed a union and balance between the active and contemplative life. Their life's work was to share the fruits of contemplation with others. This is obvious in the case of Jacques, but it is no less for Raïssa as well, who not only was busy hosting the *Cercles Thomistes*, but whose literary output was considerable. (Indeed, if we are to believe Jacques—and why should we not?—she was involved in *all* his own work.) Likewise, as Jacques is careful to note, Vera's obviously more active apostolate was balanced by an interior life that was deeply contemplative.

Trinity, the Incarnation, or the Church's sacramental and mystical life is properly engaged in a work of sacred theology, is one seeking to understand and/or to defend truths of faith that transcend philosophy. Using such a standard, then, here is only a partial list of his theological works: his manuscript on La Salette (to which he devoted two years); his 23-page Preface to Fr. Clérissac's *The Mystery of the Church*, the third and fourth essays in *Théonas*, articles such as "À Propos de la Question Juive," "Sainte Gertrude," and "Pascal Apologiste," *Prayer and Intelligence*, much of the *Three Reformers* (especially its chapter on Luther), all of his writings on the *Action Française* affair (such as *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*), *St. Thomas Aquinas, Religion and Culture*, the second part of *The Degrees of Knowledge* (over one third of the main text), the second essay of *Du Régime Temporal et de la Liberté*, *Questions de Conscience*, *The Thought of St. Paul*, much of *The Philosophy of History*, *The Mystery of Israel*, *Liturgy and Contemplation*, *Notebooks*, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, *The Church of Christ*, and most of *Untrammelled Approaches*. Regarding that last, it is worth noting that a commentary on Genesis, an essay on love and friendship—two-thirds of which is devoted to the mystical state and to Christian marriage—and a commentary on Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* are listed as being of a "primarily philosophical order."²⁶ One should, I think, argue otherwise.

²⁶ See Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, II (47). He describes (151) his method of reading Genesis as of "any Christian in search of intelligibility" (thus "faith seeking understanding" or theology); he describes his method in his essay on love and friendship as neither that of a theologian nor a philosopher (165), yet he there interweaves reflections on human love with ones on divine charity, the Trinity, and even the Latin sub-diaconate; there is a similar interweaving in his reflections on *Gaudium et Spes*, as is not surprising in a commentary on a Church document. It is of course possible for truths of faith to provide matter fit for philosophical work: that the doctrine of the Trinity furthered philosophical reflection on the category of relation and that of the Incarnation on the idea of subsistence or personality is well attested. Yet Maritain's reflections in many of the above-mentioned works are not confined to such investigations; rather, they not only suppose truths of faith, they also seek to understand them and relate them to human culture. Perhaps an analogy might help make my point here clearer. There are "high" and "low" Christologies, ones that approach the mystery of the Incarnation from the Divine Word, made flesh, or from the human child of Mary guarded by Joseph, a man who was initially identified by those who

You will note that the above list deliberately avoids works such as *Integral Humanism* or *Christian Philosophy*, although these works arguably depend upon a commitment to truths of faith,²⁷ nor does it include works of moral philosophy “adequately considered.”²⁸ Even so, it is clear that Maritain not only is engaged in theological reflection, but is actively publishing works of theology, from the beginning to the end of his career. Nor should we forget his constant preoccupation with the Cercles Thomists. As he indicates, many of the themes he chose for its Sunday discussions were theological: The Trinity, the divine Persons, the state of the first man, Original Sin, The Incarnation, the motive of the Incarnation, the human nature and the human faculties of Christ, On love and the Holy Spirit.²⁹ Maritain obviously was called to be a teacher, and he obviously was engaged in teaching theology at all of these meetings.

I am hardly suggesting that Maritain did not engage in philosophical writing or lacked the *habitus* proper to philosophy! But then, presumably, no one will dispute that Aquinas had the same. His series of commentaries on Aristotle, to which he devoted the labors of his maturity, are notorious for remaining at the level of philosophy; but no

knew him as a rabbi, or a miracle worker, or a prophet, and yet who also revealed by His words and actions that He was “more” than these human titles could capture. Maritain’s theological reflection is, as it were, a “low” Theology, coming at the truths he reflects on very much from the human side: the human culture they impact. Yet it is still theological reflection, just as a “low” Christology is still a Christology.

²⁷ *Integral Humanism* proposes a *Christocentric*, rather than a *Theocentric* ideal. Maritain never explains why the second would not be adequate. Presumably, it is because a theocentric humanism, absent any *de facto* revelation (even if open to this), would not supply the forces sufficient to leaven the secular order. This indicates that a Christocentric humanism is itself insufficiently specific. Maritain would seem, in fact, to be committed to a *Catholic* humanism of the Incarnation. In any case, he appeals here to matters of faith.

²⁸ As the tenor of this paper suggests, it seems to me that any reflection based upon the truth and light of faith is properly *theological*, not philosophical. Philosophy as such (and however qualified) remains an inadequate guide to morals.

²⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 133-85.

one that I know of thinks that Aquinas was anything other than a Catholic theologian doing philosophy.³⁰ I think that, considering his intellectual labor in its entirety, Maritain succeeded in following his intellectual master better than he realized.

Several reasons help explain Maritain's failure to grasp the degree to which his work as a whole is that of a Catholic lay theologian. First, what precedent or role model did he have? He would have had to go back to Boethius: a rather long stretch of time!³¹ Second, he recognized that he had not devoted himself to the exegesis of Scripture or to the Fathers as Aquinas had (even though he often comments on the first and devotes a chapter of the *Degrees of Knowledge* to "Augustinian wisdom"); since he did not systematically study theology's sources, no doubt he did not think of himself as having its *habitus*.³² But this is to think chiefly in terms of dogmatic and moral theology, of the *Summa Theologiae*. It is to overlook that Aquinas's most personal work, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, is also a work of theology. Aquinas is concerned

³⁰ Here is Maritain's own testimony: "There is a Thomist philosophy based upon the sole evidence of reason. Saint Thomas achieved a great philosophical work; he had an extraordinary metaphysical genius. But he is not simply, or primarily, a philosopher, he is essentially a theologian. It is as a theologian, from the summit of knowledge which is architectonic *par excellence*, that he definitively establishes the order of Christian economy" (*St. Thomas Aquinas*, 19). The same could be said of Maritain, and precisely in relation to his most famous work: *The Degrees of Knowledge*.

³¹ Boethius, like Maritain, is chiefly known as a philosopher, and the title of his most famous work fits Maritain's own spirit: *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Likewise, Boethius's project was to translate for his time the treasures of classical philosophy. Yet, despite this philosophical work, he also was a theologian, and a defender of the Catholic faith against Arianism. Indeed, he was likely a martyr for the faith. Of course, there were earlier lay antecedents: Pascal, More, Dante. Yet none of these—mathematician, statesman, or poet—however intelligent and "theologically aware" that they were, possessed a philosophical *habitus*.

³² This is surely behind his later self-description as a "research worker" for theology: as a para-legal does not have all the technical training of a lawyer, so he felt he lacked all that was necessary to be a scholastic theologian. For some "critical" comments on the implications of this self-characterization, see my n. 1.

in this work first and foremost with distinguishing which truths of faith are accessible to reason and which transcend it; in another words, he is interested in a matter to which Maritain constantly devoted considerable energy: the relation of reason to faith, and of philosophy to theology.³³ Aquinas is concerned in the second place to engage in strictly philosophical arguments that demonstrate those truths of faith accessible to reason. This occupies three quarters of the work, just as (we might say) this task likewise occupied three quarters of Maritain's work.³⁴ Aquinas is further interested in showing that the truths of faith that transcend reason are not opposed to it, but even consonant with it: again, a fundamental preoccupation of Maritain. Finally, Aquinas' overarching purpose in this work is to show to his contemporaries that the Catholic faith need not fear all that reason, rightly used, demonstrates: the conclusions of the rational science then being propagated, at the Sorbonne of his day. And this is likewise the overarching purpose for all of Maritain's work.

I take his philosophical work to be preoccupied with three projects. In the realm of Beauty, to articulate a Thomistic aesthetics and—in applying it to art (chiefly painting and poetry)—to show its affinity for what was best in contemporary art. In the realm of Truth, to articulate a Thomistic theory of science and—by integrating contemporary empirical science with Aristotelian principles of natural philosophy and metaphysics—to demonstrate its assimilative capacity and contemporary relevance. Finally, in the realm of the Good, to articulate

³³ It is insufficiently remarked that you cannot decide what truths of faith are accessible to reason on the basis of faith alone, any more than you could decide whether or not modern science can prove the existence of God on the basis of faith alone. In the second case, you need to know science—its methods, limits, and conclusions—to answer the question, and in the first you need to know the same for philosophy. To answer properly the first matter posed by Thomas in the *SCG*, a theologian must also be a philosopher. Nor have Catholic theologians attended well to what Thomas says there (cf. *SCG* III, 147-163). Had they, arguably they would not have become embroiled the way they did in the 20th century debate on the right relation between nature and grace.

³⁴ Unquestionably, Maritain engaged in strictly philosophical work and had a philosophical *habitus*. My point is that this was part of a larger intellectual project: bringing Catholic faith to bear on modern culture.

a contemporary politics—by unifying Thomistic principles of natural law and the demands of the common good with a commitment to democracy, pluralism, and personal rights—to demonstrate the relevance of Thomism for today's social order.³⁵ Now, as with Aquinas's work in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, all of these projects have an apologetic purpose: to show that Catholic faith, and the philosophical wisdom it had traditionally used as a tool, need have nothing to fear from the truth, whatever its secular or non-Catholic provenance may have been. He was seeking to do for his day what Aquinas had sought to do for his own.

Finally, if we ask "who was the audience to whom Aquinas addressed the *Summa Contra Gentiles*?" I believe the answer is this: principally, to his fellow Catholics, and secondarily to all reasonable men of good will. Aquinas well understood that the advent of Aristotle had posed and continued to pose problems for his fellow Catholics:

³⁵ Speaking of contemporary Thomism, Maritain writes that "the task which lies before it is to disengage from the enormous contributions which the experimental sciences have accumulated in the past four centuries a genuine philosophy of nature—as, in quite another sphere, to integrate the artistic treasure of modern times in a philosophy of art and beauty which shall be universal and at the same time comprehend the efforts being made at the present moment" (*St. Thomas Aquinas*, xi). Regarding the second task, he refers the reader to *Art and Scholasticism* (n. 1). He then immediately goes on also to speak of "the great principles of Christian politics (xi)." This is in 1930. He is about to produce *The Degrees of Knowledge*, and *Integral Humanism* is also not far off. If these three books represent his central work, it is clear from this text and from his entire life that he gave priority to the first task; for it was his conviction from his first to his last book that the central crisis of the contemporary world was a crisis of truth, and that this was brought about because modern science had supposedly replaced the Aristotelian philosophy of nature. Since he held that philosophy began with the concrete sensible—that "meta-" physics was "after" physics, supposed it, and then went "beyond" it—to undermine Aristotle's philosophy of nature was to undermine philosophical wisdom at its root. He believed the first task of contemporary Thomism was to assimilate and integrate modern empirical findings and science with the enduring and still true philosophical principles of nature found in Aristotle. Only if the realm of the true could first be defended could its principles then be applied to the realms of beauty and goodness (his other great enterprises).

first, to understand the proper relation between philosophy and the Faith; second, to recognize that the latter had nothing to fear from the former, properly pursued. As a consequence of addressing these fundamental needs, this work likewise could be used to speak to non-Catholics, showing them the degree to which Catholic faith defended truths accessible to reason and—by showing that where it went beyond reason it did not contradict it—inviting them to embrace that realm of truth as well, through faith. One could hardly summarize better, it seems to me, the project of Maritain's whole life.³⁶

Let us recall that the reasons Maritain embraced Thomism were mainly apologetic, as a defense of the faith. No doubt, he thought this philosophy to be true. Yet his deeper reasons, and his deeper passion, derive from his faith. In the first place, it was hard for him to evade the clear call of the Catholic Magisterium to defend Thomas as an antidote to the errors of modern times.³⁷ Second, he saw that divine grace and faith were received by human nature and the vital truths of common sense, and that Thomism, in supporting these truths, gave the faith its necessary support.³⁸ Third, and specifically, he saw the need to defend conceptual knowledge, because he saw that to undermine it would be to undermine Catholic dogma, which relied upon human concepts to state its truths. (This was the reason he felt obliged to abandon Bergson.)³⁹ Lastly, he saw the degree to which modern philosophy had

³⁶ At the Fall of France, Raïssa movingly speaks of having "almost lost the hope which sustained us in our work and in the trials of our life: the hope that Christian love could pervade and transform the world" (WHBFT, vii). This summarizes the goal of their intellectual life and labors. Equally, in the Preface to *St. Thomas Aquinas* (p. ix), he says "it is for the love of their souls that I thomistize"; my emphasis.

³⁷ He makes this very plain in *St. Thomas Aquinas*, chapter 4.

³⁸ As he argued: "Destroy the force of reason and you destroy also the natural foundations themselves by which grace takes on the human being, you erect a divine building, exceedingly weighty, on ground already undermined... What is necessarily required is the mind in its natural vigour, that spontaneous and naturally direct use of the mind which is called common sense" (*St. Thomas Aquinas*, 112-13).

³⁹ Here is his testimony: "It was in 1908—while I was deliberating, in the country around Heidelberg, whether I could reconcile the Bergsonian critique of the concept and the formulas of revealed dogma—that the

undermined confidence in common sense, reason, and objectivity, and consequently the adherence due Catholic doctrine. Thus, even were the Magisterium to have taken a more "ample" view, speaking well of other philosophies, and even though other philosophies supported the patrimony of common sense,⁴⁰ it remained his view that only a philosophy as "high-powered" and technical as Thomism possessed the "philosophical where-with-all" to confront the subjectivism of modern culture. It was this conviction that led to his readiness to defend the "barbarisms" of scholastic terminology involved in Thomism. Now, all of these reasons are basically apologetic: he defended Thomism above all because it was needed to defend the faith.

This leads me to my final point. For whom did Maritain principally write? The answer seems rather obvious: his fellow Frenchmen. France had remained Catholic during the Reformation, yet had compromised

irreducible conflict between the "conceptual" pronouncements of the religious faith which had recently opened my eyes, and the philosophical doctrine for which I had conceived such a passion during my years as a student and to which I was indebted for being freed from materialistic idols, appeared to me as one of those only too certain facts which the soul, once it has begun to admit them, knows immediately it will never escape" (*Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1955], 16).

⁴⁰ He characterizes that patrimony in the following terms: "Does not common sense firmly believe that what is *is*, that the same thing cannot at the same time be predicated as existent and non-existent, that in affirmation or denial, if we speak truly, we are dealing with what is, that whatever happens has a cause, that the sensible world exists, that man has a substantial self, that our wills are free, that the primordial laws of morality are universal, lastly, that the world did not make itself and that its Author is intelligent?" (*St. Thomas Aquinas*, 114). It is important to Catholic Faith that philosophy defend this patrimony, but Thomism is not alone in doing so, for it is defended by both Platonism and Aristotelianism, and their various schools. Thus, he will also say "I am not preaching here for any particular philosophy. I am preaching for any philosophy capable of restoring in man the sense of being and the sense of reason, and the sense of the unconditional value and unshakeable truth of the things which are the treasures of civilized consciousness" ("The Cultural Impact of Empiricism," p. 465). Thus, as a Catholic, he could remain friendly to forms of Augustinianism (as Thomas was to Bonaventure's views), while still preferring Thomism.

her commitment to her Catholic Tradition through adherence to some modern trends of thought (first of the Enlightenment and then of scientific positivism) that undermined it. He was calling Frenchmen back to their true, Catholic, soul. His thought addressed chiefly Catholics. If practicing, it was to remind them of the weapons in the Church's intellectual armory, and to urge them to take them up. He was constantly showing them how they could appropriate the riches of modern culture while adhering to their own tradition. If Catholics "manqué," or those purely secular, it was to build bridges towards them: to show them that a Catholic could embrace what was best in their truth, while offering a deeper and truer vision of faith that surpassed what reason alone could reach, and which it needed.⁴¹ He did not merely philosophize *in* the faith; rather, he was constantly philosophizing *for* the faith.

Much might be said concerning the *significance* of Maritain's vocation for us.⁴² Allow me to conclude with just these two thoughts. First, I think that those who would follow his spirit should be seeking to address their own fellow countrymen, trying to get them in touch with their "better soul:" the religious foundations of the great institutions of their country and the need to recognize this fact, if its patrimony is not to be imperiled. Second, and more importantly, I think he would remind us that our first duty is to our fellow Catholics and to Catholic

⁴¹ I can bear witness to his success in both endeavors, for I read Maritain as I was on my way to becoming a Catholic and repaired to him frequently thereafter. His work was a bridge for me, to move from my own secular standpoint, across the troubled and anxious waters of modern culture, to the Church. And then I found myself returning to him to understand what was the right perspective to take on so many of the questions posed by that culture and that I continued to take seriously, even while adhering to the Faith.

⁴² Among the many other points that could be made, this one seems pertinent: Maritain shows us best what is involved in apologetics. If its reputation has waned, it is because it has been identified with some kind of "manual apologetics," rather than with the lived and vital apologetics to which he gave his life. If contemporary Catholics are again to be ready to "make a defense... of the hope that is in [them]" (1 Peter 3.15), they could hardly do better than to return to Maritain and take his spirit and judgment as their guide.

institutions. The forces in today's culture that lead towards meaninglessness and despair work as powerfully on undergraduates today as they did on those in the Sorbonne a century ago. And the absence of an intellectual tradition firmly opposing them is as palpable on many Catholic campuses today as it was at the Collège Stanislas and the Institut Catholique before his own call for a renewal of Thomism. I think he would again be ready "to break some windows." I think he would call us to that task: to get Catholic institutions of higher learning to recommit themselves seriously to the riches of their Catholic intellectual patrimony and especially to those of Aquinas. After all, who better than we should be called to that task? Ever-faithful godson of Léon Bloy that he was, I think his message to us here today would be a call to arms.