

JACQUES MARITAIN

That the pursuit of intellectual knowledge goes hand in hand with the spiritual life is the key to seeing Maritain as the model for the Catholic thinker .

Not long ago I drove from Strasbourg to the little town of Kolbsheim, so little it wasn't even on my map, and to its little cemetery where Jacques Maritain lies in the same grave as his wife Raissa. The Chateau in Kolbsheim, of which Antoinette Grunelius is chatelaine, houses the Cercle d'études Jacques et Raissa Maritain which is just now bringing to completion its magnificent fifteen volume edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes*. I had come to talk with René Mougel about the launching of the twenty volume Notre Dame edition of the works of Maritain in English and of ways in which the Jacques Maritain Center at Notre Dame could cooperate with the Cercle d'études.

Standing at the grave with René, praying for the repose of the souls of Jacques and his wife, but also asking their support for the work to be undertaken, I marveled at how Raissa's memoirs had made so many of us feel part of their circle of friends. *We Have Been Friends Together* and *Adventures in Grace* were written in war time in New York where they were in exile from occupied France. It is all but impossible to write of one Maritain without writing of the other, but I shall concentrate now on Jacques and subsequently write on Raissa.

Born in Paris in 1882, Jacques Maritain entered the Catholic Church in 1906, along with Raissa, his wife since 1904, and her sister Vera, whose life was intertwined with the Maritains. The writer Leon Bloy, who became their godfather, was instrumental in their conversion, but prior to that the lectures of Henri Bergson, to which Maritain had been led by Charles Peguy, were a disposing cause.

After his conversion, Maritain studied biology for two years in Heidelberg. It was not until 1910 that Jacques published his first article; that very year he began the study of St. Thomas Aquinas, something Raissa had already done. Maritain was to become one of the greatest leaders of the Thomistic Revival envisaged by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, three years before Jacques was born. The encyclical *Pascendi* issued by Pius X set the tone of Maritain's work. One of his early books was entitled *Antimodern*.

The range of Maritain's philosophical interests alone amazes. Like his mentor Thomas Aquinas, he took philosophy to be whatever we can come to know by our natural powers. From the beginning of his career, he was concerned with the relation of science to other branches of philosophy. In his masterpiece, *The Degrees of Wisdom*, he sets forth an ordered panorama of wisdoms, from natural science through metaphysics and theology to that wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Ghost. That the pursuit of intellectual knowledge goes hand in hand with the spiritual life is the key

to seeing Maritain as the model for the Catholic thinker (as his wife may be seen as a model of the Catholic artist.

After World War I, the Maritains inaugurated their Thomistic Study Circles, inviting philosophers, artists, writers, poets, theologians. These gatherings were as much retreats as conferences. In his *Note-Book*, published in 1965, Maritain both described the Thomistic Circle and reproduced its Statutes.

According primacy is the fact that the Church has recommended Thomas Aquinas as our mentor in philosophy and theology. The task of thinker and artist is to make felt in his work that union of faith and reason defended so vigorously by Thomas.

Equally important is the recognition that the divorce of the intellectual or artistic life from prayer will lead to chaos, in the life of the person and in his work.

The growing role of lay people in fulfilling the aims of the Thomistic revival is underscored.

Jacques and Raissa had already expressed these thoughts in a jointly authored book called, in translation, *Prayer and Intelligence*. It was out of a rich spiritual life that the works of Jacques Maritain came. His major lesson for today lies here, I think. There is a danger of putting the life of the mind and imagination on one side and the life of faith on the other. Knowledge and culture are presumed to be secular, spiritually neutral,

while the practice of the faith becomes increasingly emotional and devoid of specific doctrinal content.

This separation is taking place before our eyes in Catholic institutions of higher learning, which seem alarmed at the suggestion that the faith is relevant to what goes on in classroom and lab and not simply in the chapels. The Statutes of the Thomistic Circles point to the danger of that kind of divorce, and in doing so they consciously echo the long tradition of Catholic spirituality.

It is not simply that moral virtues must govern the activities thinkers and artists engage in, the faith is internally important in every activity engaged in by the believer. Thomism for Maritain was a specific content but it was also a name for something incumbent on all. "Woe is me if I should not follow Thomas" is not the slogan of a fan, but a wise man's recognition of that in Thomas which is greater than Thomas.

The convert more than the cradle Catholic recognizes the responsibility to draw others to the faith. Maritain was a legendary convert maker in person, but his writings have functioned in the stories of many conversions. So too his writings on aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, have influenced many writers and artists and poets.

For almost twenty years of his life, the forties and fifties, Maritain was closely associated with this country, residing here during much of

those two decades. In *Reflections on America*, he set down his somewhat uncritical affection for the United States.

When Raissa died in 1960, Jacques left Princeton for France, settling in Toulouse, where he taught novices of the Little Brothers of Jesus. He was into his nineties when he died and toward the end he took the habit of a Little Brother.

Maritain served as France's ambassador to the Vatican for several years after World War II and represented his country when UNESCO was founded. His political philosophy has always kept his followers on their toes. It is only ideologues who are predictable and Maritain was constantly surprising his friends. Initially close to *l'Action Française* he moved to the left with *Integral Humanism* but his later appreciation of America surprised some. But it was his *Peasant of the Garonne* of 1966 that turned Catholic progressives against him. Maritain was the first to discern and to warn against bogus uses of Vatican II.

There are two international Maritain groups, an American Maritain Society, the new uniform edition of his works and the forthcoming Notre Dame edition. His greatest influence still lies ahead as more and more find themselves saying with Raissa, "We have been friends together."