
Non Thematic Paper

The Lesson of Maritain

Augusto Del Noce¹

The title of this talk raises a preliminary question: is there a lesson of Maritain for contemporary Catholic thought? The very easy answer that no one among our century's Catholic intellectuals broke like he did the wall of silence that usually surrounds Catholic thought is not sufficient, and the affirmative answer is less obvious than one might think. Indeed, if we browse the many philosophy books written in Italy by Catholic philosophers over half a century we realize that Maritain's influence has been minimal. So-called spiritualists or personalists have been completely indifferent, and scholars inspired by Thomism also have paid little attention. As for politicians, I will talk about them shortly. This lack of attention reflects the judgment – not explicitly formulated, but implicit – that Maritain should be regarded as a publicist of philosophy rather than a philosopher.

The negative answer is sometimes formulated in a different way: by granting that there was a lesson of Maritain during the twenty years between the two wars, but denying that by now it has been fully assimilated.

¹ Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) was a distinguished Italian philosopher and political thinker. This lecture was given at a symposium in Naples concluding the celebrations of the first centenary of the birth of Jacques Maritain, December 10-11, 1982, and then published in the proceedings (Naples: Laurenziana, 1984). Translation and footnotes by Carlo Lancellotti (City University of New York).

Supposedly, Maritain had the merit of formulating an initial critique of the Catholic integralism prevalent at that time, but the recognition of this function performed by his thought must be accompanied by the judgment that we must go much further. Other theologians and philosophers are fashionable today among Catholics, and there is no need to name them.

My answer is that today Maritain turns out to be a uniquely, and in fact exceptionally, relevant thinker. But he needs to be continued, and can be continued only by pruning some dead branches of his thought. These branches, peculiarly, are those that received the most attention and gave rise to short formulas, so to speak, to proverbs. We thus find ourselves in agreement with the judgment that Maritain himself pronounced: indeed, in his 1966 book *The Peasant of the Garonne* he wrote that the hope, which had been fervent in him in the mid-thirties, “for the advent of a *Christian politics* (corresponding in the practical order to what is a *Christian philosophy* in the speculative order) has been completely frustrated.”² That is to say, he presents himself as an author whose work is still waiting to be discovered. Therefore, assessing the lesson of Maritain is tantamount to discussing whether this judgment is valid or not; and this requires that we examine two premises.

The first is that he was *before anything else* a philosopher of history. He cannot be truly understood unless we read him from this perspective, even if in the fifty volumes of his works he dealt with all aspects of philosophy. A study that did not respect this priority would lose the key to his thought. We must see in him first of all the rigorous continuator of the “antimodern” Catholic philosophy of history which was developed already in the nineteenth century and had its decisive moment in the rebirth of Thomism promoted by Leo XIII. Now, I believe that the most adequate formula to describe our century's history is the one that sees in it the transition into practice of the conceptions that in the nineteenth century had presented themselves as philosophy of history. This is clear about Marxism and Communism, but should be no less clear (in terms of its dependence on the positivist philosophy of history) about the Western idea of radical modernization through science and technology – which, from a Christian perspective, is at least equally disastrous. And what one observes is

²Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, tr. by Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1968), pp. 22-23 – hereafter referred to as *Peasant*.

that the result of both has been the advent of nihilism prophesied by the greatest foe of the philosophy of history, Nietzsche.

The second premise is that from this point of view we recognize an absolute continuity in the development of Maritain's thought, from the first writings to his last. Apparently, it seems that one can distinguish three stages in the development of his thought. The first is marked by a book from 1922, *Antimoderne*, as a program for a general critique of modern philosophy and the modern world, and by the rediscovery of the present value not just of Thomism in its theoretical meaning – as is manifested in *Reflections sur l'intelligence* of 1924 – but also of the historical context Thomism was tied to, which at that time was normally described as reactionary. I am alluding to the well-known work of 1924 on *Three Reformers*, Luther, Descartes and Rousseau. This book is very remarkable, because the affirmation of such context moved from a posture of defense and resistance, to which by then it seemed reduced, to an offensive posture. Thomism – which until then had been confined within seminaries, theological schools and ecclesiastic colleges, and reduced to manualistic form – joined the fray in the battlefield of secular culture. The second period – whose beginning can be identified with the short 1930 book *Religion and Culture*, and which found its best expression in his most successful work, *Integral Humanism* of 1936 – displays features that to a first and superficial impression may seem the opposite. Faithfulness to Thomism remains, and becomes deeper. But the polemical target shifts: it is not so much “modern thought” any more, but rather “closed Thomism.” To “closed Thomism” he opposes the idea that the essential characteristic of Thomism, and what makes it original, is that of being an “open” theological-metaphysical system, capable of integrating all the contributions of modern thought, ranging from science to politics to art. This was also the time when Maritain's prevalent interest was political, or better theological-political. This led him to criticize the reactionary alliance between Catholicism and the Fascist movements, which certainly suited the mental habits of many followers of closed Thomism, and to criticize the view (which was current at that time) that Fascism would open the way to a Catholic restoration by destroying Socialism and liberalism – that is to say, the modern errors, in their political version. Starting in the year when *Integral Humanism* was published, and for about a quarter of a century, Maritain was viewed as the thinker who had promoted the reconciliation

between Catholicism and the modern world, including its boldest expressions; as the leader of a movement which continued in Mounier and then in Teilhard; who, obedient to the spirit rather than the letter of St. Thomas, had Christianized modern thought – recognizing that Christianity transcends all cultures and all civilization – just like the Angelic Doctor had done for Aristotelianism.

Thirty years after *Integral Humanism*, in 1966, there was instead the book that condemned intransigently the new modernism, *The Peasant of the Garonne*. The new post-Conciliar trends had completely distorted Maritain's thought by "kneeling before the world."³ The negativist attitude towards the modern world had been replaced by a huge fear of feeling "outdated" and thus condemned by History with the capital H. Christianity had been re-thought according to forms of thought incompatible with it. "Fear," the will to be up to date, had led people to abandon all religious themes (let alone Catholic or even Christian), starting with original sin. "In large sectors of both clergy and laity (but it is the clergy who set the example), hardly is the word "world" pronounced when a gleam of ecstasy lights up the face of one and all."⁴ The sentence I recalled earlier, about his isolation and his frustration, must be interpreted in this sense. The previous stages of Maritain's thought had somehow predicted, anticipated and criticized the possibility of the inversion from the negativist attitude to what we can call, using today's approximative language, the progressive one. His attempt to avoid the danger of an inversion from one mistake to another which was much worse had gone completely unheeded.

This brings us back to consider the continuity I already mentioned. The three books *Antimoderne*, *Integral Humanism* and *The Peasant of the Garonne* are in fact, viewed in depth, three stages of one fundamental work. If the word "modern" is taken to mean immanentism, negation of transcendence, secularization, demythologization etc., we can say that Maritain's whole work was aimed at defining the exact sense of "Catholic antimodernism," separating it from the incrustations and deformations which are the reason why so often the religious aspect became subordinate to the political aspect; or why radically antimodernist positions turn upside down so easily into modernism (think of

³ *Ibid.*, 53-58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Lamennais), or why the most radical affirmations of both modernism and antimodernism alternate inextricably in the same authors (in Italy, think of Gioberti or Buonaiuti).

In order to see this continuity, we only have to refer to what was said long ago in the preface to *Antimoderne*: "If we are *antimodern* it is certainly not out of personal taste, it is because the modern outcome of the anti-Christian revolution forces us by its spirit, because it makes opposition to the human heritage its own specification, because it hates and despises the past, and adores itself, and because we hate and despise this hate and this contempt and this spiritual impurity; but if it is a matter of saving and assimilating all the riches that have been accumulated in the modern times, and of loving the effort of those who seek, and of desiring acts of renewal, then there is nothing we desire so much as to be *ultramodern*."⁵ Therefore, to the idea of the historicity of truth one can only oppose that of eternal truth, transcending time, capable of being specified in analogous, but not identical, ways depending on various historical situations. We thus touch upon that fundamental idea of analogy which allows us to understand the meaning of *Integral Humanism*, as a work whose teaching is not yet exhausted today. Too often people have read this book in terms of a political act; supposedly, Maritain intended to establish the conditions for Catholics to participate in the anti-Fascist unity, and to do so he fell back on some sort of Catholic minimalism founded on the historical ideal of a Christian profane conception of temporal realities, such that it would be possible to stipulate the conditions for a political program of collaboration with the secular world.

This is the most common interpretation. Starting from it, one arrives at the idea that the endpoint of Maritain's political philosophy is the collaboration in drafting a democratic charter at the UN containing ethical-political principles with which all could agree, regardless of their metaphysical and religious convictions. All could agree because of their insignificance, as was later demonstrated.

In actuality, this political element is there, but is subordinate. Let us say that it was the historical occasion for a thinker who always lived in contact with

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes, 1922), p. 22.

historical reality, for a philosophical thought that transcends the historical circumstances that served as its stimulus.

Let us try, then, to nail down the essential theoretical point of this work. I believe it can only be expressed as follows: it is the liberation of the Catholic philosophy of history from the “archaeological utopia,” which took shape as opposition of medieval society to modern society, or as a romantic dream to restore the *Sacrum Imperium*. Not in the sense that medieval society realized perfectly Christian moral and political principles – something which, after all, no reactionary ever claimed – but in the sense that it was permeated by a historical ideal that had eternal value. Now, when Maritain distinguishes the medieval historical ideal as “sacral Christian conception of temporal realities” from that of a new Christendom as “profane Christian conception,” he does not intend at all to propose a “less religious” model of new Christendom compared to the past, nor a “form of separatism” between the spiritual and the temporal. He is saying that the transcendence of Christianity with respect to all civilizations rules out every *univocal conception* of the Christian temporal order. Moreover, as we saw already, Maritain’s “antimodern” is a polemical stance, and it always was, against the interpretation that affirms an irreversible course of a historical process such that it is no longer possible to speak of the transcendent and the supernatural – at that time “after Kant and after Hegel” and today “after Marx, neo-Positivism, the philosophy of language, psychoanalysis.” This, and nothing else. Already in 1922, more clearly in subsequent years, his *antimodern* did not deny that in the post-medieval centuries positive principles emerged, which helped make explicit affirmations already virtually included in the tradition. The first and essential one, verified in *Integral Humanism*, is the attention to the subjective aspect of the apprehension of truth, and thus to freedom; to the form in which truth is welcomed as such. However, in Maritain’s judgment these positive principles are at risk of degenerating catastrophically if they are interpreted according to the immanentism of modern philosophy, giving rise to the *-isms* – subjectivism, libertarianism and so on – which ultimately all degenerate into nihilism.

This sets the conditions for a correct reading of *Integral Humanism*. I think it can be expressed as follows. The problem History imposes on us today is the salvation of Humanism, of the *person*, or actually of every *person* (hence the “personalistic” sense he attributes to democracy, a definition that cannot be

reduced to any other). Due to the novelty of the problem, the concrete historical ideal of the profane Christian conception of temporal realities “will no longer be that of God’s *sacred empire* over all things, but the idea of the *holy freedom* of the creature whom grace unites to God,”⁶ in the words that summarize the entire meaning of the book. According to Maritain, humanism – in the sense of affirming “human rights” themselves – cannot survive without a Christian reawakening.

We can then gauge how much politicians botched – excuse this word – Maritain’s thought. He himself points it out in the passage I already recalled, in which he speaks of his hope being completely unsuccessful. In the same place he affirms his estrangement from the political parties that are said to be Christian “most of which are primarily combinations of electoral interests.”⁷ And yet, it is also true that politicians did use his words, even sincerely, and so the misunderstanding must be cleared up: when Maritain talks about the “medieval sacral historical ideal” and the “profane historical ideal of modern Christendom,” his emphasis is on the Christian aspect, and the differences between the two ideals must be understood starting from the principle of analogy as I already said, which is a point that can never be stressed enough. Hence, it is not a matter of mere substitution, and even less of one [ideal] surpassing the other, in the sense that the second is more mature than the first. When, instead, the emphasis falls on the profane aspect, what happens – and did usually happen – is that the thesis of *Integral Humanism* will be understood as a proposal that Catholics subscribe to an agnostic type of democracy, indifferent to values of every kind, and actually affirming the idea that they are all relative. This interpretation is then presented as a promotion of Catholics, who until now have been minors with respect to history, to the “adult” state. Activating this process is supposed to be the task of Christian Democracy. Thus, Maritain’s theoretical work consisted in leading Catholics to embrace a relativistic democracy, of the kind that has Kelsen as its theoretician! If only for the sake of good taste, since we are discussing an author of high stylistic quality like Maritain, I will not linger on this phraseology. But we all know that it is common and defines a certain wing of the Christian Democratic party.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, tr. by Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1968), p. 163.

⁷ Maritain, *Peasant*, p. 22.

Therefore, in *The Peasant of the Garonne* Maritain rejected two approaches to Catholic culture and politics: the one he will call Blochian – because of the peculiar fascination that Bloch's thought has exercised on a certain segment of Catholic thought, and I daresay even more on clerics than lay people – and the separatist one. *Distinguish to Unite*⁸ is the title of his major work of theoretical philosophy. The same thesis can be applied also to the relationship between religion and politics.

However, the recognition that his thought underwent deviations in authors who refer to him – and that they began already (as is even said in *The Peasant of the Garonne*) in Mounier, a writer whose intellectual dignity and nobility of feeling cannot be denied – implies that the reasons are somehow already present in his work: in an inadequate interpretation of contemporary history and, consequently, in a hope for a Christian reawakening which, in the form it took, could only be disappointed. In order to explain it, let us not forget that Maritain's activity climaxed in the Thirties, and therefore his work could not escape the common atmosphere that defined them. Using a word worn out by abuse but for which there are no alternatives, it is called "Eurocentric." At that time Europe was apparently still on the world's front stage. In the judgment of that time, one of the peripheral powers, Russia, represented the involution of Socialism into an Asiatic type of despotism. The other, America, seemed to fall within the European ideal sphere. Now, in this center of the world the advance of the Fascist movements seemed irresistible, and somehow facilitated by the "archaeological utopia" of the traditional Catholic philosophy of history. And in fact, although there was no real Catholic Fascism, we must acknowledge that many people thought that Fascism, by defeating the traditional political adversaries of Catholicism, was establishing – in unwitting obedience to the plans of Providence – the conditions for a theocratic restoration, in the sense of the ideal of medieval Christianity viewed as the absolute Christian ideal.

Here, too, we see the consistency of Maritain's antimodernism. Strangely, Catholic medievalism was subordinate, albeit in opposition, to some elements of modernity in the secularist sense that I mentioned earlier. I mean to say that the hope for a Catholic restoration through Fascism – an attitude that today young people find hard to understand, but whose reality can be verified just by

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, tr. under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

reading some writings and speeches by Fr. Gemelli⁹ – could not help going hand in hand with a revival of that form of Machiavellianism *ad majorem Dei gloriam* which had characterized the Baroque age, and which Maritain criticized, besides in *Integral Humanism*, in an essay written during the war about the end of Machiavellianism.¹⁰ Certainly, *Integral Humanism* represents the definitive critique of this Catholic philo-Fascism. Conversely, the aspect where it manifests its illusion is in its judgment about the ideal principles that inspired other anti-Fascist forces. This is true about Communism, although Maritain observes the primary and essential role of atheism in Marx's philosophy, and although his judgment about its ethical and political effects becomes more and more rigorous as the years go by. Nevertheless, he keeps viewing it as "the last Christian heresy" (making a mistake, also at the level of historical interpretation), and thus as somehow redeemable, while supposedly the Fascisms are a form of neo-Paganism, even when they present themselves as defenders of the faith. To him, whereas both Communism and Fascism are forms of totalitarianism, the former represents the progressive version, the latter the reactionary one. Therefore, Fascisms are the final, irrationalist form of bourgeois reaction, which enfolds within itself all reactionary forms. By stating these propositions, Maritain moved in the direction of the Enlightened and Communist interpretations of contemporary history, as the final struggle between progress and reaction; and towards the interpretation of the anti-Fascist unity, as was realized during the second world war, not as unity *de facto*, against a common enemy, but somehow as an ideal unity – even though he took certain precautions which were forgotten by many of his readers. Thus, in a short book of 1943, *Christianity and Democracy*,¹¹ speaking of Christianity as a historical energy at work in the world, he pointed out that in this respect it can also operate through non-Christians like for example "rationalists who proclaimed in France the rights of man and of the citizen ... [or] atheistic Communists who abolished in Russia the absolutism of private profit."¹² In short, he thought that the ideal leadership of the laic-Catholic-Communist

⁹ Fr. Agostino Gemelli OFM (1878-1959) was a prominent Italian friar and psychologist, and the founder and first rector of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, "The End of Machiavellianism" in *Review of Politics* 4, no. 1 (1942): pp. 1-33.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, tr. by Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22 [slightly modified translation to match Del Noce's Italian].

alliance would go to Catholic thought, which would be able to save the positive aspects of both liberalism and Socialism, separating them from the aspects that gave origin, respectively, to bourgeois hegemony and totalitarianism.

Certainly, these observations should be nuanced and specified more exactly, if the time given to me were that of a course and not one hour; and I already see that I abused it. Maritain correctly emphasized, as crucial, that the most urgent task of Catholic thought is the construction of a philosophy of modern and contemporary history. Now, contemporary history can be read in two ways, either as the process of a revolution – taking the term in a positive sense – or as the decomposition of the myth of the new world which, building upon remote Joachimite traces, organized itself especially in the philosophies of history of the nineteenth century. If one sticks to the first interpretation, the modernistic deviations criticized in *The Peasant of the Garonne* are inevitable: undoubtedly, a survey of post-conciliar theologies would show their profane origins, which can be traced back to this judgment about recent history. The logic of Maritain's thought would lead to the interpretation in the sense of decomposition of the myth of the new world; however, we must recognize that he is not clear on this point, and that truly some of his sentences lend themselves to be interpreted as a concession to the revolutionary interpretation. It is not by chance that his "communitarian personalism" was immediately translated into Mounier's "personalistic and communitarian revolution," a work¹³ that actually influenced Catholics who were young in the Forties and Fifties more than *Integral Humanism* did.

November 18 of this year was the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth. The upshot of my intervention is that these were not the usual hundred-year celebrations which resemble obituaries. Their conclusion is that his work is not out of date, and does not bear the marks of time (which today runs particularly fast), but that it must be continued. This is the same as saying that the best and most fruitful significance of his work is still waiting to be brought out to light.

¹³ Emmanuel Mounier, *Révolution personnaliste et communautaire* (Paris, Éditions Montaigne, 1935).

Book Review
