



Recollections of Three Thinkers: Adler, Simon, and Maritain

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Part 3 of 3

III. Jacques Maritain

Maritain and Simon appeared on the North American scene during a period when European scholars were effecting not an invasion but an incursion upon our shores. During the tumultuous Thirties and the war-torn Forties of this century, scholars and artists from a number of European countries, experts in various fields of higher learning and in various arts, were fleeing from the dictatorships of the Old World. Some of these men and women settled in the USA and Canada permanently; some remained for longer or shorter periods. Everyone in his or her way made an important contribution to the maturation of American cultural life. North American Catholic Scholars and intellectuals were ready for such an “incursion,” as I call it, and were disposed to welcome the newcomers with admiration and affection. Among the latter were Allers, Bohner, Mueller, von Hildebrand, and a number of others. Of course, Gilson and Maritain came as lecturers; Simon became a regular professor at Notre Dame. These were the three who influenced me most deeply at this intellectually impressionable time of my life.

As is well known, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain were instrumental in the establishment of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, Canada. Gilson was undoubtedly one of the founders of the Institute and a permanent force in it until his demise. (The authoritative work on Gilson by Lawrence K. Shook should be mentioned here.) A number of scholars, alumni and others, some to become distinguished in their own right, were deeply influenced by the teachings of this school. There were other important Catholic centers of higher

learning (among them the Catholic University of America). Maritain lectured at Notre Dame; Simon, as mentioned, taught there. It is, then, against this background that we are able to appreciate more completely the impact of Maritain and Simon upon American Catholic scholarly life as well as their significant roles in regard to the so-called secular or “non-denominational” university world. As further background, it should be noted that in Europe, as Pope Pius XI had declared sorrowfully, the working classes were being lost to the Church. And the intellectual “elite” were in many instances disaffected. Europe excelled in outstanding scholars but conditions were, it seemed, more propitious for their labors in North America.

Every generation, even if it faces extraordinarily difficult times, such as severe depression or warfare, looks upon itself as ready for the challenges confronting it. Whether it be mere luck or, as some fervently believe, Divine Providence that brings one to the fateful crossroads, every youthful generation stands at the ready. And so with those of my own age: I felt, without being too conscious of these matters at the time, blessed by the opportunity I had to derive inspiration and learning from our European confreres and masters .

In 1933, Jacques Maritain crossed the Atlantic Ocean for the first time in order to give lectures in North America. His association with the New World was to last, with only a few interruptions, for over thirty years. The Maritains dwelt in the United States for seventeen of these years, including the period of World War II.

Jacques Maritain means so much to all of us that you appreciate how difficult it is to speak of him in a few words. As for myself, I can hardly refrain from a kind of adolescent fervor when I refer to his inspiration in my youthful years and to his continuing presence as revered master in my later ones.

In these recollections, I focus upon his books, his lectures, our meetings, and our friendship. With a kind of adolescent fervor, I represent books, lectures, “encounters,” and personal associations as winged messengers, as golden moments, as Beautiful Moments, and as Love-in-Christ. I employ poetic language as I am not writing a scholarly study, but trying to recapture the livingness of these relationships—particularly as they were experienced in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

There are notes in my possession, as already pointed out with respect to Adler and Simon, affording valuable information on my personal reading of Maritain’s books. The writings of Maritain, like *magical winged messengers*, introduced me to the mystery of being and the wonders of the human being as illuminated by one I came to revere as the Prophet Philosopher. (I hasten to add that my first philosophy professor at Fordham University [1933-34] paved the way for this intellectual ad venture and gave me my first soaring experience in philosophy.) My notes indicate that I acquired first of all his *Petite logique*, in 1933. Books arrived regularly from the *Librarie du Cerf* in Paris, and I continued to add to our collection. To go beyond the scope of the present essay, I gathered Maritain’s books in Spanish and Portuguese on trips to South America, beginning in the late Sixties and on into the Seventies and Eighties; Rome was fertile soil for picking up his works in Italian. My notes indicate further that I began my first reading in Maritain during 1934 and 1935, undergraduate years at Saint Louis University. By 1936-37, I was reading *Les degres du savoir* in the original and presented a lecture and a paper on its themes in a graduate course at the same institution. I return later to the

subject of reading the books of Maritain and the influence they had upon me.

Maritain delivered a lecture at Marquette University in 1941, and this was the first one of his I ever attended and the first time I saw him. (There was a brief meeting in a group situation.) In 1949 and 1950, I was the principal figure in organizing and chairing two lectures he gave on contemplation and the spiritual life in Milwaukee. In the 1950s, I drove frequently to South Bend (a distance round-trip of almost 400 miles) and to Chicago to hear him lecture at the University of Notre Dame and at the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago. (So great was the enthusiasm for the leaders of “the revival,” *le renouveau catholique*, that a group of professors and students from Marquette University filled several cars on a trip to the University of Chicago just to hear the great Anglo-Catholic poet and critic T.S. Eliot.)

There were meetings with Maritain at lectures, receptions, and similar occasions in a variety of places, but the first personal meeting, or what I would call *un rencontre*, was in 1949, at his home on Linden Lane in Princeton, close to the university, where he was a professor. I took notes of our conversation. Among other things, I recall his urging upon young American Catholic scholars the importance of studying and evaluating the leading American philosophers of the day. In a similar vein, around the same time, Etienne Gilson was propounding the same message to Catholic philosophers at a convention of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in Cleveland in the early 1950s. He himself was a recognized authority on French philosophy, particularly that of the “Founder of Modern Philosophy,” Rene Descartes.

In 1952-54, I studied Contemporary French Philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium on a Fulbright Award and then at the Sorbonne in France. Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon willingly wrote letters of recommendation for me.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when I was teaching at Villanova University in the Philadelphia area, I visited Maritain at Princeton on many occasions. It was during this period, I would say, that we became friends. I still venerated him as a Master, but with extraordinary *gentillesse* he put me at ease.

The last encounter in the United States was upon the occasion of his last visit to this country in 1966. Idella and I drove from Boston, where we were teaching at Boston College, to see him in Princeton. It was a wintry day. I recall he insisted on taking us to dinner at a French restaurant near Princeton University. He proved to be a charming host.

In meetings with Maritain, one was struck by his attentiveness to his interlocutor. He listened with care to your thoughts. In the manner of the truly great who are often truly humble, he looked upon you as though you were the most important person in the world. He concentrated upon you as an individual person present with him and gave no sign of thinking of his next appointment. During this period, and even more so later on in his life, Maritain suffered bouts of extreme fatigue and even of illness, and yet remained affable and self-giving to friends and visitors.

Of his attentiveness and courtesy I have already spoken and of these qualities and of his humility and humanity I received over the years many confirmations. I recall that one of my students at Villanova University who came from Princeton remembered as a child in a Catholic grade school seeing this elderly gentleman with a scarf closely wound around his neck at the parish Mass every

morning. His simplicity and devotedness deeply impressed the youngster, who dimly remembered the old gentleman referred to as a great professor or philosopher. I recall his considerateness, his grave attention to young students at a Marquette University reception, while *very important people* waited their turn to greet him.

On one occasion, my father and I visited the Maritains at Princeton. We had traveled from northeastern Jersey that day. My father, an average intelligent American of Irish descent (who did not refer to himself as an hyphenated American but was proud to call himself simply an American), was, as I realized, a kind of “specimen” for the Maritains and Raissa’s sister, Vera. They usually consorted with academic or scholarly types, “rarefied beings.” Vera said, “Il est formidable!” We sat at tea in the small dining room decorated with the lovely work of the Maritains’ artist-friend, Andre Girard, five of us: Jacques and Raissa Maritain, Vera Oumancoff, my father, and I. With the utmost courtesy, they listened to my father’s ideas, and his helpful suggestions about practical problems facing the Maritains were gratefully received. Later, my father always referred to the Maritains with great respect as “very fine people.”

At Toulouse in Southern France not far from the Pyrenees at the Community of the Little Brothers of which he was already a professed member, my final *rencontre* or “encounter” with Jacques took place in January, 1973. It was to be only a few months before his passing away in April of that year. Jacques was occupying a cottage or hut in the compound. I recall that the Little Brother who escorted me to his door warned me, “Il fait tres chaud dedans.” (“It’s very hot in there.”) It was indeed extremely warm, and Jacques was sitting there with his scarf, as was habitual with him, around his neck. He seemed pleased to see me and pressed me to stay, when I prepared to leave after a while, not wishing to fatigue him. He was ninety years of age and told me that the doctor had informed him that he was in good shape for a man of his age. He added simply, “I know that at my age I can go at any time.” He added something which astounded me at the time, although it does not now that I have attained the proverbial three-score-and-ten. He said that even a lifetime of study and writing seemed little or nothing in comparison to the task to be accomplished in philosophy. He had simply prepared the way, he was still a tyro, another lifetime would be required to develop the thoughts as they matured. He was not thinking only of himself; he was thinking of Saint Thomas and of his own twentieth-century compeers. Their work was merely in a preparatory stage; it clamored for completion. On another theme, Maritain remarked how important it was to follow faithfully the teachings of the Holy Father. It was unwise to rely too much on the Bishops, at least many of those in France.

Maritain was grateful for the personal message I brought him from Pope Paul VI, whom he had known for many years and with whom he was closely associated during the time he was French Ambassador to the Holy See and resided in Rome (1945-48). In his chamber, there were two photographs: one of the Pope and the other of his wife, Raissa. He spoke of his beloved departed partner as though she were present she was verily to him a presence and of his longing to be reunited with her. The ninety year-old’s voice broke as he spoke of her with unswerving youthful love.

Shortly before I visited Jacques in Toulouse, my associate in foundation work and I had the special privilege of a very private audience with Pope Paul VI at the Vatican. Five persons were present: the Holy Father, his interpreter, an

American priest of Italian descent, my associate, and I. The conversation, if that is the appropriate word, turned to Maritain, and the Pope's eyes brightened. He spoke warmly of the one he had revered and still regarded as a Master from the time he was a young priest. He even mentioned that he had long ago translated *Three Reformers* into Italian. At one point, the Holy Father paused, and reflecting on his friend Jacques Maritain for a moment, he said simply: "*E un santo*" Later, on the occasion of Jacques' death, Pope Paul VI referred to him as the master of those who know and love.

I mention this audience, even though it is beyond the period that mainly concerns me here, to illustrate the regard and affection in which Maritain was held to the end of his days. I do not know whether I am more impressed by the tribute paid him by the Pope himself, or the veneration he aroused in young people, even children. In a way, each regard speaks volumes, and one is incommensurable with the other.

There is a sheaf of correspondence between Jacques and the two of us, Idella and me. It is treasured, even though it may not be very significant in itself. (I do hold that every letter, particularly from a famous person and no matter how brief it may be, sheds light upon or brings out a new aspect of the personality.) As time went on, the correspondence became more friendly and Jacques Maritain would conclude by saying, sometimes in French, sometimes in English, "with affection and love, your old Jacques" or "votre vieux Jacques." Even though Maritain was old at the time he signed himself thus, I believe the connotation of *vieux* is not merely "old" but implies a sort of comradeship, as when one Frenchman calls another, "*mon vieux*."

Let me return to the topic of reading Maritain. In my undergraduate years at Saint Louis University (1934-36), I was busily reading *The Angelic Doctor* and wrote a study on Saint Thomas Aquinas, depending upon Maritain, for the university's literary magazine, *The Fleur-de-Lis*. I have already mentioned the report and paper I gave on *Les degres du savoir*. The notes on my readings contain numerous references to reading Maritain's work in the 1940s and 1950s and there are comments either short or lengthy on these books and articles. In my teaching years at Marquette University (1939-58), I was strongly influenced by Etienne Gilson in my approach to the history of philosophy, and, with him as a guide, I strove to present it as a *philosophical* history, not a mere recital of names and themes. However, I continued to study and to derive much from the writings of Maritain, and his work was of great aid to me in my courses in what was then called "systematic philosophy." In subsequent years, at Boston College and other universities, I gave graduate courses in "Contemporary Thomism" with much attention devoted to Maritain, and, on one occasion at least, I gave a course on *The Degrees of Knowledge*.

Permit me to mention my meditative reading and rereading of Maritain in the 1980s, even though those years go far beyond the period upon which I am focusing. No longer a full-time philosophy professor, though I did lecture occasionally, I began in 1981 to read something by Maritain every day, along with the Jerusalem Bible (often in French) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (in the Latin). No longer bound to prepare lectures or to write scholarly articles (and the pressure to accomplish these tasks was intense, as many of you know; I would hesitate to record how many undergraduate and graduate courses I taught in my active years), I was

enabled to read Maritain (as well as Saint Thomas) slowly and reflectively. Sometimes I would select a study more or less at random; for a long while, I proceeded methodically through the first volume of Henri Bars' two volume edition of the *Oeuvres*, but always in a leisurely fashion. Recently, I began moving through the *Oeuvres complètes*, of which a number of volumes have already been published. Freed, as I have said, from the demands of teaching, I was able to enjoy the words of Maritain as never before. Insights into the mystery of being and of man as he expounded them came to me as never before. I had the privilege of reading "pages" and not "texts." I was, in short, able to savor the mind-and-thought of Maritain and came to revere him all the more as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. And this appreciation was aroused after a period (the last decade or so) of my teaching career in which I had read widely and deeply in the contemporary philosopher, and in the modern classics, Descartes, Hegel, and the rest.

I mention all this because it shows how the reading of Maritain is a lifelong pursuit and it illustrates Simon's remark that Maritain is inexhaustible. I would like to add that even in the winter of his long span of years, Jacques Maritain has given us pages glowing with springlike freshness.

In the part of this essay devoted to Simon, I quoted him as saying in effect that he emphasized "distinguishing" while Maritain put stress on "writing" or "synthesizing." As I have already noted, the Maritain who was at his best in *synthesizing* could *distinguish* and present a closely reasoned piece of exposition.

His habit of synthesizing sometimes led to extraordinary compactness. In a paragraph-long sentence there would be included a parenthesis a lengthy parenthesis in a sentence perhaps overlong and yet the parenthesis was well worth the reading as it often contained an unforgettable insight!

Maritain disliked labels or labeling anyone's philosophy, including his own. Above all, he rejected the term "Neo-Thomism." He recognized that it was important for thinkers of other schools to know where you stood in philosophy, and therefore he accepted "Thomism" and "Christian philosophy" as identifying his own philosophy. He was never altogether *comfortable* with these appellations. In *The Peasant of the Garonne* he employs his coinage "ontosophy." He considers that "philosophy" and "philosopher" are somewhat ambivalent terms and takes delight in opposing "ontosophers" to "ideosophers." (There are giants in modern times whom he respects and from whom he says we can learn much and who are in his judgment not real philosophers but rather ideosophers.)

Maritain is *philosopher* in the strictest sense: he knows superlatively how to philosophize his way to definitive conclusions with rigor, clarity, and exactitude. I do believe and maintain that his philosophy comprehends a special dimensionality, expanding the frontiers of what he insisted was an autonomous discipline. How should we denominate his distinctive philosophy? Dare we label it? One of Maritain's favored disciples, Little Brother of Jesus Heinz Schmitz, called it "theo-philosophy." There is some merit in this somewhat awkward appellation. However, there is another I prefer.

Upon considering the stature, stance, and status of Jacques Maritain, and realizing the risk involved that his standing as a philosopher might be overshadowed, I have ventured to call him the *Prophet-Philosopher*. I use *prohetic* not in the full or rather specific religious sense, but as a term pertaining primarily to the temporal order, that is, to the social-economic political-cultural *complexus*, and especially where it borders upon or is illuminated and inspired by the "religious

dimension.” In a word, prophecy as pertaining to the temporal, but brightened and enlightened by Revelation.

Perhaps Maritain himself would consider this treatment of his work as much too serious. In the letter he wrote to the Little Brothers of Jesus announcing his acceptance as one of them by the Congregation, he suggests half-playfully that perhaps his name should be “Don Quixoto of Saint Thomas.” There is something of Leon Bloy in Maritain the elder as well as Maritain the younger. When he jokes about himself, his remarks should be taken, if not too seriously, at least as revelatory of the man’s humble view of himself .

In philosophy, one is a Master when free from tutelage and free and capable of philosophizing in one’s own person. Even if one is mature enough intellectually to call oneself a philosopher, or perhaps one should say “ontosopher,” one can without inconsistency look upon one’s teacher as the Master. Maritain, like Simon and Adler, is the philosopher’s philosopher. I revere him alongside Thomas Aquinas as my Master and know I can continue to learn more and more from the inexhaustible treasure-trove of his thought.

For these reasons, I consider Jacques Maritain the Synthesizer and Prophetic Voice of our age.

The idea of attempting to encompass three thinkers of the stature of Adler, Simon, and Maritain in one presentation is something I half-regret. However, it is one thing to attempt an evaluation of their philosophy, as I have said, another to evoke recollections for the value they have in bringing out the impact concretely upon the younger generation of the 1930s to the 1950s. Along with significant differences in style, in perspective, and (from a certain point of view) even in their very conception of philosophy or, rather, in the dimensions it assumes in their intellectualizing about it, I came to recognize that there is something common in their search for reality and in their defense of the classical Tradition. Each of these philosophers has championed in his own distinctive way the Great Tradition and has sought to restore wisdom to its rightful role. In my recollection and present view, Adler is the thinker, the teacher-encyclopedist who exhorts and exhibits, particularly to those who are not specialists in scholarship, fundamental mind-saving truths. Simon is the thinker, the teacher-argumentator, whose discourse in rigorous and careful procedure leads minds to definitive conclusions about reality. Maritain is the thinker, the teacher-as-prophetic utterer, who leads persons by the hand to a realm beyond the ordinary confines of life, where dwells Wisdom interfused with Charity.

As philosophers, each of these thinkers draws near the mystery of reality and illumines it for every one of us who has a philosophical bent. Adler is the one who approaches reality through the keys of the Great Basic Books and the Great Basic Ideas they contain. Simon is the one who approaches the mystery of reality by utilizing deductive and inductive argumentation. Maritain is the person who approaches the mystery of reality by delving into its depths and scaling its heights and delivering it throbbing and existential to us.

Vivid in my recollections undimmed by time are these philosophical friends. In rather theoretical terms, I have ventured to name them as follows: Adler is the Demonstrator and Remonstrator, Simon is the Expositor and Argumentator, and Maritain is the Synthesizer and Illuminator



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