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## Bernanos, Claudel, Mauriac and Maritain: a quartet not always full of Christian charity 'A Catholic has no allies. He only has brothers': letters shed light on four leading French writers

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**“A Catholic has no allies: He only has brothers.”<sup>1</sup>**

The publication by the French Dominican publisher Cerf of the epistolary correspondence between four of France’s best known Catholic intellectuals and writers, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac and Jacques Maritain, reveals serious rifts and, at times, a definite lack of Christian charity in the sentiments they shared with one another. The correspondence centres on Maritain’s exchanges with the other three, which is most probably due to the fact that he and his wife Raïssa were seriously revered and much consulted figures in cultural circles in France at the time when the other writers were at the peak of their powers.

Jacques Maritain was a professional academic – a philosopher of note who became a committed Thomist (a supporter of the writings of Thomas Aquinas) – and his wife a Jewish Russian émigrée whom he met when they were both studying at the Sorbonne. He was raised in a liberal Protestant family and she as a Jew, but they were both dissatisfied with the religion of their youth and set about discovering a different spiritual path. After experimenting with various religious traditions, they converted to Catholicism in 1906. Their house in Meudon on the outskirts of Paris attracted visitors from artistic, cultural, diplomatic and religious circles and was looked on as a sanctuary by some, as a melting pot of ideas by others. The tone and rhythm of Meudon revolved around Catholicism, a fact that undoubtedly played a role in Jacques’ appointment as French Ambassador to the Holy See during the highly charged post-World War II years, from 1945-1948. Most commentators agree that Maritain did much of the groundwork that would ultimately shape the social documents of that seismic event in the evolution of the Catholic Church, Vatican II.

When reading through this very interesting correspondence, what is most striking is the seriousness with which the four men took their Catholic faith. They were far from *ad idem* when it came to which brand of Catholicism they espoused; Maritain and Mauriac being more liberal, Claudel and Bernanos being traditionalists with a strong attachment to monarchy and, occasionally, a tendency towards anti-Semitism. Such allegiances naturally caused rows and angry words. For example, when Charles Maurras’s right-wing Catholic publication, *Action Française*, was condemned by the Vatican, Claudel in particular was enraged and railed at Maritain about how the Vatican could have allowed such a thing. Then there was the thorny issue of the Spanish Civil War, which pitted Franco against the Republicans, whom many suspected as being crypto-Marxists – the four had somewhat differing views when it came to Franco, being attracted on the one hand to his strong Catholic beliefs while distrusting his fascist tendencies. These matters and others could cause a sharp rise in temperature and sometimes provoked bitter differences of opinion. In most cases, however, the correspondents were aware that their Catholic faith topped any divergences they may have had on other, less important issues.

Many of the letters are not available for various reasons, which means that readers are forced at times to fill in the blanks, but the excellent notes supplied by the editors, one of whom, Michel Bressolette, unfortunately died before the project saw the light of day, allow us to understand the context of what was really at issue. In this country, we know how religion can be used for political and material ends and so the subtitle of this book, “*un catholique n’a pas d’alliés*” (a Catholic has no allies), taken from a letter that Claudel wrote to Mauriac, reveals an unwillingness to conform in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the recently published *Correspondance Maritain, Mauriac, Claudel, Bernanos: Un catholique n’a pas d’alliés*, edited by Henri Quantin and Michel Bressolette (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 2018).

matters of faith, and a realisation that Catholicism is ultimately about making informed personal choices independently of others' views. In his revealing Introduction, Henri Quantin explains the divergence of ideas among the four by noting: "The Gospel is about announcing the Good News and not about propagating any particular ideology", a policy not always respected in the correspondence, it should be said.

The most extensive and, in my view, most interesting section is the correspondence between Maritain and the Nobel Laureate for Literature, François Mauriac. This was based on a friendship of over forty years' duration and its basis was mutual respect and a shared intellectual preoccupation with Catholicism. Whereas Maritain demonstrated all the zeal of the convert, Mauriac was born into a staunchly bourgeois Catholic family in southwest France. While his father, who died young, displayed a certain scepticism when it came to religion, his mother was unwaveringly committed to Catholicism and imbued a Jansenistic fear of sin in her children that would constantly plague her youngest son in particular. Mauriac underwent a serious spiritual crisis in 1928 and he often stated how he envied Maritain his peaceful serenity.

For his part, Maritain was reticent in relation to Mauriac's early writing, which seemed to favour sinners over saints and which revealed a disturbing sensuality and absorption with the flesh that alienated many traditional French Catholics. In the end, it was Mauriac's journalism, his commitment to the cause of social justice, that appealed most to Maritain. In his art Mauriac always felt torn between his Catholic beliefs on the one hand, and the need to produce a faithful reproduction of life on the other. By favouring characters who were consumed by evil and, what was worse, by sometimes admitting a connivance with them, Mauriac knew that he was threading on dangerous ground. In the end, he found a solution of sorts by resolving to "purify the source". By this, he wasn't implying that his characters might not be flawed, rather that his primary motivation should not be to connive with their sinfulness, or to luxuriate in it. Once he wrote with a pure heart about such things, he would not need to worry about bringing his Catholic beliefs into disrepute.

Mauriac was well aware of the extent to which his upbringing moulded him. He would write in his famous *Bloc-notes*: "One remains faithful to a certain aspect of the religion that takes root in us as we grow older". This explains the array of characters in his work who are unhappy in their skin, who are constantly fighting with the impulses of the flesh and who feel estranged from God. Mauriac's own struggles with homosexuality, which conflicted with his strong Catholic faith and his role as husband and father, clearly had an impact on his work. In a letter to Maritain, although not speaking directly about homosexual desire, Mauriac admitted: "I have personal experience of what I describe. I was one of those souls who were stuck in the mud of life. I could never speak of such things with the authority I do, if I did not belong to that race myself".

Maritain was keen that Mauriac should come to give a paper in the Vatican during his period there, but the latter felt there was a danger of his becoming an official Catholic writer if he did so, something that would have been abhorrent to him. Mauriac displayed a somewhat jaundiced opinion of Maritain's success in North America, where he worked for many years as a university Professor, and stressed France's urgent need of thinkers that might raise it up from the depths of despair after the humiliation it underwent before, during and after the Second World War.

Whatever the private tensions between them might be, the tone of the letters is very cordial, especially when compared to the correspondence with the other writers. "Mon cher Jacques", "Bon

cher François”, these openings reveal a warmth that is undeniable. Maritain provides a good assessment of Mauriac’s novels when saying that they reveal a sincere loyalty to the Gospel and to the supernatural light of faith: “They also show that your cruel lucidity comes from a deep and painful love of souls, and not from this fascination with gathering together as many of them as possible, a trait which characterises several of your fellow novelists”. Mauriac was a regular visitor to Meudon and also visited Maritain when he went to spend the last years of his life with the community of Les Petits Frères near Toulouse after the death of Raïssa, a woman for whom Mauriac demonstrated great respect and about whose work he wrote approvingly on numerous occasions.

The main link between Claudel and Maritain was their shared commitment to Thomism. They also had experience of the French diplomatic corps, although for Claudel that was his full-time profession - he had postings in places like the US (New York, Boston and Washington), China, Germany and Denmark. Claudel wanted to infuse his poetry and drama with the essence of Thomistic thought, a task Maritain undertook in the philosophical realm.

Claudel’s letters contain the same zeal and élan as his creative writing and he was not someone who believed in restraint. Concerning some of the disdain and anger he poured on Maritain in relation to the Spanish Civil War, the latter observed: “Claudel is just being Claudel, but what really upsets me is the spiritual misery this war has brought about and the obsession with politics it has engendered in a multitude of Catholics”.

While his track record in relation to the Jews was somewhat dubious in his earlier years, Claudel did express frustration at the silence of Pope Pius XII in the wake of the extermination of this race by the Nazi regime. The “meek and vague pronouncements” coming from the Vatican did not satisfy Maritain any more than they did Claudel, but the former thought it better to adopt a more private campaign within the Holy See rather than indulging in public pronouncements.

Maritain graciously accepted Claudel’s rather muted apology about the vitriol poured by him on his fellow countryman, which he described as “*nos petits dissentiments*” (our minor squabbles). Maritain understood Claudel’s fiery nature and admired his work. He also exchanged some keen insights such as the following with Claudel: “How painful it is to think about the current state of the world and about the great challenges that face the Church, and to see that the massive work of spiritual regeneration that you speak of so eloquently has scarcely begun. I deeply regret my own inadequacy in this struggle. My head is full of Bloy’s great comment: ‘As an obedient Catholic I am in impatient communion with all the rebels of the earth’”. Claudel was undoubtedly a rebel, a characteristic that Maritain admired and disliked in equal measure.

When one speaks of rebels from the inside, one immediately thinks of Bernanos, a tireless advocate of the poor and someone who refused membership of the Académie Française on a number of occasions, in spite of the advantages such a distinction would have brought both him and his work. Bernanos was the writer who undoubtedly understood the minds and functions of the clerical caste better than anyone else. His priest-characters offer wonderful insights with regard to the tedium of daily life in a parish and the constant struggle to overcome the spiritual indifference of parishioners.

Henri Quantin notes that the correspondence of Bernanos and Maritain covers the human traumas that the two underwent while also providing a glimpse of what eternity might hold in store for them. Because of Maritain’s role as a director of the publishing house Plon, he would have cause to offer

advice to Bernanos about the various versions of his ground-breaking first novel, *Sous le Soleil de Satan* (Under Satan's Sun), first published in 1927. Maritain was warned by another director of the company, Stanislaus Fumet, of the danger associated with this publishing venture: "It's unpublishable! We cannot publish such a book. It's a depressing novel that will interest no one. I read the proofs this evening. We have been tricked. I would never have agreed to publish a book like this had I known what it was like. It has no merit and it is incomprehensible!" But Maritain stood firm and the novel, while it upset many of the traditional Catholic figures in France, came in time to be accepted as a masterpiece of spiritual anguish and drama.

Bernanos was not a particularly easy person to get along with. He saw the truth as being something that might burn at first, but then bring healing. Hence, in spite of the great respect he had for Maritain, he was not afraid to criticise him at times, at one point comparing him to Claudel, seeing them both as "civil servants and good Catholics", not a compliment when coming from the pen of Bernanos! When things got acrimonious, it took the intervention of priests like the Abbé Journet to restore the peace. The latter wrote to Maritain of Bernanos in the following terms: "He is incapable of objective thought. He must always think 'against' somebody. There is surely a good deal of hidden pride in such an attitude". There was an inherent goodness in Bernanos that even his enemies acknowledged. Like Mauriac, he was an admirer of Raïssa and he wrote to her on occasions to express his admiration of her publications.

The first letter from Bernanos to Maritain contained in this work provides a good summary of his literary objectives: "One always writes for the few souls that one loves. I have written mine (*Sous le Soleil de Satan*) for those who are still searching for God, for those who reject pious favour. The blood of the Cross does not necessarily have to bring pain to our hearts". Bernanos's view of the novel was that it had to break with the conventions of the past in order to make way for a form capable of conveying something of the spiritual turmoil that takes hold of his characters. As he stated in a letter in February 1926: "Christ is not the healer of souls. Rather, he is someone who ravishes them or, in a way, he acts as their executioner". For Bernanos, the perpetual war between God and Satan for the soul of humankind was the fabric of his fiction. His constant obsession was to convey the reality of this supernatural battle in his work.

While he wrote some very hurtful letters to Maritain, Bernanos also recognised the goodness in his friend. After the death of his father in 1927, he asked Maritain to say a prayer for the repose of his soul, and concluded: "My friend, I know that you are a better man than I am, that you have attained a peace that I am far from achieving. I think of you with fraternal affection".

Reading through the correspondence of these larger than life individuals, one gets a genuine flavour of the traumatic period that they lived through and the ways in which they responded to the crises, both spiritual and political, that came their way. Letters are a wonderful resource in that they encapsulate the personalities of the people who write them. They are also spontaneous reactions to a particular moment in time.

*Un catholique n'a pas d'alliés* is, therefore, an essential resource for anyone who is mildly interested in the early decades of the twentieth century in France and the manner in which four Catholic writers and intellectuals responded to them.

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in TU Dublin – Tallaght Campus. His latest book, co-edited with Derek Hand, *Essays on John McGahern: Assessing a Literary Legacy*, is now available from Cork University Press.