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A Catholic Has No Allies

EAMON MAHER

FRENCH literature of the twentieth century was blessed by the work of writers who were explicitly Catholic while also adorning the cultural life of their country. A new collection by the French Dominican publishing house, Editions du Cerf, of the epistolary correspondence between four of France's best known Catholic literati – Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac and Jacques Maritain – reveals serious rifts and, at times, a definite lack of Christian charity in the sentiments these men shared with one another.¹ 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 – and Raïssa, a Jewish émigrée from Russia whom he met when they were both studying

1. *Correspondance Maritain, Mauriac, Claudel, Bernanos: Un catholique n'a pas d'alliés*, edited by Henri Quantin and Michel Bressolette (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2018). The translations from the French are my own and in-text references are followed by page numbers in brackets.

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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.

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 Maritain's appointment as French Ambassador to the Holy See during the highly charged post-World War II years, from 1945-1948. Maritain had a considerable influence of Vatican II's teaching on liberty and human rights. The influence of Henri Bergson and Léon Bloy on Maritain's intellectual evolution should not be underestimated, both bringing to light particular shades of thought – Bergson showing how intuition and immediate experience trumped scientific rationalism when it came to understanding reality, and Bloy, another fierce opponent of rationalism and a convert to Catholicism, who was at times suspected of bigotry.

What is most striking in this very interesting correspondence 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 of a liberal persuasion, whereas Claudel and Bernanos were more traditionalist, with a strong attachment to monarchy and, occasionally, a tendency towards anti-Semitism.

Such allegiances 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 of being crypto-Marxists. The four men had somewhat differing views when it came to Franco, being attracted, on the one hand, to his strong Catholic beliefs, while at the same time 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 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 by the letter-writers, it should be said.

MARITAIN AND MAURIAC

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 40 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 long-standing Catholic family in southwest France and would in time, under the influence of the Republican and socialist Sillon movement founded by Marc Sagnier, mark a distance from what was a very privileged and conservative background. While his father, who died young, displayed a definite scepticism when it

came to religion, his mother was unwaveringly committed to Catholicism and imbued a Jansenistic distrust of the flesh 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 in the eyes of committed Catholics of the time, by sometimes admitting a connivance with them, Mauriac knew that he was treading 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 collude 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. Maritain definitely influenced Mauriac's thinking on how a Catholic novelist needed to be careful of portraying sin without immersing himself in it and yet he drew the distinction between 'a writer going deep into the recesses of the human heart as opposed to the physiologist bent over a frog or a guinea-pig.' (33-34)

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" (61). 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" (80).

Maritain was keen that Mauriac should come to the Vatican during his period there and give a public address, but Mauriac 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 sceptical 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 cordial, especially when compared to the correspondence with the other writers. 'Mon cher Jacques', 'Bon cher François' – these cordial 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" (152).

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.

When assessing the respective contributions of Maritain and Mauriac, Michel Bressolette has this to say: 'With Mauriac, one encounters a less coherent vision: one has the impression of duality, of separation. For him, there is literature and the Christian life, and the question of their compatibility is posed in almost Jansenistic terms. Accepting one is to refuse the other, or at least provides an acknowledgement of the gap between the two, which is not without its own wrenches and heartbreak.' (55)

CLAUDEL

The main link between Claudel and Maritain was their shared commitment to Thomism. They also had experience of the French diplomatic service, 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 exhibit the same *élan* as his creative writing and he was not someone who believed in restraint. When he poured disdain and anger on him in relation to the Spanish Civil War, Maritain 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'. (192)

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 after the war with regard to the attempted 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 'our minor squabbles' (*'nos petits dissentiments'*). 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. He was also a fan of the Renaissance and a believer in the power of art to offer glimpses of the divine: 'Wherever one finds beauty, God cannot be absent.' (184) Maritain was less convinced and wrote in reply to Claudel: 'It [the Renaissance] found it too easy to forget the Cross.' (185)

BERNANOS

When one thinks of rebels, 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, immediately springs to mind. His priest-characters offer wonderful insights into 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 var-

ious versions of his ground-breaking first novel, *Under Satan's Sun* (*Sous le Soleil de Satan*), 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!' (260)

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. Quantin explains how fortuitous it was for Bernanos to have someone like Maritain as a champion of his work:

The letters exchanged about the final touches that needed to be made to the manuscript of *Sous le Soleil de Satan* prove that the analysis of a work, when it is not being dealt with by a simple specialist of narrative techniques, but by someone capable of seeing how it provides a revealing exploration of the abyss of evil, can completely absorb a human being. (254)

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 loath 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: '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'. (296)

Bernanos' faith was part of the very fabric of his being. Com-

promise was not something he could countenance. In a letter to Valléry-Radot, a member of the Académie Française and a physician by training, he wrote: 'It is truth or death with me.' (264) 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. He was tender with her in a way that is not nearly as apparent in his letters to Maritain.

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 my novel [*Sous le Soleil de Satan*] for those who are still searching for God, for those who reject religious favour. The blood of the Cross does not necessarily have to bring pain to our hearts. (307)

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 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'. (311) For Bernanos, the perpetual war between God and Satan for the soul of humankind forms 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'. (320)

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. At the end of his Introduction, Henri Quantin provides an exemplary summary of the import and interest of this work:

The declarations of friendship, the screams of wounded hearts and the truthful exchanges that characterise this correspondence are not confined merely to their historic context. They contain meanings that transcend the materiality of the decipherable words written on paper, in the same way as they constantly reach out to readers other than the people to whom they were initially addressed.... In brief, even when ideas expressed on certain issues are not shared, even when the exchange of letters is interrupted, even when the writer wraps himself in silence, no letter really remains unanswered. (25)

The readers of this correspondence will fill in certain gaps and will react in different ways to the opinions expressed by four giants of twentieth century Catholic literature. It would be wonderful if an English translation could be undertaken for those who are not in a position to read the book in its original French. It certainly deserves the wider audience that this would afford.