

ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JACQUES MARITAIN

by MARCEL DUBOIS

In the opening address at the Meeting of the Catholic Intellectuals of France, "On the Ways to Faith,"¹ held in Paris in May, 1948, Jacques Maritain expressed with a touch of humor the paradoxical situation of the philosopher who ventures to deal with questions of theology: "I am only a philosopher — not even one of those theologians which the Cartesian Minerve would ironically describe as a superman." This is, perhaps, the paradox inherent in our subject: "Philosophical Principles of Ecumenical Mutual Understanding." What right does a philosopher or a philosophy have to set out to justify a project of ecumenism, which is a collaborative enterprise among theologians? Nevertheless, if the quality of his witness, the extensiveness and integrity of his research, and the fidelity of his findings are counted as factors in the credibility of his message, then certainly the philosophy of Maritain, or more precisely, his life as philosopher, can help us better comprehend, in all its depth, his thoughts on what he himself called "philosophic cooperation and intellectual justice".

Marcel Dubois, O.P., who is the editor of *Immanuel*, is Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University and Director of St. Isaiah House in Jerusalem. This paper was originally given as a lecture honoring the hundredth anniversary of Maritain's birth at the Ecumenical Institute at Tantar on November 18, 1982. Translated from the French (excepting the quotes from Maritain) by Patrick Gaffney.

1. "Les chemins de la foi," Leçon d'ouverture à la Semaine des intellectuels catholiques français, May 8, 1949, in J. Maritain, *Oeuvres, 1940-1963* (Paris, 1978), p. 451.

The fact is that, in his reflections, this disciple of Thomas Aquinas has pressed forward on every path that human thought is capable of exploring. As Etienne Gilson, the historian of Mediaeval Christian thought, who was both his friend and fellow traveller, once wrote: “No Philosopher has ever found, in his familiarity with the eternal, the secret of a more perfect familiarity in his intimate dealings with the daily cares of our time... Literature, art, science, ethics, politics, both national and international, there is no area in the life and the thought of his time that he did not personally inhabit, explore, and know, right up to the outer limits of the frontiers which are the natural places for a thought that is intent upon “*distinguishing in order to unite.*” As you know, this phrase is the title of one of Maritain’s great works, a study of the ways and degrees of knowledge, but is also the formula that contains the secret of his view on the relationship between people and between doctrines.

To illustrate these remarks of Gilson, it is sufficient to note the range of the many works by Jacques Maritain, including: in the field of metaphysics, *Seven Lessons on Being*; in epistemology, *The Degrees of Knowledge*; in theological and political philosophy, *Integral Humanism*; and in aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*.

However great the variety and extent of his work, what is still more impressive amid this vast *ensemble* is doubtless the rare balance between reason and wisdom which he received from his master Thomas Aquinas. But here also, equally rare, is the meeting between a calm adherence to principles and a courageous involvement in the affairs of human existence, in the domain of art as well as politics. Above all, and even more rare, is the conjunction of precision and affection, of rigor and tenderness. Here, in a heart that is brought to peace by truth, is a unity between the conviction of faith and openness to one’s fellow man.

The philosophy of J. Maritain appears beyond any doubt to be a rigorous system — some even reproached him for having re-made a scholasticism of his own — yet it represents, above all (as it did for Augustine, another of his masters), an endless search for truth that answers the longing, the need, and the nostalgia which fill man’s heart. Thus, with Maritain, it is the philosopher himself who marvels at the many ways that God encounters man.

One of my teachers, who was also a Dominican, — and God knows that Dominicans, even Thomists, have not always been in full agreement with him! — once remarked: “The thing that is really admirable about Maritain is that you feel in him a man ready to go down on his knees before the truth.” On his knees before theological truth, that which is revealed (*Truth of Revelation*), or that which is believed (*Truth of Faith*), but also before the truth of every kind of *research*, in whatever direction it leads. Such an attitude involves reverence for God,

respect for human liberty and regard for God's ways as expressed through freedom of the human spirit.

Surely, therein is the source of the genius — of the grace — which made Jacques Maritain the kind of man who listened and was open to dialogue. All those who met him, in particular all those who were entertained by him, be it at the time of the meetings in his home in Meudon, later during his years of residence at Princeton, in the United States, or towards the end of his life in his monastic cell at Toulouse, were struck by the quality of his attention, by his gentle patience, by his openness to the interlocutor, and by his readiness to give a benevolent interpretation to any position or proposition, however accidental or clumsy. His intelligence had the rare ability of seizing, discovering and delivering truth from the captivity of its expression.

It is, again, the philosopher in Maritain who made overtures to artists and who welcomed the poets of the *avant-garde* or the painters known as futurists. In Meudon one would meet painters like Georges Rounault, Gino Severini, Marc Chagall, sculptors like Arp or Marek Schwark, musicians like Eric Satie, Georges Auric, Roland Manuel, Arthur Lourié. He exchanged with Cocteau unforgettable propositions on the creativity of the human spirit. He helped Emmanuel Mounier to define his personalism. He elaborated with Massignon on bold projects for international organization. The integrality of his humanism, in fact, quite naturally gave a political dimension to his thought. Long before he became French ambassador to Rome or chairman of the French delegation to UNESCO, he published his admirable "Letter on Independence" in which he demonstrated that a Christian philosopher must come to grips with the stresses of the city. I mention these things not only to recall his personality, his message and his testimony, but also because they enable us to understand the quality of his vision and his attitude toward intellectual cooperation and mutual understanding.

Taken as a whole, the work of Maritain shows the theoretical principles which, in their varied dimensions, correspond to this existential attitude. Therefore, in order to illustrate more precisely our theme, I have selected three texts that express, in a more explicit way, the ground-rules and the necessities involved in any meeting between different spiritual postures.

The first is an address that was delivered at the first general assembly of UNESCO in November 1947, in which he examined "the Possibilities for Cooperation in a Divided World." Then, in order to register a tone that is more explicitly philosophical, I shall quote a lecture given in 1946 at the Angelicum, the Pontifical University of Thomas Aquinas in Rome, entitled "Philosophical Cooperation and Intellectual Justice". Finally, in order to uncover the spiritual intuition inspiring his notion of the encounter with the other, in the divine perspective,

I shall turn to an article in which he analyses with formidable insight what he calls "The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom (1949)." It is my belief that in terms of Christian wisdom, it is this text which provides us with the key to his moral philosophy and his openness to ecumenism.

As you may know, at the Funeral Mass of Jacques Maritain, the homily was given by none other than Maritain himself! The voice of this man, which was now silenced, had been recorded by a member of the audience in one of the presentations he made in Toulouse to the Little Brothers of Jesus. During the course of this talk he had mentioned, with delicate humour, the kind of life led by the saints in heaven. Inspired by this example, I would like include here a generous portion of citations from some of these texts in which his thought is most clearly expressed.

I

Let us begin with the address he delivered before UNESCO in 1947. At that time, the world had barely emerged from a second world war, yet a dull uneasiness was already weighing down the nations. The political rivalry between two blocs, the sense of oppression and human anxiety, offered an odd premonition of those same ills that press upon and darken this still more dangerous and difficult era in which we now live.

There, in a manner both lucid and loyal, Maritain placed before the members of UNESCO the question of the ultimate end (*finalité*) of the organization they constituted, and examined the possible ways to accomplish such an end. "Is it possible to cooperate in a divided world?"² Listen to how he frames the question:

Our conference meets at a particularly serious moment in the history of the world, a moment when, faced with growing international tension and antagonisms the dangers of which cannot be ignored, vast portions of public opinion risk becoming obsessed by the spectre of catastrophe, and surrendering to the idea of wars's inevitability. The anguish of peoples breaks like a mighty surf on every shore.

At first glance, there is something paradoxical in UNESCO's task: it implies *intellectual* agreement among men whose conceptions of the world, of culture, of knowledge itself are different or even mutually opposed. In my opinion it behooves us to face this paradox which is but an expression of the great distress in which the human spirit finds itself today.

But what does this distress consist in? In essence, it is a division of minds and, above all, a conflict between mentalities and doctrines over the most fundamental truths. We can understand his analysis that we are now tracing all the better, in its catastrophic proportions by the image of the confusion and outrage that followed the failure of the tower of Babel:

2. "Les possibilités de coopération dans un monde divisé," in *Oeuvres (op. cit.)*, pp. 435-450.

Modern thought has been labeled with *Babelism*, and not without reason. Never, indeed, have men's minds been so deeply and cruelly divided. As human thought is pigeon-holed into more and more specialized compartments, it becomes more difficult to bring to consciousness the implicit philosophies to which each of us, willy-nilly, is committed in actual fact. Doctrines and faiths, spiritual traditions and schools of thought come into conflict without it being possible for the one even to understand the signs which the others use to express themselves. Every man's voice is but noise to his fellow man. However deep we may dig, there is no longer any common foundation for speculative thought. There is no common language for it.

Here again, his description holds something prophetic. It is the same dialogue of the deaf in which we participate today. It must be acknowledged that even among Christians, among members of the same communities or the same churches, the situation is sometimes this bad or even worse. Likewise, the question posed by Maritain is more current now than ever before:

How then, under these circumstances, is an agreement conceivable among men, assembled for the purpose of jointly accomplishing a task dealing with the future of the mind, who come from the four corners of the earth and who belong not only to different cultures and civilizations, but to different spiritual lineages and antagonistic schools of thought?

Facing a situation like this, we run the risk of being bombarded by two opposing temptations, two different forms of escapism or resignation. Listen to the way that Maritain focuses on these, for at times of exhaustion and discouragement, the very things which threatened the purpose of UNESCO can also beset the efforts of ecumenism:

"Should an agency like UNESCO throw up the game, give up any assertion of common views and common principles, and be satisfied only in compiling documents, surveys, factual data and statistics? Or should it, on the contrary, endeavor to establish some artificial conformity of minds, and to define some doctrinal common denominator — which would be likely, in the course of discussion, to be reduced to the vanishing point?"

But however great are the dangers of fight or surrender, in either one direction or the other, before the challenge of an enterprise of such constant difficulty, Maritain believes that there exists another possibility:

I believe that the solution must be sought in another direction; precisely because UNESCO's goal is a practical one, agreement among its members can be spontaneously achieved, not on common speculative notions; not on the affirmation of the same conception of the world, man and knowledge; but on the affirmation of the same set of convictions concerning action. This is doubtless very little; it is the last refuge of intellectual agreement among men. It is, however, *enough* to undertake a great work, and it would mean a great deal to become aware of this body of common practical convictions.

So in what does this solution consist? Here, it is the philosopher who responds or, to be more precise, the disciple of Aristotle and Aquinas whose principles he has elaborated and whose distinctions he has refined in his philosophy of man and his moral philosophy. Maritain is applying to the problems of an intellectual community that is divided, indeed fragmented, the distinction he has often used bet-

ween that which is practical in a *speculative* sense — that is, abstract knowledge of action, a theoretical position with regard to a doctrine of involvement — and that which is practical in a *practical* sense — that is, a decision or behavior directly involved in real and effective action. This distinction, which is absolutely fundamental to his system, enables him to invite people who adhere to radically different creeds, whose basic intuitions may even be contradictory, to nevertheless come to agreement on their practical objectives despite the disharmony in their theoretical justification of the action. Note this most important text:

I should like to note here that the word *ideology* and the word *principle* can be understood in two different ways. I have just said that the present state of intellectual division among men does not permit agreement on a common *speculative* ideology, nor on common *explanatory* principles. However, when it concerns, on the contrary, the basic *practical* ideology and the basic principles of *action* implicitly recognized today, in a vital if not formulated manner, by the consciousness of free people, this happens to constitute *grosso modo* a sort of common residue, a sort of unwritten law, at the point of practical convergence of extremely different theoretical ideology and spiritual traditions. To understand that, it is sufficient to distinguish properly between the rational justifications, inseparable from the spiritual dynamism of a philosophical doctrine or a religious faith, and the *practical conclusions* which, separately justified for each, are, for all, analogically common principles of action. I am fully convinced that my way of justifying the belief in the rights of man and the ideal of liberty, equality and fraternity, is the only one which is solidly based on truth. Nevertheless, that does not prevent me from agreeing on these practical tenets with those who are convinced that their way of justifying them, entirely different from mine, or even opposed to mine in its theoretical dynamism, is likewise the only one that is based on truth.

Assuming they both believe in the democratic charter, a Christian and a rationalist will, nevertheless, give justifications that are incompatible with each other, to which their souls, their minds and their blood are committed, and about these justifications they will fight.

And God keep me from saying that it is not important to know which of the two is right! That is essentially important. They remain, however, in agreement on the practical affirmation of that charter, and they can formulate together common principles of action.

Thus, it is by no means simply a matter of “agreeing to disagree” whereby those holding differing or opposing doctrines or positions would abandon their fundamental options and their own certainty in favor of a common denominator of a prudent minimum (*sagesse minima*). Ideological agreement, the *practical* ideology that Maritain tries to define and set forth, is that which concerns the purposefulness and the concrete possibilities for common action, apart from varied and sometimes opposing justifications that different people bring to their involvement:

Thus, in my opinion, can the paradox I pointed out earlier be solved.

The ideological agreement which is necessary among those who work toward making science, culture and education contribute to the establishment of a true peace, is restricted to a certain body of practical points and of principles of action. But within these limits there is, and there must be, an ideological agreement which, for all its merely practical nature, is none the less of major importance.

In the justification he offers for that body of practical principles, everyone commits himself

fully, with all of his philosophical and religious convictions — how could he speak with faith, if not in the light of the speculative convictions which quicken his thought?

But he is not entitled to demand that others subscribe to his justification of the practical principles on which all agree.

And the practical principles in question form a sort of charter which is indispensable for any effective common action, and the formulation of which would matter to the good itself and the success of the peace-making work to which their common endeavors are dedicated.

By all means, I should hope that ecumenical dialogue and the cooperation among Christians is not reduced to such a tragic state. If I recall these reflections of Maritain, it is because they seem to be the first step in any effort at understanding and encounter between different ideologies and doctrines. It is also because they resound with an urgency that has grown during these troubled times we now traverse, particularly in this region of the world in which we live. What Maritain calls upon us to recognize is that when it comes to working for peace, promoting justice between people, providing them with the basis for a happiness which is their right, the urgency of practical purposefulness offers — or should offer — to people who are otherwise divided or opposed in their nationality, their culture, their religion, and their philosophy, the point-of-departure for the application of a practical wisdom.

II

As soon as we turn to the question of the confrontation between philosophical systems considered by themselves, and no longer speak on the level of action or involvement but rather that of original inspirations, attitudes of doctrine and methods of thought, the urgency of the problem seems to be reduced, in so far as these matters seem distant from such tragedies of human life as hunger, poverty, and the ravages of war. In fact, however, on this more abstract level the problems are no less serious, and they are certainly more difficult.

Maritain took up this question very early. He was brought to it, as we have seen, by the enormous range and variety of his encounters with people who were coming from the most disparate spiritual, intellectual and artistic viewpoints. But in his case, it was above all the very meaning of the truth which compelled him to investigate the problem of pluralism in philosophy. Hence, he asked himself, "What are the possibilities and what are the conditions for philosophical cooperation and for intellectual justice?" Who is there among us who has not also experienced this same difficulty in translating ideas very different from our own into the coordinates of our own system of reference. Is it possible to develop a formula for coordinating philosophical systems, somewhat analogous to Albert Einstein's formula for relating the coordinates of space and time in the physical universe? Maritain reflected on this problem and here, again, his analysis abounds in observations and suggestions for the kind of exchange and collaboration that constitutes ecumenical efforts.

He frames the question as follows:³

“Can philosophers co-operate?” The problem is eternal but particularly pressing today, and brings to mind one of the saddest conditions of our human, conceptual and discursive way of thinking.

To make my position clear, I would state that, in my opinion, co-operation between philosophers can only be a conquest of the intellect over itself and the very universe of thought it has created — a difficult and precarious conquest achieved by intellectual rigor and justice on the basis of irreducible and inevitably lasting antagonisms.

In the perspective of the *inner*, conceptual and logical structure of philosophical systems and, if I may put it thus, of *doctrinal exchanges*, each system can avail itself of the others for its own sake by dismembering them, and by feeding on and assimilating what it can take from them. That is co-operation indeed, but in quite a peculiar sense!

Yet from a deeper point of view, and in the perspective of the judgment which each one passes on the other, contemplating it as a whole, as an object situated in an *external* sphere, and trying to do it justice, a mutual understanding is possible which cannot indeed do away with basic antagonisms, but which may create a kind of real though imperfect co-operation, to the extent that each system succeeds (1) in recognizing for the other, in a certain sense, a right to exist; (2) in availing itself of the other, no longer by material *intussusception*, and by borrowing or digesting parts of the other, but by bringing, thanks to the other, its own specific life and principles to a higher degree of achievement and extension.

In the discussion from which these lines are taken, Maritain takes up by turns first one and then another of these points of view. He first examines the demands and the procedures for philosophical cooperation conceived on the model of *exchanges* on doctrine. How and under what conditions is one philosophy able to assimilate into its own system the particular elements and discoveries of another philosophy? To what degree can such an operation be reciprocal? Maritain then sets out upon a comparison between Thomism and Pragmatism, which at that time was one of the challenging controversies. Is there some ground upon which an exchange between the truth of reason (*vérité rationnelle*) and pragmatic verifiability (*vérification pragmatique*) is possible? Or between process and immutability? Or between substance and evolution? Indeed, what appears as the framework of comparison turns out to be the major difficulty in the operation. This reveals “a profound antagonism that the best of efforts are powerless to overcome. However praiseworthy are the attempts to reconcile such or such a particular point, one *cannot* avoid the impression that everything becomes extremely precarious in this matter of overall ‘cooperation’.”

It is for this reason that Maritain prefers to leave aside this level of reflection and to approach the problem from another perspective, “one of mutual intellectual grasp, of which different philosophical systems are capable, each one taken as whole.” This is what he called in other terms, “the shared intellectual inclusivity

3. “Coopération philosophique et justice intellectuelle,” *Ibid.*, pp. 249–274. English: J. Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York [1952]), pp. 30–50.

(*le mutuel envelopement intelligible*) of philosophies.” Here again, let us leave him to speak for himself. The paragraphs in which he expresses his thoughts on this point unfold an extremely fine insight capable of being applied to every intellectual encounter, and ecumenical dialogue in particular:

First let us remark that, if we were able to realize, in a higher light, that most often our mutually opposed affirmations do not bear on the same parts of aspects of the real and that they are of greater value than our mutual negations, then we should come nearer the first prerequisite of a genuinely philosophical understanding; that is, we should become better able to transcend and conquer our own system of signs and conceptual language, and to take on for a moment, in a provisional and tentative manner, the thought and approach of the other so as to come back, with this intelligible booty, to our own philosophical conceptualization and to our own system of reference.

Following this line of thought and endeavoring to satisfy the demands of intellectual justice up to the very end, we come upon a new and deeper aspect of the problem: “Can philosophers co-operate?” Then, we are no longer concerned with analyzing or *sorting* the set of assertions peculiar to various systems in spreading them out, so to speak, on a single surface or level in order to examine what conciliation or exchange of ideas they may mutually allow in their inner structure. But we are concerned with taking into account a third dimension, in order to examine the manner in which each system, considered as a specific whole, can, according to its own frame of reference, do justice to the other in taking a view of it and seeking to penetrate it as an object situated on the outside — in another sphere of thought.

From this new standpoint, two considerations would appear all-important: the one is the consideration of the central *intuition* which lies at the core of each great philosophical doctrine; the other is the consideration of the *place* which each system could, according to its own frame of reference, grant the other system as the legitimate place the latter is cut out to occupy in the universe of thought.

Actually, each great philosophical doctrine lives on a central intuition which can be wrongly conceptualized and translated into a system of assertions and negations seriously deficient or erroneous as such, but which, insofar as it is intellectual intuition, truly gets hold of some aspect of the real. And, consequently, each great philosophical doctrine, once it has been grasped in its central intuition, and then re-interpreted in the frame of reference of another doctrine in a manner that it would surely not accept, should be granted from the point of view of this other doctrine some place considered as legitimately occupied, be it in some imaginary space.

If we try to do justice to the philosophical systems against which we take our most determined stand, we shall seek to discover both that intuition which they involve and that place we must grant them from our own point of view. And then we shall benefit from them, not by borrowing from them or exchanging with them certain particular views and ideas, but by seeing, thanks to them, more profoundly into our own doctrine, by enriching it from within and extending its principles to new fields of inquiry which have been brought more forcefully to our attention, but which we shall make all the more vitally and powerfully informed by these principles.

Once again Maritain takes up, in this new light, in a more global, more penetrating, more “enveloping” manner this confrontation which he had already attempted between Thomism and Pragmatism, that same confrontation into which he elsewhere introduced aspects of Hegelianism and Existentialism. A

comparison carried out in this spirit in clearly richer, but in the end Maritain does not hide the difficulties:

Perhaps, in the last analysis, we shall have an idea that this word “co-operation” is perhaps a bit too ambitious. All that can be said on the question can be summed up in the philosophical duty-of understanding another’s thought in a genuine and fair manner, and of dealing with it with intellectual justice. This already is difficult — and is sufficient, if only we are aware that there cannot be intellectual justice without the assistance of intellectual charity. If we do not love the thought and intellect of another as intellect and thought, how shall we take pains to discover what truths are conveyed by it while it seems to us defective or misguided, and at the same time to free these truths from the errors which prey upon them and to reinstate them in an entirely true systematization? For intellectual justice is due to our fellow-philosophers, but first of all to truth.

To free truths from the errors that feed upon them, to love the intelligence and thought of another as intelligence and as thought. That is the project, and above all that should be the intention!

But Maritain does not mask the difficulty of such a program, and he states its fundamental presupposition: the belief that intellectual justice is certainly owed to philosophers who are our colleagues in research, but to believe first of all in the truth! And still more profoundly, the understanding that intellectual justice cannot exist without intellectual charity.

In fact, the mutual respect that is needed for cooperation, for intellectual justice, for the understanding of others in the pursuit of truth, and most of all in the love of truth, all of this, requires a purification of the soul, something that can only be acquired through prayer:

The true solution would require that one succeed in strengthening these powers from within, in restoring the taste for truth within the minds of men, and in purifying and refreshing the sight of their eyes. Finally, in order to achieve these ends — and this is the point I want to make — there is only one remedy: to re-awaken in the world a sense of, and esteem for, contemplation. The world is prey to a great thirst, an immense mystical yearning which does not even know itself and which, because it remains without objective, turns to despair or neurosis.

Maritain wrote all this in 1949, two decades before Woodstock and the Charismatic Renewal. Here, penetrating the climate of distress and the needs of the human heart, he anticipates the manifestations of that aspiration for the transcendent and for the absolute that can be seen in the work of his friend Thomas Merton, who expressed these pleas and explored this territory.

In a word, in the vision of Maritain, philosopher and Christian, it is in the vertical dimension of a relationship to God that a philosopher is able to find the necessary clarity and discernment in all his work, and beyond the fumbling of errors, the authentic seed of truth. Thus, the precondition for philosophical dialogue, as for all dialogue, ultimately appears as a theological requirement.

More than that, his conviction enhances, according to him, the more profound certainty of the need to respect in every venture that involves the spiritual, the relationship of the person with God himself, the Supreme Truth and the Ultimate Good.

III

Maritain accords very special attention to this secret and mysterious dimension of all human action. On this subject, he explains himself well in an article that seems to me to hold the key to the problem that engages us here. It is entitled: "The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom."⁴

This article is less concerned with the psychological factors of a free act and is more interested in a metaphysical inquiry into the moral and supernatural values involved in that first human choice which occurs at the awakening of consciousness. For this reason, the thesis he presents has relevance for a theology of grace as well as for a philosophy of freedom with regard to human action. The inner fervor enlivening these reflections is already sufficient evidence for the openness and the wholesomeness of this thought, faithful to the spirit of Thomas Aquinas on the questions of the freedom and the salvation of man. In effect, Maritain is attempting to demonstrate how in the first act of the moral life, an infant either does or does not adhere in a way that is confused and obscure, but also immediate and existential, to God, the principle of all Good. Such an act, even though it might be a tenuous, small and limited choice, is enormously rich in moral and supernatural involvement. From that moment, the child orients his destiny. "Children are told not to play with fire; they play with God."

Maritain analyzes the threefold implication of this first moral option. First, there is a vital consciousness of good and evil, the dictation by a sort of inner voice, an unfailing presentiment: Here is the Good. Secondly, there is a consciousness or presentiment of an ideal order, a transcendental rule of human acts that forms the objective basis for this awareness of Goodness. Finally, there is the third and, for our discussion, the most important implication, and this is the point upon which Maritain centers his reflections: that is an insight, vague but immediate, into the relationship that exists between this transcendental rule and the distinct Good upon which it is based or, in other terms, a grasp of the formal instigation (*ordination formelle*) of the act of the will with respect to God as ultimate end (*fin dernière*).

The initial act which determines the direction of life and which — when it is good — chooses the good for the sake of the good, proceeds from a natural *élan* which is also, undividedly, an *élan* by which this very act tends all at once, beyond its immediate object, toward God as the supreme Good...

4. "La dialectique immanente du premier acte de liberté," in J. Maritain, *Raison et raisons; essais détachés* (Paris, 1948), p. 131 ff. English: *op. cit.*, pp. 66–85.

In brief, moral involvement is a vague but real involvement with God; faithfulness to the good perceived here and now is an adherence to Him who is the Supreme Good, an adherence based upon a “*purely* practical cognition of God, produced in and by the movement of the appetite toward the moral good precisely considered as good.”

There is much in this thesis that could easily take to flight! The mystery which he is encircling is, finally, that of the salvation of men of good will. Maritain has taken up the subject with a veritable apostolic fervor. Some have found it to be a daring contention, but he has brought to it all the necessary discernment.

This is not the time to plunge into the details of Maritain’s argument. I intend only to sort out that which concerns our topic. I will try, therefore, to share the inspiration which, it seems to me, is fundamental for an ecumenical venture. First, we must recognize that Maritain sets up the question on its right territory, that is, within the confines of philosophy and theology. To love God efficaciously and above all else — and this is the heart of the matter — presupposes grace and love in the soul. The free choice of which we speak must be considered in its true light and moral philosophy does not suffice. The person, the infant we are talking about, is not an ideal human being in the perfection of nature who is supposed to love God with all his strength. As a matter of fact, this infant is a child of Adam, exposed to sin and drawn to other goods than God alone. It is grace that re-establishes order, grace that is offered unceasingly and offered to everyone. In the acceptance or the refusal by the infant who discovers the Good, ultimately, is the question of the acceptance or refusal of grace. Seen from this perspective, this first act of freedom can have only two outcomes, the choice for self or the choice for God.

Maritain supports this entire reflection by two wonderful articles of St. Thomas Aquinas which he cites *in extenso* at the conclusion of his discussion: “*Can man love God above all things by his natural endowments alone without grace?*” (*Summa* Ia-IIae, q. 109, a.3); “*Whether venial sin can exist in a person with original sin alone*” (Ia-IIae, q.89, a.6). The conclusion that emerges from the encounter with the texts is plain and suggestive. For a human being, or for an infant still marked by original sin, the initial involvement that is offered can only bear upon the ultimate end: it is either the accession into the love of God through the justification of grace, or the refusal through moral sin. In the historical status of man as sinner and redeemed, it is grace alone that enables him to choose God. The first act of freedom is a reception or a refusal of the grace that is always offered, and even that reception is already a work of this grace. Here Maritain recalls the true meaning of the axiom *Facienti quod est in se, Deus non denegat gratiam*: “God does not refuse his grace to one who acts to the best of his ability; but it is under the action of grace that man prepares to receive grace.”

With his approach thus enlightened by divine Revelation, Maritain continues to develop his philosophical reflection. Moreover, he seems to say that this is the only possible moral philosophy. We understand then that in this light and by this approach, the first act of freedom appears as either an acknowledgement or a rejection of God. At the center of this moral involvement, Maritain discovers a primordial consciousness from which he wishes to extract the *theological* wealth, confused, obscure as it is, but *real*.

Thus, Maritain's great interest in this article is to demonstrate the type of knowledge that is altogether original implied in this first act of freedom: "(The intellect) knows God existentially through conformity with the right will, and in the 'dark mirror' of the moral good, but without any *concept* of God disengaged from that basic concept. In the first act of freedom, man can "know (unconsciously) God without knowing him (consciously)." The problem is then to situate in the order of knowing this "particular form of knowledge which reaches its object within the unconscious recesses of the spirit's activity and is a merely practical and volitional knowledge of God." Maritain insists on the fact that "such a knowledge is neither implicit nor explicit, but although inexpressible, is a knowledge *actual* and *formal*, through which the intellect knows in a practical manner the Separate Good," that is to say, God as the actual terminus of the will's movement.

Already in his "Four Essays on the Spirit in the Carnal Condition"⁵ Maritain has indicated the place of this quite original case of human knowledge. Is not the source of this mysterious affinity that leads souls that are open to re-discover God the Holy Spirit, and does not that divine trace withinus, that *sigillatio*, correspond to what Augustine and later Aquinas called the *vocatio interior*?

I am sure you grasp the importance of this intuition for the problem that is ever timely and ever new, the mutual comprehension between philosophical positions and different creeds. Ultimately, what Maritain is proposing in these pages is a philosophical commentary on the declaration of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John: "... *The man who lives by the truth comes out into the light*" (John 3:21).

Such is the key to any encounter between men of good will, between philosophers and believers of good will. Moreover, Maritain presses this insight to its conclusion. At the end of the article I have just summarised, he devotes his attention to a very attentive reflection on the significance of atheism. In the light of what he has said, he demonstrates the conditions for discovering, despite revolutionary and negative expressions, on this side of the apparent rejection, that there is at the bot-

5. J. Maritain, *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle* (Paris, 1939).

tom of every authentic question, at the source at every inquiry into truth, an *unconscious* opening to truth and to goodness. It is this openness of the soul that is to be set free in a movement that passes from darkness to light.

In order to be able to discern in the position of others this relationship, at times unconscious or blind, with the light of God, it is essential that the philosopher, and even more so the theologian, cultivate an attentiveness for their own sakes to the priority of this theological reference, and that they are faithful to what it requires. Here we come upon the conviction Maritain had earlier expressed in his article on “Philosophical Cooperation and Intellectual Justice”. This capacity ultimately belongs to prayer, which is at one and the same time the condition for the respect for others in the hidden depths of their own relation with God, and one’s own ability to pray. To be oneself in the solitude of investigation and prayer in order to be open to others, regardless of their faltering, their denials and their shouts, there in the solitude of their spiritual investigation and of their ability to pray!

Maritain himself had experienced this fundamental law of all authentic spiritual dialogue: Listen to the confidence that he offers in the introduction of the *Journal of Raïssa*. There he describes the spiritual communion that existed between himself, his wife, Raïssa, and his wife’s sister, Vera:

I don’t think there has ever been a union among three people that has been more close and profound than that which existed between the three of us. Each was open to the two others with full sincerity... And yet, not only did the personality of each differ greatly from that of the two others, and not only did each have a sacred respect for the freedom of the other two, but at the heart of this marvelous union of love, made by the grace of God, each kept their solitude intact. What a mystery! The more we were united, the more each set out on their way alone... That is to say that the unity of this little flock only grew with the years, but the solitude of each only grew more deeply at the same time... This was the part of God.

Such a communion, based on a theologically and spiritually inspired way of living, stood as his model for the possible collaboration between thinkers, and certainly between believers. He dreamed of the establishment of centers of spiritual life in which such an exchange would be encouraged. Moreover, this is one of the wishes he expresses at the end of his article on intellectual cooperation:

There should be established everywhere, on a larger scale, centers of spiritual life where the practical science of the contemplative ways and the lessons taught by the saints could be studied (in themselves and also in their relation to poetry and knowledge, to works of culture and to everyday morality). There this multitude of thinking beings of every background and every denomination (including also philosophers and those who read their writings) whose hearts are troubled by a secret aspiration could be helped to rise above the life of the senses and to receive a spark of that fire which used to consume the heroes of the spirit.

His dream of a community of wisdom corresponds to a *need* that we also feel with an urgency that is more and more pressing. The majority of you are academics. I myself, to pay for my sins, am also an academic. Maritain likewise belonged to this company. I hope I won't offend anyone, however, if I allow myself to state a feeling that has become more and more certain for me; and that is that the wisdom people need in our time, the wisdom that they hunger and thirst for, will not come from the universities. It will come instead from spiritual centers where people can reflect and pray together not necessarily on the basis of a common doctrine or insight, but at least on the basis of respect and mutual comprehension in the light of God.

This was the purpose of Cassisiacum for St. Augustine. This was the character of the monastic community. Isn't it also the vocation of the ecumenical center of Tantur? Maritain would have certainly greeted its creation with joy. Doubtless, he is one of those who, at some remove, far or near, suggested the idea.

What we have recalled from his work allows us to guess at what counsel he would now have to offer us. Once he was visiting the Dominican House of Studies in St-Maximin, which is a community of philosophers and theologians whom he liked very much and in whose company he passed the last years of his long life. Some of the students asked him to write a few words in the guest-book of the monastery. As a disciple of St. Thomas and a man of the Gospel, he wrote something very simple. "My brothers, see to it that your head is hard and your heart is soft." A hard head and a soft heart! This is just what he himself sought to achieve — rigor and tenderness! An intelligence strong and well-ordered in service of mercy according to the heart of God.

I believe it is just *this* that he would have wished for this house, for its role in the Church, in the world, and in Jerusalem.

Immanuel 16 (Summer 1983)