

Cher ami et maître

John M. Oesterreicher

My friendship with Jacques Maritain—when writing to him, I addressed him as *Cher ami et maître*—goes back to the middle of the 1930s. I am sorry to say I do not remember the exact date nor the exact location of our first meeting. I know only that it was in the lobby of one of Vienna's major hotels. I was eager to tell him of a new venture I was engaged in. I had begun the publication of a new periodical, called *Die Erfüllung*, "The Fulfillment." It was an attempt to battle the racial mania of Nazism and assert the primacy of the mind. The archbishop of Vienna, in giving his blessing, wrote: "*The Fulfillment* seeks, in troubled times, to be a voice of truth. Its purpose is to communicate to Christians and Jews a religious vision of Jewish existence, trying to break down the walls that ignorance and discord, error and sin have built. It, thus, hopes to become an instrument for peace."

The first issue contained an excerpt from Maritain's correspondence with Jean Cocteau. In his letter to the playwright, he touches on what he later was to call "The Mystery of Israel." He wrote: "How better could I answer you than with this Catholic prayer." The prayer referred to was one recited at the beginning of the Holy Year, 1925, by Pope Pius XI. The pope had prayed for all the inhabitants of this earth, in particular he had called for an outpouring of God's mercy on the Jewish people. He assured Cocteau that he did not consider the problems that are part of the Jewish dispersion of little moment. Still, oppressed or oppressing, ruled or ruling, they are always God's own, he wrote. He quoted—years before the Second Vatican Council would renew Saint Paul's theology on the Jews—this weighty sentence from the apostle's Letter to the Romans: "Judged by their response

to the gospel, they are God's enemies for your sake; but judged by His choice, they are dear to Him for the sake of the patriarchs. God's gracious gift and His calling are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28–29). He continued to quote the apostle: "We (Gentile Christians) are grafted to [the well-cultivated olive tree]." Responding to common criticism of Jews, he wrote: "Israel is a priestly people. Its vices are the vices of bad priests; its virtues, the virtues of saintly priests. I have met arrogant Jews; I have also encountered high-minded Jews of generous heart, men who were born poor and died poorer still, whose happiness was in giving, not acquiring."

Later in that letter, he spoke of the chaos of those days. He added that the confusion, rather than foul peace, is burgeoning with hope. With the measure of sin so great in the world, one must assume that God prepares a superabundance of grace for it.

I was able to share with Jacques Maritain the ideas that guided me and some collaborators in publishing *Die Erfüllung*, and found a unity of vision that I reencountered in various stages of his and my pilgrimage. After the rape of Austria by Hitler, I was able to find a temporary home in Paris. I visited him but once in his home in Meudon because he left Paris for Toronto where he was to teach at the Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies. When large parts of France were occupied by Hitler's army, I was able, with God's help and that of friends, to find my way through Spain to Portugal, and embarked for the United States. Though I had arrived without any knowledge of English, after half a year, I was able to preach my first sermon. It was on that very day that I saw Jacques Maritain again.

I do not remember whether it was at that visit, or my next one that Jacques Maritain came to speak of a book I had published at Édition du Cerf in Paris, entitled *Racisme, Antisemitisme, Antichristianisme*. Only half of that edition had been sold when the Nazi invaders marched into Paris. The Gestapo followed hot on their heels, and looked for me, but in vain. They found, however, the remaining copies and had them destroyed. Maritain suggested that the book be republished in New York by Éditions de La Maison Française, and offered to write a new preface to it. I dare say that we saw eye to eye on the thesis that governs the book: What begins as a glorification of one race—Count Gobineau's assumption of the Indo-German race's superiority to all other races—soon becomes contempt for Slavs, Semites, and others. (In reality, "Semites" is not a genuine racial classification. It refers to a family of languages spoken by

peoples of the Near East, of diverse backgrounds.) Sooner or later, the contempt turns into hatred, and hatred into violence. In the case of Hitler, the hatred changed into systematic mass-murder. Though this is rarely recognized, enmity toward the Jews invariably begets a denial—mental murder—of Christ. We—Jacques Maritain and I—were of one mind in considering Hitler's fury *sui generis*. It was light years away from any previous hostility toward the Jewish people, however bitter and brutal.

When I was to publish my first book in English, *Walls Are Crumbling: Seven Jewish Philosophers Discover Christ*, Jacques Maritain was again willing to write the preface.¹ What appealed to him was that these were thinkers who were all drawn to Christ without demeaning their heritage.

Our friendship deepened when he moved to Princeton, and we were able to see each other more frequently. Though I greatly value his contribution in many fields of thought, my deepest appreciation of him is his *délicatesse de coeur*. I trust this little anecdote will convey what I wish to say. One wintry night, as he helped me into my coat, I told him that Father Feeney—the man who taught that no one could be saved unless he rendered obedience to the pope, but refused to obey a papal decree that demanded he change his teaching—had just attacked me in print. Smilingly he answered, “Lucky you, being criticized by that man!” No sooner had he spoken than his face darkened and he continued, “No, no. It still hurts to be accused unjustly.” To me, he will always be the model minister of reconciliation. He would not barter one iota of his faith, and yet profoundly respected the convictions of others. In rereading his writings on the “Mystery of Israel,” I may not identify myself with every interpretation of his, but I think him unparalleled in his deep affection for the Jews, his appreciation of their intelligence, and his solidarity with them in their suffering.

While recounting part of Maritain's correspondence with Cocteau, I promised that I would take up his hope that the night of Stalin's and Hitler's terror might be followed by the dawn of a new day. Alas, there followed no spiritual awakening, no turning from mere laments and recriminations to a new dedication to the God of Israel. The crimes

¹John M. Oesterreicher, *Walls Are Crumbling: Seven Jewish Philosophers Discover Christ* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967). Abbreviated edition, *Five in Search of Wisdom*.

had been so monstrous that only a new beginning would have been a valid response. But Jews as well as Christians, Christians as well as Jews have failed in redeeming the time. It is not Jacques Maritain who erred; rather it is we who have not measured up to the task.

I am grateful to be able, at long last, publicly to acknowledge my debt to a humble and yet so towering a friend. May we all be inspired by Jacques Maritain's devotion to truth and justice.