

Fr Luke writes on the recent Maritain Seminar at Quarr

I meet so many people wounded by education. For example, an extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive young philosophy student told me how he had been caught up in Kant's way of thinking, which seemed reasonable as long as he was in it, to the point of nervous collapse. Friends with faith were able to show him a fuller, more embodied way of living which eluded the academic process.

Others have minds closed by scientism, sometimes in uneasy coexistence with hearts opened by faith. There are noble minds at work teaching in tertiary education, but sometimes they have to put into parenthesis what matters most to stay in the system that sustains them.

The telling aphorism of Nicholas Taleb, that academia is to knowledge what prostitution is to love, finds many an echo. Learning seems to have left behind study that grows out of faith, is rooted in hope and reaches up with love to Truth somewhere in the process of leaving the cloister first for cathedral schools and then for universities and what they have over the centuries become.

So when the Prior proposed that we have a seminar at Quarr Abbey on the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, and his wife, Raïssa, I was happy to give it my full-hearted support.

And the first paper given at the seminar, on Raïssa Maritain's creative intuition, showed us Jacques and Raïssa gravely wounded by their education. Sarah Maple spoke movingly of their suffering, dropping the level of her voice to the point where we had to pay attention to hear it and letting her dark red lipstick focus our eyes on her speaking lips. She told us, "Both having strong sensitivities, they were greatly affected by the Sorbonne's scientific materialism proclaimed by the professors of their day. Their intellectual circle was full of

pessimism..." They resolved to kill themselves if they did not find their way to truth. They were initially helped by the thinking of Henri Bergson (a critic of Kant) which was more intuitive and in line with Raïssa's naturally playful openness to reality than what they were generally taught. Their escape from death to life came definitively under the influence of the French novelist Léon Bloy.

Dom Bruno Drilhon, monk of Kergonan Abbey in Brittany, told us in his paper how they encountered this writer who was to be their godfather, quoting Raïssa: "They had within them that distress which is the only serious product of modern culture, and a sort of active despair lit only, they didn't know why, by the interior assurance that the Truth for which they hungered, and without which it was almost impossible for them to accept life, would one day be shown to them... What he showed them cannot be told; Christian fraternal tenderness and that sort of trembling of mercy and fear which seizes a soul marked with the love of God when encountering a soul."

Jacques Maritain identified the secret of their godfather's influence as "His extraordinary love for souls."

This, spiritual love, emerged for me as the over-riding theme of the seminar. It was clearly at the heart of the marriage between Jacques and Raïssa and their welcoming of others into their household, first Vera, Raïssa's sister who lived with them, and then the many writers and artists that came as their guests.

Perhaps it was shown most clearly in the paper by Doctor Florian Michel, a historian from Paris. He explained how Jacques fathered many god-children, bringing them to faith and baptism by spiritual love. They included people who continued to struggle in their lives, such as the novelist Julien Green.

Bonnie Wolfman, in her paper, shared her own return to faith in experiencing what Jacques Maritain articulated as a "transnatural desire

for beatitude or of absolutely and definitively saturating happiness, distinct from the strictly natural desire for happiness or felicity in general.” She spoke of how “Our age of scientism and secularization breeds the constancy of internal and external noise, and tends to render God’s voice indistinguishable” and cited an important teacher for the Maritains, Saint John of the Cross, as a guide to escaping it through “a contemplative quietude beyond the natural senses whereby the soul attaches to the object of its desire beyond the perceived external world.” She cited the same text from the poetry of Saint John of the Cross as our first speaker: “With no other light or guide/ Than the one that burned in my heart.”

As the latter expressed it, the intuition of the Maritains “burned in their hearts, and provided them, throughout their lives, with a light to venture towards the Truth they deeply longed for.” In an age when the teaching we get trains us to look outside ourselves in our search for knowledge, that repetition was good. It was heart speaking to heart, in spiritual love.

Love of course always sees the best in others and a paper from Father Thomas Crean O.P. discussed Maritain’s understanding of the work of the Spirit in those who do not self-identify as Christians.

Anthony Haynes, a young philosopher supple of mind and limb, considered a question that Maritain’s outreach to the artists of the day brought before him: the ethics of art. It is a question, Maritain argued, of purifying the source – of both the artist and the society in which he or she works allowing the motives of action to be made wholesome by alignment with the divine.

Mathematics, as well as art, can be linked to the divine love and Sister Nicholas Marie Polkowska O.P. explained with the aid of a power-point presentation how the power of abstraction in mathematical thought – for example in the consideration of a geometry

that goes beyond three dimensions – can be both a paradigm and a support for our reaching out to God whom we cannot imagine.

I confess that I nodded off to sleep for some of this paper, after an excellent convivial Sunday lunch on the terrace, but I heard enough to be persuaded that mathematics is a way into contemplation.

I have kept till last mention of a paper by Dom Michel Cagin, monk of Solesmes Abbey, simply because it summed up the theme of the conference by focusing directly on spiritual love. He cited Maritain’s conviction that “the spirit of contemplation is called to take on new forms, to become more supple, more free, to wear the livery of love for one’s neighbour in the measure that it flows out into ordinary life” and commented “it is not a question of just any kind of human or ‘humanitarian’ love, but of a love which has its source in God, which is God’s own love for men”.

Dom Cagin explained that through loving with this love (the love with which Jesus loves) there will be given to us what Maritain calls “a more mysterious grace” that of knowing Jesus experientially, of meeting Him in the act, of being one with Him in the very act by which He loves each one of the least of these his brothers”.

That love was surely present in this seminar. It was there in the discussions that followed each paper. As I watched a Dominican sister and brother in lively debate, the thought came to me: this is the Church. I saw the incarnational Christianity so dear to the founder of the Solesmes spiritual tradition, Dom Guéranger. Persons were fully engaged. Spiritual love motivated the thinking.

This is why it is beneficial for thought to make cloistered retreats; this is where healing of the mind is to be found. We hope to do this sort of thing again.