

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Love generates what is truly human
A reading of Paul Claudel's
The Tidings Brought to Mary

Luigi Giussani

Our movement* was born from this text: I used it a lot when I taught high school. Objectively, *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is one of the greatest works written in the twentieth century. It is not highly acclaimed because it is not understood, but the genius of Catholic Christianity is concentrated within its pages. For me, it represents the greatest poetry of the last century.

The theme of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* can be defined like this: love is the generator of the human person according to its total dimension; that is to say, love is the generator of each person's story in that it generates a people.

The play's central figure is a complex of persons; that is, a figure which is interpreted through the three characters of Pierre de Craon, Violaine and Anne Vercors. Anne Vercors is the rough and by now elderly builder of the family, who directs their work, who renders the earth useful. Violaine is a simple figure, beauti-

* The author of this introductory text is the founder of the Catholic Ecclesiastical Movement Communion and Liberation. This text is taken from a reading he made of the play with a group of university students in 1982.

Introduction

ful, and obedient, about to marry someone whom her father has chosen, who is, by chance, exactly the one she likes: Jacques. Lastly there is Pierre de Craon, the character who is most immediately expressive of the play's message.

The common denominator of these three characters is love, but not love as the expression of one's own will, as reactivity, nor as "sentimental tenderness." Emmanuel Mounier, in his book *The Christian Adventure*, says that the young no longer know the difference between love and tenderness. One of the most famous contemporary Italian philosophers has said: "The violence of ideologies having ended, tenderness remains." The way of life of today's young people demonstrates its own ethical inconsistency. Tenderness is precisely a reactive emotion, which love is not. Love is to be for, to be for the Ideal, to be for the whole design, where beauty and justice are safe.

The theme of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is the creative love of totality. Within the person, in fact, there can be the awareness of the wholeness of reality, of the universe. Understanding these things, one can understand this text. Anne Vercors is the tree's root, a man who has amassed wealth from honest work; he looks after his family. He also maintains by his labor a monastery of cloistered nuns, an absolutely gratuitous act that reveals the greatness of his heart. Yet he, despite having everything, is no longer able to live in a France where one no longer knows who is King, in a Church where one no longer knows who is Pope, among a Christian people that is divided, crushed, confused, so he makes a

great decision: he will go to the Holy Land to beg at the Holy Sepulcher for the return of the unity of the people under a King and a Pope. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, going on pilgrimage almost certainly meant dying. Very few returned. Totality as a dimension of this man's awareness is already shown by the love which draws his attention away from the concerns of field and family. He thinks about "God's sparrows" as he calls them, about those doves who sing less and less, because people are no longer entering the monastery and times are sad. He has the perception that gratuitousness has fled and he decides to go to his death, abandoning his wife, his daughters, and his lands. This is the first character, the seed of the play's development. Anne Vercors is like the root which is seldom seen: he appears at the beginning and then disappears, only to resurface at the end, against all expectation.

Of such a root a beautiful flower must be born, and such is Violaine our striking protagonist. She is a very simple woman, whose richness lies in responding with the heart, moment by moment, to the issues that the Mystery of God proposes to her through life. Her openness to the invitations God makes to her through the things around her is rich, intelligent and immediate. She has the good fortune that everything God asks of her corresponds to her desires. She will say in the prologue to Pierre de Craon: "Ah, how beautiful the world is, and how happy I am!"

"It is not for the stone to choose its own place, but for the Master of the Work who chose the stone" she is told by Pierre de Craon, who as a builder of cathedrals

Introduction

knows well how to place stone. Violaine then responds: “Then praised be God who has given me mine now, and I have no longer to seek it. And I ask him for no other. I am Violaine, I am eighteen years old, my father’s name is Anne Vercors, my mother’s name is Elizabeth, My sister’s name is Mara, my betrothed is named Jacques. There, that is all, there is nothing more to know. Everything is perfectly clear, all is arranged beforehand, and I am very glad. I am free, I have nothing to trouble me; another will lead me, the poor man, and he knows everything that there is to do!”

But at a certain point this simple, providential, and gracious correspondence between her tenderness, her womanly reactivity, her human desire, and life’s demands, this concordance that is so fascinating, unexpectedly breaks apart. It is shattered, and it will be the death of her. Thus Anne Vercors, returning, an old man who should have died, comes upon the corpse of his daughter who has herself just died though she should have lived.

In this unforeseen break we see the ultimate logic of what drives Violaine. In fact, she had always been placed in front of daily, normal, ordinary occasions; these she had lived with intelligence, cordiality and ready obedience. Thus, confronted by something exceptional, a thing filled with pain and fascination—Pierre de Craon’s love and the fact of his leprosy—the logic of this availability cannot but make her adhere, that is, make her share that exceptional and “irregular” pain. The same loving outlook with which she embraces what each day brings carries her, pushes her to share that fas-

cinating and painful presence. Yet that presence carries a terrible evil, leprosy. In the gesture of charity with which Violaine kisses Pierre de Craon on the mouth out of pity, out of compassion, the sharing of pain, the leprosy passes to her.

On the one hand, then, there is her wealthy father, struck by the exceptional historical situation; on the other there is Violaine, who serves the order of all things in the normality of her life, the one who says, “Excuse me for being so happy!”

The third aspect of this *central figure* is Pierre de Craon, who is the key actor of the whole work. Pierre de Craon is the character who most fully expresses what man is, the human “I”. He is the genius, the architect, the one who creates for everyone, who builds the world where everyone is as one, straining towards the ideal and filled with mutual helpfulness. He is the builder of cathedrals, which are the greatest symbol of the unity of a people. The genius, in fact, is someone who expresses in an exceptional way the soul of his people, and in doing this recalls them and unites them. What unifies people is given naturally by the genius, who in whatever field he expresses himself, has the function of drawing together and unifying. This is why the genius, because he expresses everyone, has a profound sensitivity to the recall of the beauty, the justice and the usefulness which reality mysteriously evokes.

In this supreme perception of the ideal significance of things, Pierre de Craon yields to temptation in front of Violaine, a symbol of beauty. He forgets justice and the right use of things, and tries to rape her. This prior

Introduction

event, which is the story's point of departure, is introduced in the prologue. Full of righteousness, she pulls away and resists him, and he is unable to dominate her even physically; she ridicules him.

However, as we have said, Pierre de Craon is a genius who more than others understands the design and right use of everything. Thus the impulse by which he attempts to possess one element, forgetting its true relationship to totality, immediately inflicts a mortal wound on him and he becomes "the man of pain." Symbolically, following Biblical tradition, the punishment of God makes him a leper. Thus, he who gives life to the inspiration of everyone is a stranger among all, since lepers have to live apart from the people. He who gives unity to everything must be a stranger to everyone. Pierre de Craon accepts these consequences, recognizing the instant of error; he becomes one who *dedicates* the totality of his life and paradoxically, is a virginal person. He dedicates his entire life to creating that which is the sign of the ideal toward which everyone tends: the cathedral, dwelling place of unity, for the beauty of everyone. He dedicates the whole of his life to building among the people the sign that evokes their destiny, thus it is he who will help everyone.

Therefore, next to the exceptionality of the decision to sacrifice himself, we discover the recognition of what love really is, notwithstanding one's own error and evil. Pierre accepts his leprosy as the consequence of his evil, and dedicates his life to the one true human good: the creation of hope. The cathedral, in fact, is dedicated to hope. Justice is the basis of hope; the cathedral is the

place of hope. All of this is intimated in the prologue, when Pierre says to Violaine: “May you be blessed in your chaste heart! Sanctity is not being stoned in a pagan land or kissing a leper on the mouth, but doing the will of God with promptness; it has to do with remaining in our place, or with moving higher up.”

He accepts the fact that his evil, throughout his life, will be dedicated to everyone, because everything re-enters the horizon of this sinner-genius. Violaine says: “Ah, how beautiful the world is and how happy I am!” Pierre de Craon replies: “Ah, how beautiful the world is and how unhappy I am! [...] So many belfries whose circling shadows write the hour for all the city! But shall I never design an oven, and the room for the children?” Violaine consoles him, and Pierre de Craon responds: “It’s not for this that you should cry for me; we are set apart. I don’t live as other men.” Here we have a unique definition of virginity.

They are in the portico, in the courtyard of the house. Violaine points out to him the shortest path and with her fragile arms opens the large door. Purity indicates the shortest path. Previously a significant gesture had occurred: Violaine had given him the only thing she possessed, the ring of her engagement to Jacques. As he departs, in an act of compassion, she embraces Pierre and kisses him. This second act is more total and radical; it is herself that she gives him, in the kiss.

Mara, Violaine’s sister, sees this.

This new character opens the second part of the play. In Mara, whose name is derived from the word *amara* which means bitter, we meet the *second figure* which, as

Introduction

with the *central figure*, is played out by three characters: Mara, Elizabeth and Jacques.

Jacques is the man who interprets these three figures. Jacques is perfect, a hard worker, faithful and constructive. But in him, love is defined; it is measured out.

The third scene of the second act, which for me is the most beautiful love scene ever written, develops the dramatic arc of human love. On the day of the engagement of Jacques and Violaine, she draws near and he notices she is not wearing the ring. Mara comes up to him right away and accuses her sister of betrayal, but Jacques believes Violaine because he loves her. Yet at a certain point, Violaine must tell her fiancé something terrible for that morning, upon awakening, she noticed on her own breast the first mark of leprosy. She has to tell him.

She is seized by anxiety, her behavior full of mysteriousness, because she must test how much he loves her. It is not that she believes he does not love her, but his attitude in front of the sign of leprosy will be her proof. She is compelled to put him to the test. As far as the ring is concerned, Jacques believes her. Then she begins to utter strange phrases and to say strange things in their conversation. Jacques points this out. The climax, the cornerstone is when Violaine affirms: "Ah, how vast the world is, and how alone we are." He becomes agitated and tells her not to be afraid, to trust, that his strong arms will sustain her in life. Yet Violaine continues her train of thought and begins to ask him if he really loves her, like Christ asked Peter. Jacques grows more agitated, but she insists that if he really loves her he must

entrust himself totally to her. Jacques says that he does, that he trusts. So she opens her dress and shows him the sign of leprosy.

For the mentality of that time, leprosy constituted punishment for sin, thus this sign, to Jacques' eyes, is clear proof of Mara's denunciation. The two continue speaking, suddenly turning their backs on each other. Already there is an unfathomable abyss between Violaine, who enters more and more into the pain of this disappointment, and Jacques, who grows more dogged in his evidence for accusing her, until he cries out for her to leave. She still tries to obtain his trust, asking to be embraced even if she is leprous, because if one loves he embraces another even if she is leprous. But he tells her to leave the city and live as an outcast. When Jacques has to face the things which Violaine says, with which she recalls "the world is vast, and how alone we are," he responds that she's making strange comments, tells her he doesn't know how to philosophize, and asks her not to complicate things. He says that he is a serious man who knows how to work, to plant and to sow. He is a man for whom the measure of life is duty as it is perceived and felt by him.

Jacques is not someone who recognizes the essence of his person by reference to all that there is, something greater and more mysterious. The Mystery, in fact, reveals itself to him through the paradoxical presence of that woman who has apparently betrayed him. Jacques is the emblem of the gentleman who carries out his duty. But it is not this that defines man, because what defines life is the relationship with the infinite. Jacques, how-

Introduction

ever, does not live out his life in relation with the Mystery. He does not “throw it away”: everything has to be calculated, precise and convenient for this gentleman.

From these observations about Jacques we can understand the other two figures of the drama.

Mara is madly in love with Jacques and doesn't understand why Jacques has to marry her sister since she herself is naturally in love with him. It is “just” that Jacques should be hers. In the name of this justice, Mara will kill her sister.

Elizabeth, their mother, feels more for the unfortunate Mara. Here we have the conflict between love that either makes one perceive one's own existence in reference to something immeasurable, or else yields to an ideal of life that coincides with one's own measure, with one's own idea of justice.

Violaine goes off and lives alone, far from the town; they bring her food every day which she goes out to get. She knocks two castanets together so that others, warned of her condition, move away. In the end the leprosy makes her blind. While she is away, Mara marries Jacques. They have a daughter who dies. Mara thinks that this death is her sister's vengeance on her. Early in the morning Mara brings the child's body to the leper. She throws the body at her, calling her a child killer. Violaine takes the body of the little one in her arms, a drop of milk issues forth from her breast, touches the baby's mouth and the baby lives. A miracle has happened. Crazed with joy, Mara brings the baby home. When he sees the child the husband cannot take his eyes off the eyes of the reborn child, because they are the same color

as Violaine's. The baby's eyes have taken on the color of Violaine's. This is the emblem of yearning for the Absolute, for the Ideal that can only be approached through sacrifice: the tremendous pain of Pierre de Craon, the brokenness of Violaine's life, Anne Vercors' risking death.

The Tidings Brought to Mary is God's invitation to us to remain in our own place in the world. This cannot but pass by way of the cross, but then from the cross to resurrection, not in the next life but in this one.

Logic always remains faithful to itself. The logic of both good and evil grows apace: seeing her husband who from that moment keeps looking at the eyes of the resurrected child, Mara reaches the pinnacle of hatred and kills her sister, throwing her under a gravel cart. By the place where the body of Violaine is found, mortally wounded, passes Pierre de Craon. He is the person who is a stranger to society, a stranger to the life of everyone; the one who, estranged from the life of everyone, embraces everyone and gives a dwelling place and a meaning to everyone. Because he is himself a leper, he is the only one who may touch the body. He brings it to Violaine's family home.

From the aesthetic point of view this drama is full of correspondences, symmetries. Every word corresponds to another that comes later. It has an endless beauty.

When Pierre de Craon places the body of Violaine on the table, just after sunrise, Anne Vercors, her father, arrives; he looks for his house, perceives the agitation and discovers what has happened. There, with Pierre de Craon and his dead child, now incapable of remaking

Introduction

that which has been destroyed, he summarizes the story in the final monologue.

“Herein lies peace for the one who knows it, and it is composed of joy and grief in equal parts. My wife is dead. Violaine is dead. It is better this way.” “Is the goal of life, perhaps,... to live? [...] Not to live, but to die [...] and to give what we have gladly. Herein lies joy, freedom, grace, eternal youth!” “Why get yourself worked up so much when it is so simple just to obey?”

Violaine’s path is the simplest, next to the painful one of Pierre de Craon and the exceptional one of Anne Vercors.

These pages contain the ideal of everything. Their theme is love, that is, conceiving of one’s own being always by reference to the total design. This design has a name, it is a man, Christ: to conceive of our being in reference to him, through burning pain, through the exceptional thrust of generosity, or through the normality of daily obedience. The alternative is mean-heartedness.

Every day, we must choose between these two roots, these two well-springs: either that of Anne Vercors or that of Elizabeth.