

Mosaic: St Praxed's

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So like a quiet pigeon in a hollowed rock
You stand there in the wall's curve
Made of stone needled tapestry
In this dim sheltered paradise
Mary made of love art and poetry

In the obscure and flaming chapel
Where gold and ruby hold the azure
Conch of sweetly burning peace
You welcome me refuge pure
To see you O soul's delight

Deeply forgetful of the evil by our side
We sail above our strange agony
Chained utterly Mary to your joy

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MERTON SETS OFF for an extended holiday in Italy. A serious illness, his place at Cambridge, a camping holiday in the New Forest, and a Bournemouth Hotel romance had been put behind him. He arrived in Rome. The 17 year old Merton began to feel a pulse in his soul and a longing to pray. It was not the usual sights that moved him, neither the "vapid, boring, semi-pornographic statuary of the Empire" nor the ecclesiastical monuments of the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation that he had first sought out as a dutiful tourist reading his Baedeker. Rather, it was the city's most ancient churches. In particular, for our purposes, the church of St Praxed's. Here and in

other churches, he discovered 'the Christ of the Byzantine icons'. In his autobiography, Merton writes:

And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life. (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948, p.109).

In practice, D.H. Lawrence was put aside, and the Gospels were taken up.

St Praxed

St Praxed was a female saint, the daughter of Pudens, a Roman senator, and his wife Servilia. St Paul the apostle is said to have lodged in the house of Pudens, and to have used it as a church. St Praxed is said to have ministered to the martyrs in prison, and to have been diligent in collecting their relics. In the nave of the church is a well, in which it is pretended the Saint cast the sponge wherewith she had sopped up the blood of many martyrs. Her relics are preserved in the church. She is represented in art with a basin in one hand and a bunch of palms in the other, though she did not herself suffer martyrdom.

Columbia University and Jacques Maritain

The next piece of the mosaic of this poem begins in 1935 when Merton was at Columbia University. He heard, under Mark Van Doren's tutorship, of a modern scholastic called Jacques Maritain. Here was someone who could encourage Merton in his interest in the connections between Catholicism and the world of culture. At Columbia he found others who shared his passions.

They stand in the stacks of libraries and turn over pages of St Thomas's *Summa* with a kind of curious reverence. They talk in seminars about "Thomas" and "Scotus" and "Augustine" and "Bonaventure" and they are familiar with Maritain and Gilson, and they have read all the poems of Hopkins—and indeed they know more about what is best in Catholic literary and philosophical tradition than most Catholics ever do on this earth. (SSM, p.175).

Maritain helped Merton through the difficulties and contradictions that he felt between sociology and economics on the one hand, and faith and charity on the other, in his thesis on the poems of Blake. Merton met Jacques Maritain through Dan Walsh who had been a student and collaborator of Gilson and knew Maritain well. Merton was introduced to Maritain at the Catholic Book Club, "where this most saintly philosopher had been giving a talk on Catholic Action" (SSM, p.219) No mention yet of Jacques's wife, Raïssa, although she too had been among the library stacks. Raïssa is the author of the poem, 'Mosaic: St Praxed's'.

Raïssa Oumancoff (1883-1960)

Raïssa was a Russian Jewish emigrée and a student at the Sorbonne where she met her future husband Jacques Maritain. They met in 1900, and were married four years later. In 1906, together with Raïssa's sister, Vera, they were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church; Léon Bloy was their godfather. Raïssa shared Jacques' intellectual interests, and as philosophers, poets and social critics, and above all as contemplatives, they made their mark on twentieth century catholicism. With Merton, they shared a commitment to art, wisdom, and social action. Like Merton they recognised contemplation, or as Raïssa called it, 'receuillement', as the source from which all else flowed. Jacques and Raïssa lived in the United States for a time during World War II, and again from 1948-1960, while Jacques taught at Princeton. They returned to France shortly before Raïssa's death in November 1960. She was buried at Kolbsheim, Alsace and in 1973 when Jacques died in Toulouse, where he lived with the Little Brothers of Jesus and had professed religious vows, he was buried in the same tomb as Raïssa.

Une à Une

Raïssa Maritain shines out of Merton's work in brief shafts of light. They were soul to soul. As Raïssa said, and Merton put as a quotation at the front of *Emblems of a Season of Fury*:

Et il n'y aura pas d'acquittement pour les nations
Mais seulement pour les âmes une à une.
(We shall never have an acquittal for the nations
But only for souls one to one)

For our purposes here, the significant joining of souls, came with Merton's translation of six poems and a prose piece of Raïssa's, which were published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, among which was 'Mosaic: St Praxed's'. *Emblems* came out from New Directions in 1963. Merton wrote to James Laughlin,

I have done some new translations, this time from Raïssa Maritain... who was a remarkable person. Her poems are very individual and reflect a deep and simple personality that is most impressive. Probably won't be wildly popular with some people, but I think they have, as the blurbs say, "lasting significance" (TM to JL, Jan .11, 1963).

Raïssa's Journal

After Raïssa's death, Jacques sent Merton a signed copy of Raïssa's *Journal*. Merton's letter to Jacques, (Dec.18, 1962) thanking him for sending the book is very revealing of how Merton thought of Raïssa, and her writings:

The document is like a sunrise, a wonder that is ordinary but if you are more attentive you find it an outstanding event. I read it in solitude in the woods. Each sentence opens our heart to God. It's a book full of windows. What moves me most is that in each line I see and I hear this "child" of Proverbs 8.27-31 "ludens in orbe terrarum" (playing over his whole world), ludens too in Raïssa. I dreamed a few times of this child (who for the first time presented herself as a girl of the race of St Anne) and she was sad and quiet because everyone was making fun of her strange name which was "Proverb". Also another time on a Louisville street I saw suddenly that everyone was "Proverb", without knowing it. Raïssa's words are filled with the presence and the light of this wisdom-child. She is 'Proverb'... Especially she reminds me of that mystic that I love above all others, Julian of Norwich. (Raïssa even speaks of the maternal knees of God.) She has the same tone, the same candour.

O thank you dear Jacques for this beautiful book with my name written by Raïssa's hand, on the first page. How precious this gift is to me. It will often remind me that I must be faithful to Proverb, the poor, the unknown. Pray so that I may be faithful.

Some time ago I told (John Howard) Griffin...that I wanted to translate some of Raïssa's poems that do not exist in English beginning with the one about Chagall. Some others too, but I don't have them. Tell me who the publishers are and if you will allow me to translate and publish them, not all but about a dozen. (Letter, Dec 18, 1962, *The Courage for Truth*, pp.33,34)

Raïssa's *Notes sur le Pater*

In 1962 Raïssa's *Notes on the Lord's Prayer* (*Notes sur le Pater*) was published. Merton quoted short sections from it at the end of his book, now known as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. He was finishing this essay on his Asian journey. The Managing Editor of the Cistercian Fathers Series received a note the day after Merton's death which read, "I guess I ought to read the galleys for this book but I am not sure where I'll be. Asia has been magnificent so far and more to come. Best always, Tom Merton." Raïssa is quoted on almost the last page of this book. They were almost her last printed words, and they are written in Merton's last book of printed words.

If there were fewer wars, less thirst to dominate and to exploit others, less national egoism, less egoism of class and caste, if man were more concerned for his brother, and really wanted to collect together, for the good of the human race, all the resources which science places at his disposal especially today, there would be fewer children who die or are incurably weakened by undernourishment.

She goes on, says Merton, to ask what obstacles man has placed in the way of the Gospel that this should be so. It is unfortunately true that those who have complacently imagined themselves blessed by God have in fact done more than others to frustrate his will. But Raïssa Maritain says that perhaps the poor, who have never been able to seek the Kingdom of God, may be found by it "when they leave the world which has not recognized in them the image of God." In *Conjectures* (p.318) Merton mentions that he is writing a preface to Julie Kernan's translation of Raïssa's beautiful little book on the *Pater*.

The poem itself

So much for secondary sources. What about the poem? It's short. It's a translation from the French. It doesn't rhyme. I haven't seen the mosaic myself, and although Merton had visited St Praxed's, he might not necessarily have seen it, or remembered it, either. Raïssa, spending time while her husband worked in Rome, obviously did, and it moved her greatly. So all we have is the poem, in order to paint for ourselves the visual picture. This mosaic is of Mary, the Mother of our Lord, and it is on a part of the church which is not flat but rounded, "in the wall's curve", that's feminine for a start, and she is as if nestling like a pigeon in a hollowed rock, and so, natural, discreet, but visible. The quality of the mosaic is like a tapestry, but seems to be sewn into

stone; soft, but integral with the very stone of the building. There are no punctuation marks, you will notice, in the poem, and so there are various combinations of phrases you can make. The words belong to other words with a will of their own.

The "dim sheltered paradise" takes us to the churches Merton liked in New York which were dark and numinous. Donne said, "churches are best for prayer, that have least light": and here is one of them, with in it an image of the Blessed Virgin, whose constituent parts are not earth, air, fire and water, but love, art and poetry. Then come the visual fireworks:

the flaming chapel
Where gold and ruby hold the azure
Conch ...

'Conch' is a strange word, it reminds me of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and the conch which was used to call a meeting, but probably here it is meant in its architectural meaning "domed roof of semi-circular apse".

You welcome me refuge pure
To see you O soul's delight.

This is 'Love bade me welcome', and 'God is my refuge and my strength', and the Song of Songs 7: 6, 'How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights.'

You welcome me refuge pure
To see you O soul's delight

And then, Raïssa is:

Deeply forgetful of the evil by our side

Conscious of the evil, but freed from its chains, we are chained only to the joy which captures us in Mary. Finally, "we sail above our strange agony". The heights and levels of this poem are very important. I don't know, but I'm sure the mosaic is at a height, and by associating with the Virgin we too are aloft. We are sailing along, like Mary on the heights of Judah, urgent to see Elizabeth to share the news, described in one of Merton's most memorable images, in his poem 'The Quickening of John the Baptist':

Why are your clothes like sails?

We are sailing to heaven, well above "our strange agony", whatever that might be for us. "Strange" because agony is foreign to our true nature. The nature to which Mary gave birth should not be

strange to us, as humans, for in Christ we share his humanity. Agony, even if it is a stage on the journey, is not our final destination.

Chained utterly Mary to your joy

Now, of course, we are eager to see this mosaic with our own eyes, and yet, and yet: in a way we have seen it. Perhaps even more clearly than it may be seen in St Praxed's. We have seen it through the eyes of that difficult to translate French word, 'recueillement'. Does it mean meditation, or is it more than that, the process of seeing the secrets of God?

A final quote from Raïssa Maritain:

It seems that the Holy Spirit grows in the heart 'recueilli', silent and burning with love. Profound silence is lyrical. It opens the heart in a mystical way, it experiences the whole range of humility, joy, and love, without a word being said. (*Journal*).

The heart "recueilli". This was the state of the heart of Merton in 1933 on his visit to Rome. In a letter to Jacques Maritain discussing the translation of Raïssa's writings, he wrote

The best word for recueillement would be it seems to me, ABSORPTION (December 20, 1966, *The Courage for Truth*, p.50).

His prayer, through its attention to the word and the image, and the world around him, allowed him, as it allows us, to be absorbed into God.