

THE DESERT OF SOLITUDE: REFLECTIONS ON APOSTLESHIP IN THE WORK OF MADELEINE DELBRÊL

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“At the heart of even the most engaged and active of missions lies this solitude at the foundations of all communion, a solitude that is adoration.”



Madeleine Delbrêl, the French laywoman who at the age of seventeen penned a remarkably lucid atheist manifesto entitled “God is dead . . . Long live death!”¹ knew the pitiless suffering of the world of unbelief. In 1960, shortly before her death, she would describe what she held to be the most “profound misfortune” that can befall a man: “The inner support that holds all things in being crumbles from within . . . and all things are swallowed up in nothingness.”² The same woman, who at twenty found herself in the grips of a “violent” conversion to Christianity and who would spend the rest her life in a bastion of French Communism, seeking to respond to the commandment, “You shall love . . . ,”³ also knew

¹Madeleine Delbrêl, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets* (= *We*), trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. and Charles F. Mann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 47–49.

²*Ibid.*, 174.

³“Missionary Love” (an extract from *Missionnaires sans bateaux* [=MSB]), in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 24 (Fall 1997): 626–29; at 628.

the, not pitiless, but even more unbearable suffering that lies behind every genuine Christian mission. The missionary has the searing experience of the finite creature suddenly faced with the love of God, and finds himself drawn into the infinite desire of the Love that “is not loved”: “only the realization that God yearns for all this love, for the love of all men who have been born, are being born, or will be born—this realization alone creates missionaries.”⁴ Madeleine was a missionary, who possessed what Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as the capacity to make the “hairline distinction” between “perfect love” of one’s brother and “a decisive rejection” of every ideological program “so expertly, that . . . she is able to become the great advisor for the worker-priests” in France.⁵ And she was this because she herself lived that reality toward which she once said that her *équipe*, the community of laywomen who gathered around her, should strive: “At bottom, this is a matter of learning to be in and with the Church.”⁶

Madeleine, whose clear-sightedness and fidelity sustained her own community striving to live the evangelical counsels in the midst of the world, as well as the task of the *Mission de France*,⁷ knew the source of mission. She knew the trajectory of God’s Word, which descends into our flesh and further still, into the “profound misfortune” of the world of unbelief. She knew that this Word is not ours, that it thoroughly expropriates whoever dares to receive it. And she knew that it is an ecclesial Word, received and kept by the Church, the Bride of Christ, for the sake of the world. Madeleine was, in other words, an *apostolic* Christian, in the double sense of the word: a Christian who, in receiving the Word, allowed herself to be sent forth by and with it into the world, and who recognized that her “apostolate” (a term she seldom used) could bear

⁴Ibid., 627–28.

⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Preface to the German Edition of *Nous Autres, Gens des Rues*,” in *We*, xv–xvi; at xv.

⁶*La Joie de croire* (=JC) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 174.

⁷Prompted by the de-Christianization and material misery of the French proletariat, the seminary of the *Mission de France* was founded in 1941 at Lisieux by Émile Cardinal Suhard of Paris and the French Bishops’ Conference. The seminary and the missionary movement associated with it centered on the formation of priests who would perform manual labor in factories and live among the working class.

fruit only if it retained its organic connection to the hierarchical Church of the apostles and thereby remained a living cell of the “whole Christ,” the “Christ-Church.”⁸

This brief sketch will simply seek to articulate something of a mystery that Madeleine herself both confessed and expressed, perhaps nowhere better than in a wordless gesture that sums up her understanding of the relationship between the Word safeguarded by the apostolic Church and Christian mission, between the Word who wishes to incarnate himself in believers and a world waiting for God. As Jacques Loew describes it, a “realistic Christian” possesses a ready, joyful, and living “realism of faith.”⁹ But what does such a realistic Christian do when the mission to which she has given her life and her strength is beset by apparently insurmountable difficulties, and risks losing “the grace of the apostolate that was granted to France”?¹⁰ What is called for when the apostolic Church that one loves and from which one draws all one’s life appears, through the severity of its reprimands, to threaten the existence of the mission that is its own fruit? For Madeleine, the answer is simple: despite a lack of money, despite the incomprehension of her friends, despite the absurdity of the undertaking, she sets off on a pilgrimage to Rome for exactly one day. Humor accompanies the trip,¹¹ but so does fidelity, and the unflinching discernment that knows that in such a crisis, only one kind of act can serve:

Sharing for eighteen years the life of a population not only without faith but without a Christian memory: bound very profoundly to what the Church, in France, conveys that is *nova* and *vetera*, persuaded that our fidelity demands a missionary thrust that is ever more ardent as well as an ever stronger

⁸Cf. *We*, 96.

⁹Cf. Jacques Loew, “Introduction” to *We*, 1–43; at 22–23.

¹⁰*We*, 114.

¹¹Cf. Loew, biographical notes to *We*, 77–78. Loew explains that, when her community balked at the expense of the proposed daylong pilgrimage, Madeleine agreed to go “only if a sum of money equal to the trip’s expenses fell from the sky Now, that very week, one of Madeleine’s friends, a nonbeliever, brought a distant relation from South America to Madeleine After her visit, ‘Aunt Rosa’ left the *équipe* with a national lottery ticket, which no one paid any attention to until someone noticed that it was in fact a winning ticket—with a prize big enough to cover the expenses of a trip to Rome.”

rootedness in obedience, I desired to go to Rome, in the name of us all So that this might be an act of faith and nothing more, I arrived in Rome in the morning; I went immediately to the tomb of St. Peter I remained there the whole day, and I left again for Paris in the evening.¹²

With this woman who was, as Balthasar describes it, “ecclesial in her bones”¹³ and who thus expressed in our age and in her way something of the *anima ecclesiastica* [the ecclesial spirit], the ancient ideal of the Fathers,¹⁴ we will look at what it means to be that kind of human being who allows himself to be drawn into the movement of God’s Word into flesh and time, and finally into the suffering of the world of unbelief, to become, as a participant in the mission of the “Christ-Church,” a covenant between the world and God. In other words, we will try to allow her to show us what it means to be an apostolic Christian.

1. “*The Gospel and the Church are a single fact.*”

In the preface of the only book Madeleine published during her lifetime, *Ville marxiste, terre de mission* [Marxist city, mission territory], she states that the work will approach the rapid spread of Marxist doctrine not so much as a “religious peril” but as an “apostolic question,” and explains, “it seems that Marxism, the earthly hopes [*espoirs*] of which have destroyed all religious hope [*espérance*], demands the presence of incorruptibly religious and apostolic human beings, freely giving their lives to that which the love of God requires.”¹⁵ Such human beings have allowed them-

¹²Cited in Henri de Lubac, *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 584–85.

¹³“Foreword” to Madeleine Delbr el, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben* [translation of *La Joie de Croire*], trans. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Cornelia Capol (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1993), 7–13; 13. Cf. the full English translation of this text in the present edition of *Communio*.

¹⁴Cf. Balthasar, commenting on Origen, in “Who Is the Church?” in *Explorations of Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 173.

¹⁵Madeleine Delbr el, *Ville marxiste, terre de mission* (=VM) (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 41–42.

selves to be seized by the supreme freedom of Christ; they know the power of the Gospel. They also know what it is that permits them to be apostolic, what allows them to be a place that binds together¹⁶ the world and God: they love God and their brothers with a profoundly incarnational realism within a profoundly incarnate reality. That is, the apostolic man is an ecclesial man, who recognizes that the life he lives, like the love with which he loves, is no longer his own. Hence the curious leap from the sentence just cited to the next, apparently disconnected paragraph: "I would like to write the word 'Church' . . . as often as I write the word 'God.'" Madeleine continues, addressing the Communist directly:

You, too, Communist (as you say to me: *you*, Christian) . . . , the more you despise the Church, the more, each time, I love you, because I would like you to understand that over everything that is said of her . . . she cries out, often with the enormous cry of her silence, the love that Jesus Christ gives her ceaselessly for you and for me. If I love you, Communist, it is not despite her, it is thanks to her, in her. You say that she is my Church and you speak rightly, but what you do not say and what is still more true is that I am hers. Madeleine's Church? Yes. But the Church's Madeleine, yes and more . . .¹⁷

The "incorruptibly religious and apostolic human being," the man who cannot but stand with his suffering neighbor because he stands before God, stands within an incomparably fruitful and life-giving reality, for Christ not only was but "*is*, in the Church":¹⁸ in the words of Joan of Arc, which Madeleine appropriates, "Jesus Christ and the Church are one."¹⁹

To understand what such a claim meant to Madeleine or to "Jacques, Pierre, or Paul of the Church, each time that a Christian loves . . . his brother,"²⁰ we must take a step further with these Christians into the mystery of God. It is God who "bedazzled" the young atheist in her radical conversion, and who left her, like every

¹⁶We recall that this binding together lies at the etymological root of the word "religion."

¹⁷*VM*, 42.

¹⁸*We*, 122.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*VM*, 42.

other believing Christian, “shaken to the core . . . through the irruption of the Lord’s Word into our lives.”²¹ Thenceforward, she knew with remarkable clarity that over the Christian’s every attempt at love, over every apostolate, over and within the entire Body that is the Church, one power is at work, one life is growing, and one light is illuminating every movement of love toward the world. In a way, the Christian cannot see, Madeleine will write more than once, because “total availability to the tasks of the Lord . . . plunges us into a mystery where our reason comes up short, where our intelligence must know how to become blind,” and yet he also possesses the only necessary, the only efficacious light: “we have, in order to live and to act, in the oftentimes disconcerting framework . . . of circumstances, a light that does not fail: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, such as the Church interprets it for us and gives it to us.”²²

In notes entitled “The Book of the Lord,” Madeleine observes that this Gospel, which is “the book of the life of the Lord,” is meant to become “the book of our life It is not made to be read, but to be received in us Words of human books are understood and weighed up. The words of the Gospel are suffered and borne.”²³ But because this Gospel is a Word addressed to one hearer, generates one life, and incarnates itself in one Body in order to incarnate itself in the world, there is only one place the Christian can stand in order to be illumined by it, to suffer and bear it, or even to hear it, once this Word and its demands have “irrupted” into his life. The Gospel is too vast, too burning in its simplicity for the individual recipient to be charged with bearing it in its entirety, unless he stands within the single suffering, fruitful, and joyful recipient of the Word: “Two thousand years of the Church have taught us that only this Church is capable, in the strong sense of the word, of living the Gospel.”²⁴

Only the Church, the Bride of Christ, is “proportioned” to the Gospel,²⁵ only she was conceived in the mind and the will of

²¹From “Le Père Lorenzo, Une voix qui criait l’Évangile,” in *JC*. Quoted in Loew, “Introduction” to *We*, 12.

²²*JC*, 57.

²³*Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴*MSB*, 84.

²⁵*Cf. VM*, 155: “Without a lively return to this realism of the Church, either we

God in a primordial unity with the Word. And if it seems that this could remain an abstract claim, Madeleine's understanding of it is inescapably concrete. Writing in the context of the worker-priest crisis, in which the movement of missionary priests into the neighborhoods and factories of the predominantly Communist proletariat occasioned for some the loss of their faith, prompting a series of prohibitions from Rome, Madeleine not only seeks to draw the Church's attention to the urgent "apostolic question" involved, but reminds the discouraged missionaries of the only place they can stand if they wish to make of their lives a genuine confession of the Gospel. The Gospel is, after all, the one Word of love, and such a Word can resound and bear fruit only in the life of the Church who is meant to receive it. This is a fact, one of the few facts that the missionary whose apostolate is dear to him cannot afford to forget: "so that our acts remain *facts* of faith, it is not only our reference to the Gospel that must be total; our 'confession' to the Church must be no less complete The Gospel and the Church are a single fact. Even if the Gospel is only proclaimed step by step, even if the mystery of the Church remains for a long time undecipherable, it is the whole Gospel that is made for the whole Church."²⁶

The whole "book" of the Lord's life is a Word that seeks to be received in its entirety in the world, and that thus seeks—one is tempted to say, *needs*—the whole Body of the Church, so as to enter completely into flesh and time. Hence the corollary for the Church, who does not exist except in unity with this Word: it is from the contemplation and assimilation of the Word of God in all its dimensions, and only from this, that the Church receives her identity and her life. This fact, upon which all Christian acts must be based in order to remain "facts of faith," places the Christian within a polarity that is the rhythm and movement of his life: in order to be apostolic in the sense of bearing the Gospel to the world, the believer must be apostolic in the sense of remaining a living "cell"²⁷ of the apostolic Church. But also: in order for the apostolic Church to remain living, its cells, or individual Christians, individual

will be unable to bear a Gospel whose weight is proportioned only to the Church, or we will so lighten this Gospel that it will no longer be itself, and we will proclaim something other than what it is."

²⁶Ibid., 154.

²⁷Cf. "The Church: A Single Life in a Single Body," in *We*, 188–91.

communities, and parishes, must persevere in the vital encounter in which the essence of the Church's life is actualized in them: they must receive, contemplate, surrender to, and adore this incarnate Word that is "made for" the Church, and that is all of God's love for his world.

Madeleine sees a reflection of the first of these consequences in the rite of episcopal ordination, in which we perceive both the dimensions of a Gospel no one of us can bear alone, and the "state of collaboration with [the] Father"²⁸ to which the Church and each of her children—and in a particular way each of the successors of the apostles—is called. "My yoke is easy and my burden light," the Lord says, and this, like all the other words of the Lord, is true. But it can be true only because the Church keeps alive in herself the unadulterated encounter between the weakness and incapacity of man and the power—one might almost say the crushing weight—of the Gospel. The bishops, who are a "ferment of unity" and a "principle of charity," also deserve our charity and our compassion,²⁹ for as the ordination rite makes visible, they are an efficacious sign to us of that terrifying encounter in which every Christian participates, the charging of sinful man with the Gospel: "In the rites of the consecration of the bishop, the Church sheds full light on the native weakness of man . . . He is interrogated as a weak and fallible man . . . about his will not to fall and not to fail." Referring to the open book of the Gospels that is placed upon the bishop-elect's head, held over him during the prayer of consecration, and solemnly presented to him after he is anointed, Madeleine remarks, "A very impressive thing: the place of the Gospel. It is ceaselessly on the scene; ceaselessly, the new bishop is placed in its presence, under its weight, before its responsibility. There is, as if become tangible, the surpassing of the simply human sphere . . . the way of being of the new creature born of God."³⁰

²⁸Madeleine Delbr el, *Indivisible amour (=IA)* (Paris: Centurion, 1991), 121.

²⁹Cf. Madeleine's prayer for the pope in a letter dated 24 February 1954: "For a long time now, I have been struck by the Holy Father's solitude: this seems to be his way of belonging to everyone. So I often asked the Holy Virgin to be *gentle* with him, to him who can call no other man 'father'" (cited in Jean Gu gen, "Preface" to *JC*, 9–29; at 14).

³⁰*IA*, 121.

We, living cells of the Church, could not bear such a burden or draw life from the Word if we separated ourselves from the Body, the exchange of whose differentiated functions is our life;³¹ the easy yoke would crush us if we did not remain in the mystery of the Bride, who alone is charged with bearing, keeping, and adoring the full dimensions of the Word. But here we encounter the second of the two consequences mentioned above: the Church cannot live, grow, and bear fruit if her most fundamental identity is not actualized in each of her members. Why else must the bishop bear his crushing burden to become for the whole Body a “ferment of unity”? Why is there that “kind of sacrament of the Christ-Church” that is Rome,³² and what does the entire hierarchical Church serve? Madeleine is convinced that all of these exist for the sake of the simplest and most charged of encounters, in which each one who participates in the life of the Body is placed face to face with “the Word of God spoken in Christ.”³³

The Gospel is a supremely powerful word, and its principle is life, divine life in men. This life seeks transmission, it seeks human hearts, and Madeleine warns anyone who steps into this encounter blind: this book will seek to “take hold of you,” “its words, which are spirit, will penetrate into you like seeds in the earth, like leaven in bread, like trees in the sky. And if you yield yourself up to these words, you yourself will become simply a new expression of them.”³⁴ The Christian to whom the Church entrusts the Gospel and thereby also entrusts her own life—and she does this, in a differentiated fashion, to each of her children—is thus

³¹Cf. *We*, 122–23: “Sometimes we take up the attitude vis-à-vis the Church of someone who is looking for a certificate of good behavior. But the Church doesn’t supervise: she exists, and we exist within her. She is the Body of Christ and we are members of this Body. Our dependence on her and our commitment to her, if they entail external acts or signs, are above all an internal and vital dependence and commitment . . . This body has its own laws, and its inner economy, which is the very economy of salvation. It has its organs—which are not cogs—its blood, its metabolism, its food. I repeat, we are intelligent and loving cells. We need to realize what the love of each cell of our body means for the other cells, for their reciprocal services, for the vital organs . . .”

³²Letter to Jean Guégen, 10 May 1952, quoted in Guégen, “Preface,” 10.

³³*We*, 64.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 63–64.

placed unprotected before, not simply a light, but a “fire that demands entry . . . so that it may ravage and transform,” before “the Gospel’s simple and ruthless commands.”³⁵ This Word *must* bear fruit, and it must bear fruit *in us*, for it was sent into the world to give life. And yet the Christian may not forget that for all this “ravaging,” in which the Gospel “reaches to the very roots of our corruption” to transform it, “the revelation of the Gospel is spirit and life.”³⁶ For all of its sovereign power, the Word of God is poor, “meek and humble of heart,” and seeks nothing more than “a human heart poor and warm enough to receive it.”³⁷ He seeks “love, the love of all men,”³⁸ and for this he needs the fruitfulness of the only one capable of bearing the Gospel.

“It is the Church alone who has charge of the Gospel,” but she also gives it to us; she gives us the Lord’s life in words that are meant to be “carried in us as the earth carries the grain . . . it must germinate and bear fruit.”³⁹ If the apostolic Church can only exist, can only live and accomplish her task when her members are placed in a bare face-to-face with the “penetrating presence of God,”⁴⁰ then this most hidden and intimate, apparently solitary encounter bears within itself all the fruitfulness of the Church and the Gospel: “The growth of the Church is tied to the growth of the Word of God: to welcome the Word of God, to allow ourselves to grow through it, is to participate in and to work at the growth of the Church. For the fruitfulness of the Word of God is its being transmitted; its transmission is inseparable from contradiction and the cross. Every Christian life and the whole of Christian life are founded on Faith, that is to say, on the . . . indisputable Word of the undisputed Lord.”⁴¹

³⁵Ibid., 64.

³⁶Ibid., 65.

³⁷Ibid., 66.

³⁸“Missionary Love,” 628.

³⁹JC, 58.

⁴⁰We, 66.

⁴¹JC, 172–73.

2. "Mission exists only in her."

Once received, this Word draws us ever more deeply into a mystery, or rather, into the mystery par excellence of supernatural fruitfulness and life. We live in it, we pass through it from our birth in baptism to death, and we do not escape its universal striving or breadth: "I am haunted by the double mystery in the midst of which our life must pass like a straight line: the mystery of charity—the mystery of the Church. In the Church, the Bride of Christ, it is all of humanity that is called to his love."⁴² The unassuming man caught in a "fortunate despair" that causes him suddenly to discover the Gospel,⁴³ the bishop almost crushed by its weight, the disciple who asks "to be clothed with Christ and nothing more,"⁴⁴ and even the Christian who only dimly perceives what happened to him at baptism, all find themselves participating in this double mystery they do not comprehend but know is their life; they know, even if only obscurely, that it is the only life capable of overcoming the meaninglessness of unbelief and the nothingness of death.

We have seen that the single ecclesial subject in whom the Christian, "together with all the others," is the "Christ-Church,"⁴⁵ is where the Word of God is welcomed and grows, and where he continues his work of incarnation. This Word does not spare anyone who receives it from being drawn into its movement of love. Madeleine is uncompromising in describing the demands of the baptized Christian's new "state": in receiving the Gospel, he must enter into the communion it generates, that realm where his action is no longer a "small, personal matter" but is "bound . . . to the very

⁴²Ibid., 174–75.

⁴³Cf. *We*, 63: "Unless you take this little book of the Gospel in your hands with the determination of a person who is holding onto his very last hope, you will never be able to figure it out, nor receive its message. If you are fortunate enough to be in such despair, to be so bereft of all human hope, it matters little whether you pick up the book from the shelves of a vast library, from the pocket of your workman's vest . . . whether in a church or in your kitchen, out in the field or in your office—just as you take hold of the book, so will it take hold of you."

⁴⁴JC, 183.

⁴⁵*We*, 96: "Standing before God and before the world, in God and in the world, it is together with all the others that the Christian is Christ. He is the whole Christ, the Christ-Church. This is a fact over which he has no control."

act of God . . . ,” and the gesture he must contribute “is bounded on all sides by those of others, by gestures that prepare, complete, and continue his.” He must enter into the mystery of charity that is this communion, and that is the Church’s reason for being. Charity gives itself, the Word communicates itself, and so, like the Church, in her, *as* her, the Christian must give the Word of God the space it needs for its love, which is an “*élan vitale*, surging out toward all the ends of the earth.”⁴⁶ This Word, too, passes into the world—and right through the believer—in a clean, straight line; it draws the believer into its own dispossession: “Once we have heard God’s Word, we no longer have the right not to accept it; once we have accepted it, we no longer have the right not to let it become flesh in us; once it has become flesh in us, we no longer have the right to keep it for ourselves alone. Henceforward, we belong,” not just to it, but “to all those who are waiting for the Word.”⁴⁷

The apostolic Christian lives as one sent, and he lives within the one who is sent. His own tasks, accomplished half-blind, are a mysterious participation in the single work of salvation: “The Church . . . saves the world, and we are obscurely inserted into her for a task that we scarcely understand, and of which the Holy Spirit knows the why and the how.”⁴⁸ If he loves God and his brothers, this Christian does not need to be convinced that this participation in mission is the form of his life. It is simply a fact, like the other “facts” to which Madeleine draws our attention, for the Christian is the “captive” of a God thirsting for the love of all men,⁴⁹ and the brother of men thirsting for God. He is a living cell of “Christ-Church,” which can carry out its task only through him; in yet another terrifying exchange, he only in her, and she only through him, must bear the force of the entire charity of God.

⁴⁶Ibid., 125.

⁴⁷Ibid., 62.

⁴⁸Madeleine Delbrêl, *Communautés selon l’Évangile* (=CSE) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), 37.

⁴⁹Cf. “Mission et missions,” an unpublished note quoted in Loew, 12: “The Christian is a captive. *Captive* of a life: the life of Christ. He is not the propagandist of an idea, but the member of a body that lives and wants to grow *Captive* of a spirit: of a desire as vast as God himself, which wants to save what is lost, heal what is sick, unite what is divided, always and everywhere. To be Christian is to be captive . . . so to speak, of a freedom which was chosen in advance for us.”

Just as the Gospel would have crushed the man who sought to bear it outside the Church who alone is adequate to its proportions, but in whom the crushing burden becomes light, the mission of Christ would burn up the individual who sought to appropriate it as a kind of private possession. He would fail, render it sterile, “fall into a ditch,” because only an “intimate, internal, and living belonging to Christ in the Church”⁵⁰—only a continual emerging, with her, from the “theological mystery of Love”⁵¹—renders a human being capable of entering into and bearing a charity that is divine. Commenting on “the love of Christ residing in the Church,” Madeleine describes the striving that is the Church’s natural movement and life: “The evangelization of the world and its salvation is the Church’s task. She strives constantly toward the world, like flame that seeks stubble. But this striving would be disproportionate in relation to a person who wanted to be merely himself.”⁵²

The apostolic Christian brings to the world the love of a free man, of “men who have been freed from themselves, who have come out of themselves once and for all.”⁵³ He, who has borne “the cost of love” in order to take his place in the living Body of the Lord, loves with an ecclesial, missionary love.⁵⁴ His love is representative, first of all in the sense that it is the Church who lives in him and bears in him something of that burning charity of God. It is he and also no longer simply he who, in the face of the “profound misfortune that besets the nonbeliever,” feels “the living God of the Gospel . . . burn in us with an unbearable intensity to the extent that we did not cry his name out loud to those living in quiet desperation.”⁵⁵ It is he who feels the systematic atheism of his surroundings provoke in him a “reflex of adoration”⁵⁶ and of love for his brothers, only his love now bears different proportions than it did when it was

⁵⁰*We*, 126.

⁵¹Cf. *JC*, 175.

⁵²*We*, 126.

⁵³“Missionary Love,” 628.

⁵⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 629.

⁵⁵*We*, 175.

⁵⁶*VM*, 180.

simply his own: “by loving we perform a universal act which is indispensable for the Church.”⁵⁷

The Christian is sent, and he knows he is sent, but he is not someone who strives “disproportionately” as a man who is merely himself. A different life lives in him, a different “love . . . runs as thickly as the blood in [his] veins.”⁵⁸ He is himself and someone else; he stands in the mystery of charity and communion that is the life of the Church. He knows from where he draws his capacity to love, and whose goodness must radiate through his life: “In our lives, the Church ought to be *good*; in our lives, the Christ-Church ought to love as he wishes, according to the movement of his love.”⁵⁹ Conversely, the Church knows that she can satisfy the burning charity that strives in her toward the world only in the Christian: “the more the world into which we enter is without the Church, the more we have to be the Church precisely there. Mission exists only in her. And she enters the world through us.”⁶⁰

The Christian is sent, and what Madeleine affirms of the parish applies to him, too: parishes, which are, like the Christian, a living cell of the Church, must “become missionary wherever they happen to be, or they will no longer be apostolic.”⁶¹ All of the cells of the ecclesial Body—which is a vast exchange of life and of that charity which “runs as thickly as blood”—are sent and must remain in their sending in a world without God. But Madeleine, who is as circumspect as she is convinced of the Gospel’s commands, knows that the individual Christian, like the parish, might not at first understand how to do this. Both might be tempted to mistake the fundamental form of this mission, which is at its core not the multiplication of “apostolates” but a permanent *state*, that “state of life” that “means being a child of God in Christ along with all his brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁶² Before it is an action, mission is simply being the Church, “the greatest sign of the mystery of God,” which “alone is the sign of the breaking open that our entire being

⁵⁷“Missionary Love,” 629.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*We*, 125.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 126.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 165.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 96.

has to undergo in order to be capable of God and God's tasks."⁶³ Only from within this mystery, only from the organic unity of this body, can this movement of love to the world take its direction and form: "mission has to be Church. It must be first 'the Body of Christ' and only then is it free to take its own direction. Its state is the total Christ."⁶⁴

Remaining in this state, wherever one may be, is difficult; Madeleine, who lived it for forty years in one of the most virulently atheistic environments in France, had no illusions about this. But the Christian, like the Christian parish, needs to bring only one thing to the world. If he is as poor as he must be, this is the only thing he can bring, and it is no different from the mystery from which he draws his own identity and life: "What the parish must live in order to be ever more deeply rooted, in order to be ever more deeply itself, is precisely the same thing that it needs to be ever more radically sent."⁶⁵ This "same thing" is not expertise or activism, and while it may need to be "translated" anew to a new time, it need not be made more human to be accessible, for "it already is human, and tragically so": "Are we aware that liturgy is the salvation of the world? . . . [I]t is the Passion of the Son of God made man, made continually present among us."⁶⁶

3. *"It is because of God that we love"*

The "state" of mission sends the Christian out, to all appearances unprotected, into the world bearing that mystery which is the Church's life. As we read in the Gospel Madeleine wished to keep "to the letter," he is sent out without money bag, provisions, or, what may be more of concern to him, without any guarantee that he will be received by the brothers to whom he brings the living love of the Lord. He has no references that might speak for him, no specific instructions, no law but a single word pronounced over his life; but Madeleine is astute enough in listening to the

⁶³Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴Ibid., 98.

⁶⁵Ibid., 168.

⁶⁶Ibid., 123–24.

Gospel to discern in this word everything with which the Christian needs to be furnished on his way through the world. In the midst of all the joy and the suffering he will meet in himself and in others, in all the obscurity of the way, in the face of everything that might tempt him from fidelity to the Gospel, there is a word that determines his existence as exactly as it determines that of the Christ-Church, and that is for both the single, organic law of their life: “We think all is well when people believe in God. But God didn’t say ‘you shall believe,’ but ‘you shall love.’ He gives only one commandment to those whom he has supernaturally quickened through faith.”⁶⁷

Thus to the skeptical Communist whom Madeleine addresses directly in the passage from *Ville marxiste, terre de mission* cited above, as well as to the Catholic skeptical of her decision to live a Christian life in so atheistic a setting, Madeleine presents her “references,” the only references a believer can have. With them, she also explains her unambiguously religious motivation to her Communist neighbors, many of whom were so struck by the efficacy of her social work that they sought to win her for their own: “Christ demands of the Christian that he live in . . . the proudest and simplest freedom there is, the love of a God in whom one cannot believe without knowing what his love is, without imitating this love as the gravest charge that exists in the world vis-à-vis God himself and every man, whom Christ says we must love as ourselves.”⁶⁸ This alone is what is demanded of the Christian, and it is, Madeleine declares, “the primary and principal goal” of her life.⁶⁹ It is the primary and principle goal of every Christian who receives the Word of God and, participating in the mysterious growth of the Christ-Church, allows his life to be drawn into its life.

The Christian who lives in mission, that abiding state of the Church who continually receives the Word striving in her “toward the ends of the earth,” is sent to love his brothers “‘as I have loved you.’ This is not a suggestion or a matter of choice.”⁷⁰ He is called to allow divine love to incarnate itself in his flesh and soul and spirit,

⁶⁷“Missionary Love,” 628.

⁶⁸*VM*, 47–48.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁰“Missionary Love,” 626.

but—and here Madeleine is incomparably clear—he can only love rightly if he has first rightly understood the commandment. The commandment that is to be the only light offered to him as he finds his way through the apparent obscurity of his life is of course the love of one's neighbor, but it can only be this if the Christian knows the source and goal, the strength and substance of this love. Christians are to love one another and their neighbor who is without God not with any love they please, but "*as I have loved you.*" God loves first, and God is first loved. If the commandment is twofold, if it is as exacting in its concreteness as the presence of our neighbor who needs our "human eyes, ears, hands, and hearts,"⁷¹ it can be such because at its core it is one: "He gives only one commandment . . . : to love him, and to love him with their whole being, and to love him above all things God said to the whole world: 'The first and greatest commandment is this: you shall love the Lord, your God' This was said to the whole world, to all men. The realization of this truth turned people into missionaries."⁷²

If the apostolic Christian has truly received the Gospel in that ecclesial encounter in which the Word of God penetrates him, is kept in him, is given freedom in him, and therefore passes in and through him in a clean trajectory into the world, he will know that all love comes from God, for "'God is love' . . . In the Trinity there is unity and fruitfulness. It is from there that everything begins."⁷³ He will know that it is not enough to share the "sensibilities . . . , loves and . . . hatreds" of the working class, or any other class to which the Christian seeks to be a neighbor: "We must never allow there to be any ambiguity about the fact that God is for us the only absolute Good, and that he thus relativizes all other goods because they are only insofar as they come from him."⁷⁴ And because this absolute Good is a love striving outward to men like flame to stubble,⁷⁵ he will also understand how indivisible is his twofold and single witness to love: "If we do not refer to God, our witness is a counter-witness; if we do not exhibit a realistic goodness as

⁷¹*We*, 139.

⁷²"Missionary Love," 628.

⁷³*CSE*, 105.

⁷⁴*We*, 138.

⁷⁵*Cf. ibid.*, 126. See text at fn. 51 above.

extravagant as charity itself, it would be as if we were bearing no witness at all, because it would be beyond the range of human eyes, ears, hands, and hearts.”⁷⁶

In other words, because the man who loves with the love of the Church allows the words of “God’s living love” to grow and bear fruit in his life, these words will transform him, become a law over and in him, and establish “imperatively in [him] the order that is theirs: the absolute primacy of the two commandments of love.”⁷⁷ In that “state” of love in which the supernatural love of human beings is both inseparable from and a consequence of the love of God,⁷⁸ and in the faith he allows to take flesh in his life, the Christian will find himself anew at the source of all mission. He will rediscover that which, as Madeleine points out, is the only possible resistance to the Marxist temptation and, in the face of such extensive and militant unbelief, the Church’s only adequate apostolic response. For the Christian sent into the “deepest corners of the world”⁷⁹ may have no light and no defenses but this: “*to rediscover in faith the motives of all missionary life: Christ’s two commandments, inseparable and similar, but the second of which can only be as great as it is because it is the consequence of the first.*”⁸⁰

If the believer has this light, this law, and this defense—if he has welcomed this love—he knows the kind of love he must offer his brothers. Here, too, the Christian who enters the great circulation of life that is the Christ-Church has been dispossessed: love is truly his only by not being his in its source, nature, and goal. Madeleine describes the love that seeks free passage through the Christian in order to find its way into the world: “It is not our love that we have to give: it is the love of God. The love of God which is a divine Person, who is God’s gift to us, but who remains a gift, who must so to speak traverse us, pierce us to go elsewhere, to go

⁷⁶Ibid., 139.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Cf. *JC*, 85: “The love of men is not a means to the love of God. It’s the love of God that is a state in which one cannot but love men supernaturally.”

⁷⁹*We*, 100: “Christ does not provide his followers with a set of wings to flee into heaven, but with a weight to drag them into the deepest corners of the earth. What may seem to be the specifically missionary vocation is in fact simply what it means to be embraced by Christ.”

⁸⁰*VM*, 87. Italics in original.

into others.”⁸¹ The missionary, like everyone else, is tempted to forget this, and thus not only risks disfiguring the apostolate that is dear to him, but courts the human disaster that comes when he cuts himself off from his supernatural life. Madeleine reminds such missionaries, whose temptations she experienced and overcame in her turn, of the only thing they must give to the world: “We have to love, not with a man-made charity but with that charity which comes from God Charity can be learned only from the heart of Jesus Christ and from the charter of this heart, the Gospel.”⁸²

The “living, indefatigable love” that addresses itself to the unbeliever in the “tenderness,” the “gesture,” the “word,” and the “beat of the heart” of the believer who reverences Christ in him,⁸³ can have only one foundation, if it is genuine; just as the Christian’s union with the ecclesial body can be living, or apostolic in both senses, only if this life is the circulation of that charity which is “for the Church what blood is for our heart.”⁸⁴ This foundation and source of the unity of the body of Christ is the power behind all Christian mission, and the Church’s only reason for being in the world: “if Christians, a Church, and even and especially Jesus, exist at all, it is only so that *charity would be done on earth*.”⁸⁵ No one who has received the Gospel is allowed to forget this, or to forget what this divine charity needs from all those who, through baptism, have become living cells of Christ’s Body and Bride: “What is certain, unchanging, boundless, and necessary, is charity. But it so happens that charity takes flesh in human hearts.”⁸⁶

These hearts, which are always too small for the gift, are obliged to adapt: they must “grow tiny before God;”⁸⁷ they must be poor in order to cry out “the love for a God preferred to everything the hands can touch and the mind can know”;⁸⁸ they must be meek,

⁸¹JC, 85.

⁸²“Missionary Love,” 626.

⁸³VM, 237.

⁸⁴“Missionary Love,” 628.

⁸⁵“Madeleine Delbr el: Selected Texts,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26 (Winter 1999): 754–77; at 773.

⁸⁶Ibid., 755.

⁸⁷Ibid., 755.

⁸⁸VM, 147.

for contrary to the anger embraced by the Communist in his attempt to save a portion of humanity, the Christian remembers that to “meekness alone was promised the possession of the earth.”⁸⁹ They must be filled with “a filial love which desires unceasingly from God what it unceasingly receives from him,” and “a brotherly love which loves each person as his neighbor whom God himself has given to him.”⁹⁰ They must not be afraid to be among men, for redemption is “in the midst of men”;⁹¹ and as a brother among their “brother[s] in creation and redemption,” they must be “unswervingly faithful.”⁹² Fundamentally, they must be hearts that remember what they love and why they love it. For Madeleine, writing to her *équipes* about the radically evangelical life they have chosen to live in the midst of the world, the source of this memory is simple: “It is because of God that we love the world.”⁹³ This twofold love alone is why anyone would wish to be an apostle, and with a “filial mind for God, a poor heart, [and] humble fists,” be that “man who adores in the street, a brother who, at home and on his knees, keeps his brother.”⁹⁴

4. Apostolic solitude

The Word of God, which the believer receives when he welcomes the Gospel into his life, is profoundly communal. It is an ecclesial Word that introduces him into the Body of Christ, the Church, of which he is a living and irreplaceable cell; and a Word that sends him irrevocably to his brothers, which is to say, to all.⁹⁵

⁸⁹Ibid., 176: “Christian hope does not trust [anger], for anger has no divine promise in its hands. If we need the world, and the time to traverse it, meekness alone will accomplish our hope. To it alone was promised the possession of the earth.”

⁹⁰“Madeleine Delbrêl: Selected Texts,” 756.

⁹¹*VM*, 199: “But redemption is never ‘in the face of’ men, it is ‘in the midst’ of them, and for the Christian who ‘saves in being saved,’ it is in the midst of himself for others, just as it is in his brothers for him.”

⁹²“Madeleine Delbrêl: Selected Texts,” 757.

⁹³*CSE*, 29.

⁹⁴*VM*, 217.

⁹⁵Cf. “Madeleine Delbrêl: Selected Texts,” 757: “We tend to think that

He is one among many, in the Church and in the world, and one with the many, all of whom stand with him as the “brothers in creation and redemption” just mentioned. But this living love of God that sends him, very simply, to love, for the same reason sends him into that solitude which is the “desert of love.” This solitude in which a human being stands before God and in the midst of his brothers is, perhaps, an even harder lesson for the Christian than was the word, “You shall love . . . ,” but, as Madeleine understands with remarkable clarity, it is inescapably contained in the commandment. It is an “apostolic solitude,” an intrinsic component of the mission entrusted to the Church, and it is also love.

Much as John Paul II uses the term “original solitude” to refer to man’s primordial relation to God, Madeleine identifies solitude at the core of the religious human being, and as a necessary and paradoxical “face” of love. For the Christian who does “not see solitude as the absence of the world but as the presence of God,”⁹⁶ solitude is, first of all and above all, *presence*: it is the believer defenseless before the presence of God and present in the most profound sense to his neighbor. It is prayer, and the mystery of the Church alive in him. But inseparable from solitude as presence—indeed, almost an expression of it—is the experience of solitude as absence, which bewilders the missionary who is unprepared for it: Christians are sent into a world which, though they love it passionately with the very passion of God, does not believe, into a world in which God is absent. They find themselves ill at ease, strangers among the multitude, only to discover that this solitude, too, is the form of their presence to their unbelieving brothers, within the “immense solitude”⁹⁷ that is adoration.

Whatever else it might seem to the Christian, the solitude he necessarily encounters is the “desert of love,” which is a “gigantic face to face,” in silence and in truth, with God and all the people he loves.⁹⁸ Madeleine observes that the desert, whatever its form, has always drawn genuine lovers into itself, so that there, where love

brotherly love means: love each person *as if* he were our brother, to do for him *as* we would for our brother. We have not ‘heard’ the ‘*You are all brothers.*’”

⁹⁶*We*, 55.

⁹⁷*JC*, 191.

⁹⁸*MSB*, 61.

becomes prayer, where the lover is stripped bare of himself and his defenses, he might find what he seeks: God and his neighbor. This seemingly empty waste allows precisely missionaries, who are sent out in love to their brothers, to enter into the presence that is prayer, that is God's presence to them, and that is the nearness of "every distant heart": "This silence is like the guarantee . . . , like the transmitter of their prayer Solitude confers upon them as if an omnipresence, in the midst of all the lives that they want to reach. There where there is no one, one truly speaks on behalf of all."⁹⁹ There where there seems to be nothing but "the weight of the presence, the grace, the Redemption of God,"¹⁰⁰ the man who wishes to bear God to others and others in God, and in whom God has kindled something of his unbearable love, stands within the most intimate reality of communion. Bearing love, bearing the lack of love, he finds himself at the center of the mystery through which his life passes. He is inserted into the full dimensions of the encounter with God's Word and hence of the reality of mission: "The desert gives man the size of the Church."¹⁰¹

For the Christian sent out to his brothers, the primary form of the "desert" is not an unpopulated waste; if solitude were, for "the apostolic Christian, a kind of rare and precious luxury that permitted him to encounter Christ more intimately,"¹⁰² his task would be much easier to bear. But if he is truly to enter into the mission of the Church, and if the love that takes flesh in him is truly to be the divine charity entrusted to her, then the Spirit of God must drive him into a far more vast and difficult desert of love.¹⁰³ This desert stretches from where the Christian stands face to face with God in the silence of prayer to the "deepest corners of the earth," and the latter not primarily in a geographical sense: "To go into the world, to accept the Christian commitment in the world,

⁹⁹Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 61.

¹⁰²CSE, 98.

¹⁰³Cf. *MSB*, 61: "We have heard about the 'desert of love.' Love aspires to the desert, for the desert hands over man to God naked In the desert, man is dispossessed of that which he loves . . . , submitted to God in a gigantic face to face. This is why, in every age, the Spirit has driven those who love into the desert."

will be to know, to rub shoulders with, to take on everything in each one of our nearest neighbors, or among them, that is foreign to, opposed to God The Christian will find himself placed in contact with the absolute and public negation of God.”¹⁰⁴ These depths that are his neighbor whom he loves and from whom he needs love, and this negation of a world without God, call to him with the irresistibility of the desert. Yet the call of the desert does not make the contradiction the Christian experiences in it any easier to bear: “This solemn negation of God . . . attracts us invincibly to stand there, where they say: ‘God is dead,’ and also to let the name of Jesus Christ, God and living savior, be inscribed in us, living But this name of Jesus Christ, inscribed in us . . . must one day, whether we like it or not, *publically become our name.*”¹⁰⁵

When it does, that is, when the Christian experiences the “extreme tension” of being both a brother to the brothers he loves and a stranger, and when “the immense solitude of adoration that seized [him] is coupled by a solitude of love,”¹⁰⁶ he will look to the Church for relief, for the Church is communion, only to discover that he is already living her incarnate mystery of love. The Church lives in an “exodus,” and the Christian must, too: “we hope that the Church will break this solitude that men impose upon us And we hope that our brothers in the faith, even without contact with us, will be a faithful presence for us. But we forget that, by nature, the Church is foreign to the world.” Continuously, “the Spirit of God lead[s] her to cross new frontiers, to face new exoduses, to pursue her promised land: the promises made by Jesus Christ to the extremities of the earth. She does not live this in thin air. She needs our flesh, our blood, our heart, she ceaselessly needs some of her children to live it.”¹⁰⁷ Her children may find this hard, even at times unbearably difficult, but it is the only way for the incarnate, filial and fraternal, faithful and meek love of the Redemption to find its way into the world. Madeleine, who was thoroughly engaged among human beings, in her community and with her increasingly numerous “neighbors,” writes to a friend, “It seems to me that

¹⁰⁴JC, 190.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 191. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 191–92.

[solitude] is a kind of sacrament for the world, that it is one of the most profound fissures which, through us, permits the Lord, permits the Redemption, to infiltrate the earth.”¹⁰⁸

The solitude of the apostle, which is the solitude of the Church in her journey through the world, is at its core an “apostolic solitude,”¹⁰⁹ however much the individual Christian might experience it as a condition imposed on him by men. At the heart of even the most engaged and active of missions lies this solitude at the foundations of all communion, a solitude that is adoration.¹¹⁰ If “those who prepare communities to come must live in the desert,”¹¹¹ that much more do those who prepare the Church where the Church, and even God, is not.¹¹² Madeleine insists with an apostolic single-mindedness that “the characteristic of a missionary community must be to form Christians, not for its own community life—this is in the Church—but to live the faith alone there, where they are the only ones to believe it.”¹¹³ For such a mission not to falter, and for it to remain the single ecclesial mission that is the passage of God’s Word through believers into the world, the

¹⁰⁸Letter of 12 June 1959, quoted in Guéguen, 16.

¹⁰⁹The title of a chapter in *CSE*; cf. 97–103.

¹¹⁰Cf. Madeleine’s discussion of the significance of the cloistered St. Thérèse of Lisieux as patroness of the missions in *VM*, 148, cited in David L. Schindler, “Preface to the English Edition” of *We*, ix–xiv; at xiv: “Perhaps Thérèse of Lisieux, patroness of all missions, was meant to live out a destiny in which her time was limited to the minimum, her actions were reduced to essentials, her heroism was indiscernible to those who looked for it, and the scope of her mission covered a mere few square meters, in order to teach us that the effectiveness of a mission is not always measurable by the hands of a clock, that actions are not always visible, that missions covering vast distances will be joined by missions that penetrate straight into the depth of the crowds of humanity. In that abyss, these missions will make contact with the human spirit that questions the world, and oscillates between the mystery of a God who wants it to be small and stripped bare, and the mystery of a world that wants it to be great and powerful. She alone is enough to show us that the best missionary approach to Marxism is not shoring up artificial defenses, but gathering strength precisely where our faith is being undermined.”

¹¹¹*CSE*, 95.

¹¹²Cf. *JC*, 190: “To go into the world . . . is to enter into the place where, in a certain sense, God is not; to walk toward the unknown design of the redemption; to walk, a man in the midst of men, but a man indwelt by God.”

¹¹³*CSE*, 97.

Christian must allow himself to be hollowed out like the earth in which one lays a foundation.¹¹⁴ Thus emptied, he will find that the moment will come when “our weakness itself cries out to God”; but this is only so that then, in the midst of himself and in the midst of a world without God, that weakness might become “the dwelling place of the mighty God.”¹¹⁵ All of this, he knows, he is called not only to suffer but to love:¹¹⁶ he must love for his own sake, for God’s sake, and for the sake—and on behalf—of his absent sisters and brothers.

The desert calls those who love through its absences, and it is no different for the Christian. He who receives the living word of the Gospel and lives from the circulation of charity that is the life of the Church, knows that it is his task, his need, his very nature to adore, but he knows this nowhere more acutely than in the face of the “absolute and public negation of God.”¹¹⁷ The solitude of the desert can be ravaging hunger and thirst as much as it is the silent intimacy of encounter; and, as the Christian discovers in the “shock” of his encounter with atheism, the desert in which one loves is simultaneously the *desert* of, that is, the lack of love. The Christian encounters a lack, a thirst that touches the core of his being, and he

¹¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*: “There is no robust house without foundations, but before placing the stones one is obliged to dig out the earth.”

¹¹⁵*We*, 70.

¹¹⁶Cf. *CSE*, 100: “Christian solitude seems to have the role of allowing God a passage so that he might render the world fruitful. If it is under this form that solitude presents itself to some people today, it’s that the passages have to be broader. The most useful thing would be for it to be not suffered, but loved.”

¹¹⁷It is worth noting that in her later writings, Madeleine observed that “Communism is already becoming ‘dated,’” whereas this public negation of God has become more insidious. In a study solicited as part of the preparatory work for Vatican Council II, she writes, “If the problems of class relations have had and maintained their importance . . . , in the new milieus it is the man-matter relation that ought most to occupy Christian attention. This relation has been forged in complete silence about God. By a strange act of substitution, creation has taken the place of the creator. And since it has happened in silence, we haven’t been alerted to it. A fundamental danger has been noiselessly overtaking the Church: it is the danger of an age and a world in which God will no longer be denied or forced away, but simply excluded. He will be merely unthinkable. It is the danger of a world in which we will want to go and cry out his Name, but we will be unable to, because there will be no place for us to get a foothold” (*We*, 230–31).

cannot help his “reflex” of adoration:¹¹⁸ “To adore God is to say God to God in a single act; everything of which the Christian man is made, all of our relativities with God are acknowledged in a single act. In the face of Marxism, adoration imposes itself as an essential act of elementary justice. One is as if racked by a lack of God that is a thirst for his glory.”¹¹⁹

Lack can be an obstacle, hunger and thirst can lead to death, but they can also grant an incomparable sense for that which alone is necessary. In the midst of the lack of God, the lack of his brothers’ presence before God, and the lack of love among men, the apostolic Christian stands once again at the meeting point of the two commandments of love. They meet in him, and the desert reveals the mystery of a twofold communion hidden in itself. Every human being is commanded to be faithful to a reciprocal love between God and man, but where God’s love remains unrequited, one of these “brothers in creation and redemption” must stand for all, and all begin to be faithful in one. This is simply a necessity, for God must be loved; there is no escaping the commandment: “The solitude of an atheist crowd demands of us, as something necessary, the reestablishment of a broken order, a severed covenant . . . As if charged with a ‘public function,’ we have to adore, [and] accept, before speaking of God to men, a silence that alone can speak of God to God.”¹²⁰ In the silence in which God is loved, where the solitude of the desert opens up to adoration, those who pray in place of their brothers discover that they are, after all, where they had wished to be.

The apostolic Christian had wished to stand with his brothers in humility and love, and he does, for he stands *as* his brother, and his prayer, purified by the desert, has no other form but love. To pray is to give fidelity, adoration, and glory to God—it is to fulfill the commandment—but for this reason it is also to love within God’s love: “To pray is also to ask, . . . to drain the hardness from a multitude of lives . . . , to plead, to supplicate, to demand, . . . it is a work that wears out, we might say a mercenary labor,

¹¹⁸*VM*, 180.

¹¹⁹*JC*, 191.

¹²⁰*CSE*, 101.

bought by grace, to face up in the place of those who are absent.”¹²¹ The desert of solitude, which grants the Christian the dimensions of the Church and the world, is the hidden foundation of mission, and it always was the place of the covenant. It is the place where the believer, bound in the God-Man indissolubly to God and to men, discovers that he has entered a solidarity that reaches into him and beyond him, from the ends of the earth to heaven, and that places him in the midst of a multitude of brethren: “Each of us has received faith on behalf of us all. The solitude into which we are driven by God brings us into conscious solidarity with every living human being that comes into the world, with all of the nations that Christ will gather together on the last day.”¹²²

5. “*In the ebb and flow of charity between the world and God*”

The Christian is called to live, humbly, clearly, indissolubly, a double fidelity to the world and God. He is to be the hidden presence of prayer among his brothers, and the presence of his brothers to God. Writing to her *équipes*, which sought to live this dynamic “letter for letter” in the midst of the world, Madeleine intensifies the descriptions of “apostolic substitution”¹²³ just cited. To be given to God in Jesus Christ and to place oneself wholeheartedly at the service of his love means: “To be in the world, . . . a parcel of humanity delivered over in all its fibers, offered, expropriated To assure a place to God. To be vowed, above all, to adoration To know that here is the saving act par excellence; to believe on the part of the world, to hope for the world, to love for the world.”¹²⁴ It means to remain aware, through all one’s struggles and despite all one’s failures,¹²⁵ of what one loves and one’s

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²*We*, 267.

¹²³*VM*, 204.

¹²⁴*CSE*, 28.

¹²⁵Cf. *We*, 227, on the “combat” of the Christian: “A realistic love for the Church necessarily entails taking your blows and living with bruises. Now, what gives the Church’s combat meaning, what outlines the meaning of her history, is hope Locally—or we could say physically—the frontier of the Church passes directly through each one of us. This is the line that divides good and evil . . . that

reasons for loving: “It is because of God that we love the world. And we want to give it to the kingdom of heaven.”¹²⁶ And it means to love with a fidelity that exceeds one’s own capacity, because it has a supernatural source: “educated through faith, hope, and love,” the heart of a Christian who seeks to live the twofold commandment “will be unswervingly faithful.”¹²⁷

Here on earth, fidelity to God and the world involves the flesh as well as soul and spirit; it involves human beings who, because they are Christians, become in their persons the meeting point between the world and God. Christians who wish to be faithful to their ecclesial vocation of welcoming God’s Word into the world know that there is no part of themselves they may exempt from this welcome; they must accept faith as they accept the Gospel, not in a mere cognitive acknowledgment, but as a covenant that takes root in their life. For God who gives faith and for man who responds with it, faith is love, and love presses, always with meekness and humility, toward the totality of the covenant: “What’s involved is accepting faith as a living love of God, as the life of this love in our flesh, in our heart, in our spirit. Not to make of faith an intellectual contract . . . but the covenant in life and for life that the holy Virgin first expressed: ‘Let it be done to me according to your word.’”¹²⁸

The Word strives to prolong its mystery of incarnation in the believer; it seeks the continual renewal of this “covenant in life and for life” that was granted at the Church’s beginning, and that presses in her toward the ends of the earth. Thus the Christian will find that when he accepts the Word into his flesh and soul and spirit, this Word will incorporate him into the living body of the Church, but it can also drive him, in her and with her, away from “everything in

separates the ‘with God’ from the ‘without God,’ the ‘for God’ from the ‘against God.’” Also 249: “This is what the ‘race of Christ’ is, but it must nonetheless constantly come into being Being faithful to the lineage of Christ is the very front line of our battle with the world. Often, we locate our fighting elsewhere: it is hard for us, not to fight, but to fight without grandeur. However, when a Christian takes upon himself Christ’s living signature, nonbelieving hearts take notice.”

¹²⁶CSE, 29.

¹²⁷“Madeleine Delbr el: Selected Texts,” 757.

¹²⁸VM, 236–37.

her that . . . prefigures the homeland of eternity,” even away from the understanding of his brothers in the faith,¹²⁹ to place him at the heart of her mission, which is love. This mission, the one “mission and battle”¹³⁰ of Christ’s Church, is faithful love, love that needs flesh and blood, a love that “is like a viaduct connecting God and men in a single arch,”¹³¹ a love of God and neighbor that, because it is also a living faith, binds what had been estranged. Even if he may be only partially or scarcely aware of this, the apostolic Christian who loves definitively, “to the end of the real needs of every man and to the end of sharing our lives, until our life should be entirely poured out,” loves, in some sense, on behalf of God; his faith is nothing other than “the temporal engagement of God’s love.”¹³² And he also loves on behalf of his brothers, living the “laws of eternal life . . . for those who reject them, through the willing gift of the life that is his, the gift of his life or the gift of his death.”¹³³

This Word is faithful, and the Christian who welcomes it into his life allows it to make him faithful. He allows it to place him in the vertiginous position of the one who stands between—and therefore holds together—the world and God. Madeleine writes, “our Christian life is a pathway between two abysses. One is the measurable abyss of the world’s rejection of God. The other is the unfathomable abyss of the mysteries of God.”¹³⁴ It is only gradually that the Christian, who bears in himself the covenant that God wishes to make with man, comes to realize that these abysses meet not only beneath him but in him. Loving God and his brother, he stands at the point of mutual communication: “We will come to see that we are walking along the adjoining line where these two abysses intersect. And we will thus understand how . . . and why we are

¹²⁹JC, 192: “Their brothers no longer distinguish them well and barely recognize them. Who can take a bud and a shoot for a brother? They no longer know their unity, except by faith.”

¹³⁰“Madeleine Delbr el: Selected Texts,” 755–56.

¹³¹JC, 193.

¹³²We, 206.

¹³³Ibid., 245.

¹³⁴Ibid., 195.

mediators.”¹³⁵ Thus the word that was spoken to Israel and with a view to the God-Man who binds heaven and earth, is addressed to him, too. “I have made you a covenant to the nations,” says God, and Madeleine comments on the Christian standing at the edge of the twofold abyss: “We will understand what sort of covenant we have been made guardians of, a covenant of which we are both the beneficiaries and the stewards.”¹³⁶ The Christian believes, and that seems simple enough; but to receive the gift of God for the sake of all, as every believer does, “is to consummate between faith and the world an eternal covenant within time.”¹³⁷

The Christian who is an apostle, who is in the state of mission and whose dimensions are those of the Church, lives in this covenant. If he is like Madeleine, he has lost neither his fidelity nor his humor, and can write lines like this to a friend, “I was born to be unshakeably faithful. Sometimes I think it would be easier to be a little less so. But there’s nothing I can do.”¹³⁸ Perhaps for this reason above all, he is joyful, even in the midst of solitude and the suffering he necessarily encounters: despite himself and his weakness, he loves with a strong, lucid, unshakeable, supernatural love. He loves God of course, but also the world, and for its sake, too, he is happy to live and to die. Madeleine, who was one of those who show with “their flesh and their blood”¹³⁹ what it means to live entirely in, from, and for the Gospel, once asked what made a Christian “someone out of the ordinary.” Her answer ends with this joy, which contains both the promise of fruitfulness and the perfection of that “ebb and flow of charity” that is, even now, the life and the mission of Christ’s Church:

Not only is he happy to live but he is happy to die, because dying means being born into eternity . . . ; not only because creation is God’s daughter, but because its beauty, even if it is

¹³⁵Ibid., 195.

¹³⁶Ibid., 195.

¹³⁷Ibid., 266.

¹³⁸“Madeleine Delbr el: Selected Texts,” 775.

¹³⁹Cf. *We*, 121: “At every turning point in history, it seems clear that the Lord wished to give certain people the vocation of living the Gospel letter for letter, so that their flesh and their blood would become as it were a new edition of the Gospel providentially destined for the men of their age.”

damaged, is indestructible Not only does he act in time, but he awaits the fruits of eternity, the seed of which has already been sown in time Not only is he happy because he has life from God and for God, but because he lives and gives life to his brothers with God forever.¹⁴⁰

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¹⁴⁰“Madeleine Delbrêl: Selected Texts,” 771.