PÉGUY, EXPOSITOR OF CHRISTIAN HOPE

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"God speaks, and in speaking he hands himself over to us. He loves, and in loving he hands his happiness over to us. He hopes, and his hope is his answer to Joan. The God we hear speaking is efficacious hope, a God new from all eternity."

It is difficult to remain in hope, Benedict tells us in his newest encyclical, because it is difficult to remain in the often painful purification that is the "school of hope," or prayer, and it is difficult to persevere in the consequence of that purification: the twofold opening to God and to our neighbor. Prayer, that most profound act of hope and most profound conversation, stretches us toward an ever-greater approximation to the dimensions of Life, eternal life (*Spe salvi*, 27), and toward the brethren into whose darkness the Son of God gave himself—for he gave himself "for all." So thoroughly must this "*for all*" resonate in the Christian consciousness that, as the Pope reminds us, "To live for [Christ] means allowing oneself to be drawn into his *being for others*" (*SS*, 28). It means recognizing that just as my life and the lives of my brethren constantly "spill over" into one another for good and for ill (*SS*, 47), the salvation of my brethren is somehow my salvation, their hope is my hope: "Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well" (*SS*, 34). Or, in the words of the poet Charles Péguy, "You do not save your soul as you would a treasure. You save it as you lose a treasure: in surrendering it. We must save ourselves together, we must arrive together

Communio 35 (Summer 2008).

before the good Lord. What would he say if we arrived before him, came home to him, without the others?"[1] Every act of hope is an act both for my brethren and borne by them, and brings us together into Life: the life that is God's gift to us, and that is God himself.

Hope binds: men to men, and man to God. It makes the human being supple, transparent to his neighbor and before the "good Lord," and in doing so it has cosmic repercussions. In the words of Pope Benedict, hope keeps "the world open to God" (*SS*, 34). Since the world is not itself if it is not open to God, that is as much as to say that it keeps the world as new as it was at its creation: a fitting receptacle for its Creator. But how does it do this, how does it reveal the deepest truth of all things, the deepest and "newest" freshness of the world? How does it spark the kind of insight into the mystery of salvation that we find in the above citation from Péguy's *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc?* More, how does it open to us the mystery of God, and thereby cause us to enter into Life? And perhaps most of all, in the face of the difficulty of hope and in the face of that darkness into which the Son of God gave himself, how do we hope? How do we live in hope?

Some people hope greatly, as Benedict notes in the encyclical, and in their willingness to undergo the difficult school of hope that is prayer, in the shape of their action and their suffering, they become "ministers of hope" to others. It is to one of these, already mentioned above, that we will now turn: a writer who in his life, his prayer, and his suffering was given the task of receiving insight precisely into the theological virtue of hope, and communicating it to his brethren. He was stretched for the sake of this task, and reading him stretches us in turn, but in the extraordinary insight he achieved, perhaps we may come to a deeper understanding of the virtue which opens us to God and to our neighbor, and keeps the world open to God. If we are faithful to our guide, we may even come to see, with him, that the openness, transparency, and freshness that hope brings into the world is only possible because it unveils to us a prior, triune opening in God: God, who is communion, is "open" to God, and consequently can also be open to his creature, man.

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[1] *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc* (=*Jeanne*), 392, in Charles Péguy, *Œuvres Poétiques Complètes* (=*OPC*) (Éditions Gallimard, 1975). Translations of all French texts, with the exception of *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, are my own.

Charles Péguy, that strange, early-twentieth-century French polemicist and poet, stood both inside and outside the Church. Much of his work, too, stands in a strange place: that sort of half-light in which theology and literature are no longer readily distinguishable, and sometimes, as in his triptych, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc, The Portal of the Mystery of Hope,* and *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, we do not really know who is speaking, the poet or God. Péguy was a difficult man who wished to stand in the most difficult place: the place of purification where the word of man, that is, the poet's word, prayer, and ultimately the word of fidelity to God and to neighbor that gathers up the whole of man, encounters the word of God, where man himself encounters God and undergoes the painful shaping worked upon him by grace. He wished to stand at that point where prayer, dialogue, the human word, meet and are assumed into the source of all dialogue: God, who is three and one. He also meant to take the mystery of the Incarnation seriously, and thereby to gaze upon the world and man in such a way that they are, at last, given all their weight. It is not clear if he meant, in so doing, to discover from within this "earthly earth" the source of hope and thereby of life, but this is in fact what he did. In allowing himself to be stripped for the sake of his poetical-theological task, in the painful experience of failure, public and private, Péguy became a remarkable expositor of what Benedict calls "the true shape of Christian hope." We will follow Péguy's slow discovery of the ground of our hope as it takes place in the progression of the three *Mysteries*, in order to discern with him, through the difficult school of prayer and suffering to which both he and his Joan of Arc (the main character of the *Mysteries*) were subjected, the virtue that makes this worn-out world somehow continuously resplendent with its original purity and perfection, makes it come to us ever-new, in all the light of that judgment in which it was first seen and pronounced good. Hope can do this, as we will come to see, because it is also the virtue that somehow, mysteriously, guarantees the archetypical, eternal "newness," purity, and perfection of God.

1. Prolegomena: The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc *and the problem of hell*

Péguy wastes not a word in introducing his reader into the difficult school of hope, or the darkness that stands in the face of it.

The first words we hear in the *Mysteries* are prayer, terribly objective: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; amen. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . . ." The bare, anonymous liturgical prayers of the Church are prayed by a child, thirteen and a half years old, who comments on them with a similarly terrible objectivity: "Our Father, our Father who art in heaven, how long we have waited for thy name to be hallowed, how long we have waited for thy kingdom to come . . . . O my God, if we were to see only the beginning of thy kingdom . . . . You sent us your Son, whom you so loved, your Son came who suffered so much, and he died, and nothing, nothing ever." There is, to her eyes, nothing on the face of the earth that has marked his coming: "The kingdom of the earth is nothing but the kingdom of perdition . . . . My God, my God, must it be said that your Son died in vain."[2] There is nothing, it seems, to mark his coming except for this prayer rising up from a daughter of the "people," taking her place in the vast and anonymous host of Christianity, nothing except for this prayer that carries within it, in its terrible intransigence, an immense tenderness and pity for the realm of France, for the world which the Son came to save, and for the misery of man.

The Joan of the *Mystery* loves terribly; she loves within what seems to her this grand failure of the Incarnation, the failure of salvation. The coming and the death of the Son of God, and his immensely tender love for everything upon the earth have done nothing, it seems. Men die despairing and are lost, France is ravaged by war and humiliated, and the English ride their cavalries through the fields of grain tilled with such care by her father, uncle, and all the good countrymen of France, destroying all that they have labored to build. This Joan, in a great *approfondissement* of Péguy's earlier, socialist Joan,[3] loves within the Incarnation. She loves time within eternity, the carnal in the spiritual, so much that her lament about the English destroying their fields of grain can pass effortlessly to a higher level of pathos and of vision: "Sacred, sacred wheat, wheat which makes bread . . . . Harvest of the wheat of the field.

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[2]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 370–71.

[3]Péguy's socialist *Joan of Arc*, his first work, was written in 1897, while he was still a student at the École Normale. For a discussion of this work and its relation to *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, see Jean Onimus, *Introduction aux "Trois Mystères" de Péguy* (Paris: Cahiers de l'Amitié Charles Péguy, 1962), 20–29.

Bread that was served at the table of our Lord. Wheat, bread that was eaten by our Lord himself, which one day among all the days was eaten. Sacred, sacred wheat which became the body of Jesus Christ."[4]

Joan loves in prayer. She lives in prayer, too, so entirely that her friend, the ten-year-old Hauviette, who is a "good Christian like everybody" and says her two prayers like she eats her three meals to get her through the day, can comment, "Yes, Jeannette . . . . I say my prayers, but you don't come out of saying them, you pray all the time . . . . the church isn't enough for you."[5] More, Joan sees in prayer—that is, she sees everything within the total interpenetration of eternity and time—and Hauviette tells her this, too: "What we know, we others, you see . . . . For you there are no weeks. And there are no days . . . . All the hours ring out to you like the *Angelus* bell. All days are Sundays and more than Sundays, and Sundays more than Sundays and than Christmas Sunday and than Easter Sunday and the Mass more than the Mass."[6]

She lives in a vision of things that is a divine vision. It is not by accident that the first note of God's tenderness that is introduced into the *Mystery*—that of Christ the prodigal son returning, through the Passion, to his Father's house—is preceded by the fierce tenderness of Joan. They are, in a way, the same thing. Or rather, Joan stands within a divine tenderness, and she speaks within the word of tenderness which God speaks into Creation, even when her word seems to skirt the edge of rebellion. She speaks in prayer always, both alone and when she is speaking with Hauviette and, a little later, with the nun Madame Gervaise. At first, in the sort of pre-dawn darkness which precedes her vocation, all we hear is her voice, quiet, imploring and—almost—despairing. The beginning of the *Mysteries* is conversation, on the part of a child who challenges God; and God, for now, keeps silent. The beginning is prayer, and prayer provides the tone of a *mystery*, which is both a contemplation of the most obscure of Christian mysteries and that perfect welding of art and worship that made the medieval mystery play. And, as Péguy reminds us, the beginning is always important. It is the

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[4]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 385.

[5]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 375.

[6]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 375.

context and the seed of all the rest. What Joan says in her prayer is daring, almost shocking. Not only does she ask, with poignant envy throughout a long and uninterrupted prose monologue, why one parish, not even a parish (Bethlehem) was more blessed than the others, why one people (the Jews) was more blessed than all other peoples because, while we others contemplate Jesus in his glory, "you considered him in his misery. You considered him once and for all, the time that counted."[7] This keen sense of what was given in the Incarnation, of the grace of that real and carnal beginning, is still within the realm of what critics like François-Marie Léthel can call the "theologically perfect." But that is not all she says. Joan's new suffering, the reason for which she asks to speak with Madame Gervaise, is more acute, and here we arrive at the theological and poetical heart of this *Mystery*: the "damnation of the damned." Joan asks not only how France can be left to suffer, churches to be destroyed, the Blessed Sacrament to be blasphemed against by vicious soldiers; she asks how it is that, in all the time since the redemption of our souls, "damnation proceeds like a mounting flood where souls are drowned." Gervaise places her finger here on Joan's unhappiness, and the nun adds, "I know that your soul is sorrowful unto death, when you see the eternal, the growing eternal damnation of souls."[8] Worse yet, Joan sees all those whom she loves as accomplices in this terrible flood of perdition, because they are resigned to it, and thus cowards. Gervaise sees her situation clearly: "After you have known this, you are a liar: A liar to your father, a liar to your mother, to your brothers, to your elder sister, to your friends, because you pretend to love them and you cannot love them . . . . And yet you love them all the same."[9]

This love introduces us to the most difficult and inscrutable point in the mystery of Joan's charity. Joan will not resign herself to this "flood of damnation," so she offers herself in the place of the damned, who are her brethren. The words of Péguy's first Joan return on the lips of the second: "And if it is necessary, to save from the eternal Absence/ The souls of the damned overcome by the Absence,/ To abandon my soul to the eternal Absence,/ May my

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[7]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 403.

[8]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 418.

[9]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 422.

soul go into the eternal Absence."[10] In spite of the fact that Gervaise tells her, shocked, that she has blasphemed, that one cannot pray like this, there is a sense in which Joan's prayer is heard. Gervaise herself witnesses to this when she lays her finger on Joan's most acute suffering: all those whom she loves are "absent" from herself, and yet she loves them all the same. Joan's new suffering is an experience of death, a falling into solitude, the death of her soul. Responding to Gervaise's diagnosis, Joan says, "It is true that my soul is sorrowful unto death . . . . I would never have believed that the death of my soul would be so painful. All those whom I loved are absent from myself."[11]

She is falling into an eternal absence, but not like that of the damned. She is falling into an absence in which she suffers because she *loves* those who are absent, an absence of love. It will take the "eruption" of Péguy's blank verse,[12] in Madame Gervaise's recitation of the Passion, to show us exactly where to place this new suffering of Joan's. The entire presentation of the Passion centers around Jesus' cry of abandonment, a "Cry as if God himself had sinned like us;/ As if God himself had despaired."[13] It is he who loves within an "eternal absence," with "His heart devoured by love,"[14] while those whom he loves are absent from himself. It is Jesus who founders before the horror of damnation:

> Being the Son of God, Jesus knew everything,
> And the Savior knew that this Judas, whom he loves,
> He did not save, giving himself completely.
> And it was then that he knew the infinite suffering,
> It was then that he knew, it was then that he learned,
> It was then that he felt the infinite agony,
> And cried out as a madman the frightful anguish . . . .
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> And through the Father's pity he died his human death.[15]

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[10]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 426.

[11]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 424.

[12]Cf. François Porché's "Introduction" to the *OPC*, ix–xxviii for a discussion of Péguy's style, and the passage from prose to poetry.

[13]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 439.

[14]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 441.

[15]*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 488.

It is as if Jesus plumbed the depths of despair before us, before anyone could know its depths, and uttered the word that would carry all words, like Joan's, that skirt the edge of despair.

Critics like Léthel, in his analysis of the *Mysteries*, can see in Joan's horror at the mounting flood of damnation nothing but a projection of the young Péguy's own scandal at an ecclesial "resignation" which seems to contradict charity, a scandal so great that he leaves the Church because of it;[16] likewise, he sees its reappearance in the *Mystery* as a "certain regression, a redescending from the plane of mystery to the plane of the problem" caused by Péguy's stubborn refusal to delete a single line of his first *Joan of Arc* in writing the second.[17] But what if we actually take Péguy at his word? He took his writing, as his life, with the utmost seriousness, and his fidelity is never mere stubbornness, trying to fit grace in where grace does not belong. Péguy is the champion of the discrete grace of beginnings, the grace that made pagan antiquity a beloved preparation for Christianity, and that made his own youth such that he could ever deny the title of convert, insisting rather that he had arrived at Christianity through a series of *approfondissements*.[18] This is precisely what he does with his old *Joan*. It arrives with him, through a remarkable series of *approfondissements*, to a new level. The old rebellion now begins with and remains in prayer, revolt becomes near-despair—which, as Jean Onimus points out, is a *religious* phenomenon, and could not properly exist in the first Joan[19]—and

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[16]François-Marie Léthel, *Connaître l'amour du Christ qui surpasse toute connaissance: La théologie des saints* (Venasque: Éditions du Carmel, 1989), 427. Cf. also Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Péguy's central problem is thus laid out before us . . . : the problem of the eternal loss of a part of humanity . . . . *'[L]a damnation est mon seul problème'* [damnation is my only problem] . . . . Joan, with her holy obstinacy, must and will force the door that Church tradition since Augustine has closed in what for her and Péguy seems an incomprehensible resignation. Joan and Péguy do not understand how *charité* can understand itself in any other way than as *solidarité*" (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3 *Studies in Theological Styles: Lay Styles* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press/T. & T. Clark, 1986], 407).

[17]Léthel, *Connaître l'amour du Christ*, 399.

[18]For a discussion of Péguy's fidelities to his beginnings and the profoundly religious character he attributes to his socialist and atheist youth, see the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* entry for Péguy, p. 872. See also Jean Bastaire's article, "Le fidèle Péguy" in *Esprit*, no. 330 (August–September 1964): 396–405.

[19]Onimus, *Introduction*, 31.

who is to say that the "problem" cannot be raised entirely to the level of mystery?

What if the "problem" of hell becomes, in some strange, disconcerting, and deeply "mysterious" way, the center of a whole theological vision? What if this most unfathomable night becomes the point of the saint's (almost unconscious) insertion into Christ, her word into his word, her agony into his agony, and, as we shall see later, the faint stirrings of her new-born hope into his hope? Jean Onimus makes this terribly "scandalous" point the point where redemption hangs together in the theological vision of the *Mysteries*, the point where hope finds a way in to this darkest night:

> God himself despaired . . . how can Joan, how can any of us now despair without a glimmer of hope? We are no longer alone. Jesus, in being "overwhelmed" by human despair, in despairing perhaps even "more" than men themselves, has in a way surpassed their own unhappiness. And is not the Redemption precisely this: a God who takes up and consecrates all the misery of the earth?[20]

Is not the Redemption precisely the gathering up of all reprobation and all death, the fruit of sin, *in love*, the secret transformation of the source of bitterness into the source of the *Portal's* clear streams of salvation?

When Joan envies the Jewish saints and sinners who contemplated Jesus "in his misery," it is this last misery to which Joan, even if unconsciously, ultimately refers; all the other sufferings of his life are gathered up and surpassed in this final moment. If the Incarnation does, in the end, inaugurate us into the mysterious kingdom of hope, and ultimately of joy, it does so precisely by passing through this point which is the culmination of the misery of the God-man, the total vacuum in which those whom he loves are absent from himself. In the *Portal*, we hear God reminiscing, as it were, about his son's "incredible descent among men": the thirty years as a laborer, the three years preaching, the three days suffering, and—he does not forget—"Those three nights when he was in the midst of men. Dead among the dead."[21]

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[20]Onimus, *Introduction*, 40.

[21]*Portal*, 136.

The temptation, when we are confronted by this vision, is to fail to see that it is precisely in the passage through the surpassing abandonment of Christ that the way to hope is opened at all. Theologically as well as poetically, the problem of hell provides the foundation of the work. Onimus writes, "It would be very wrong to wish to enter the light of the *Portal* without having first traversed the darkness of the *Mystery*. One would risk seeing nothing in this latter . . . but an artistic game." Referring to the two works, the *Mystery of the Charity* on the one hand and the *Portal* and the *Holy Innocents* on the other, he continues, "they complete one another like the two faces of the same reality, and the distance which separates them measures the dimensions of a mystery: that of the Incarnation."[22] In the *Mystery*, we find ourselves in the night in which God alone works, preparing for vocation and resurrection. We are, in Péguy's language, in the dark mystery of the beginning, in the still undefined twilight where everything takes form: "We are . . . still so close to the native soil, to the earth, to the mud of miserable reality, at that instant, the least known of the lives of the saints, where the seed that is about to open seems at first to die."[23]

It is difficult, perhaps, to see this passage from the darkness of the *Mystery* to hope. Joan seems so much at times to be a saint in revolt. She pronounces the same terrible words as Péguy's first Joan (who really was in revolt); in the unpublished continuation to the *Mystery*, we find the same confession that when she thinks of God occupying himself in damning souls, "I can no longer pray. The words of my prayer seem bloodied with cursed blood . . . thinking of the damned, my soul rebels."[24] The same words, but not quite the same. We began with the context of the *Mystery*, prayer, for a reason, and Onimus points to this reason when he writes,

> The *Mystery* begins with an *Our Father*; that alone . . . profoundly modifies the character of the drama: Joan pronounces without trembling a *Fiat* which in the older play would have burned her lips, and if we were able to speak of revolt with regard to the earlier Joan, we would this time be misinterpreting if we were to

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[22]Onimus, *Introduction*, 56.

[23]Onimus, *Introduction*, 40.

[24]*Le Mystère de la Vocation de Jeanne d'Arc* (=*Jeanne II*), *OPC*, 1216. This text constitutes the second half of the *Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, which Péguy left unpublished.

> confuse her anguish—we might even say her horror—with revolt.[25]

This time, the "revolt" of her soul is a prayer, and prayer is, in these *Mysteries*, a word spoken within the word of God. "My God you are the master, My God you are the master," continues her plea, and, she knows what the Master says: "These souls, o my God, are your creatures. Jesus was their brother and you are their father. . . . Jesus didn't say *my father*, he said *our father.*"[26]

It is possible to see the communion that exists in the *Mystery* between Joan's suffering and Christ's, her horror at damnation and his, as a projection of a human "revolt" (Péguy's and Joan's) into Christ. But what if, in the *Mystery*, it is supposed to go the other way around? What if what appears to be human revolt in the heart of Joan is the first sharing in, the first flowering of something divine in her, a wish and a hope that has its source in the one without revolt? What if it is the beginning, the first faint stirrings of her total participation in an eternal conversation? Jesus says "Our Father," and Joan decides that she will say it, too, and say it in all the meaning of the divine word. She anticipates the meaning of God: passing judgment on Gervaise, she says, "Deep down she has taken her part. She suffers a lot for it, but deep down, all the way deep down she has taken her part. And the others too. They are resigned. They are used to it. But you, my God, you are not used to it . . . . Jesus your saint is not used to it." Joan places herself squarely within the word of Christ, so squarely that his wager is hers: herself for sinners. His "heart devoured by love" is hers, and if there is a way, however delicate and qualified, to "participate" in an experience of total abandonment, Joan is granted a share even in his experience of death and the horror of hell.

Joan cannot be revolting against God in the true and stark sense of that term; *she is talking to him*. Speech connects, and all her speech is a great effort to remain connected to God notwithstanding this terrible abyss that opens before her eyes. She is trying to find a place where charity and faith no longer contradict one another, to find a place for hope. All that she says, like the cry of Jesus on the Cross, is a terribly suffered but total surrender, and the challenge ends with a simple and childlike movement of confidence: the sharing of a secret.

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[25]Onimus, *Introduction*, 32.

[26]*Jeanne II*, *OPC*, 1216–1217.

It is this secret that immediately precedes, in the unpublished section of the *Mystery*, the granting of the "sign," the deliverance of Mont St. Michel. In it, all appearances of revolt fall away and we see clearly, if we did not see before, that in all that she says Joan has argued from the unspoken assurance of having God as her confidante, and of he having her for his. Balthasar points to this as the moment when, in prayer, "Joan is drawn unexpectedly right into the heart of God."[27] How could someone who truly was in revolt, who truly despaired, guess with such exactitude and enter with such simplicity into the eternal exchange? Joan says,

> My God . . . Things can't go on like this. The same things happen all the time. That's not a reason to get used to it. My God, I have secret prayers. You know it. You are my confidante. I am your confidante. I beg you. Let's start with that. Let's start with something small. Afterwards we'll see. . . . You don't get used to it, you, and unhappy we are the cause, by the perdition of our sins, by the reprobation of our sins, that regret itself is not unknown; to you. And we are your creatures, and we ought to make you so happy. You know what you're doing, and it's always well done. The damned; the damnation of the damned. Grant us communions that are full and pure. There is a secret between us. We have a secret together. I have dared to have a secret with you.[28]

Joan has dared to enter into God, to risk everything by giving him her secret anguish and her secret, very small, and very simple beginnings of hope. Commenting on this passage and on the great *Te Deum* that follows the news of the deliverance of Mont St. Michel, Balthasar writes, "In this she shows that there is no longer any kind of rebellion in her (as in the earlier Joan). The simultaneity of her total fiat and her plea to God, her secret shared with God, is itself the inmost mystery of Christian theology, which permits nothing but a Trinitarian solution. The world is given afresh to Joan . . . 'as if it came forth afresh from your own fresh hands.'"[29]

The *Mystery* as originally published ends before this secret and the world given fresh from God's hands, before the sack of Domremy and the "Voices," in response to which Joan can say only,

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[27]Balthasar, *Glory*, vol. 3, 463.

[28]*Jeanne II*, *OPC*, 1219.

[29]Balthasar, *Glory*, vol. 3, 463.

in quiet surprise, "And I didn't know you were so beautiful. And I didn't know you were so near."[30] Yet, even as it stands, the *Mystery* remains within this opening to hope, which is an opening into God. It is not the full entrance into "the kingdom of hope," surely, but even in its somberness it retains its place as both a theological and poetical foundation. All of Joan's prayer is a sort of secret shared with God, a willingness to risk everything before him and with him, even the agony of the Passion.

Theologically, this first of the *Mysteries* is a necessary step; it takes its place at the point where all distress has been embraced and exhausted by the Savior, until there is no suffering, no solitude, and no abandonment that does not encounter his deeper and more mysterious desolation. Jean Delaporte speaks of the "unrest of Good Friday" which precedes Easter.[31] The consummation of all sorrow in Jesus is the possibility of our hope, and the secret sharing in this sorrow belongs to the saint still in the twilight of beginnings, upon whom God works, the saint before (but in a mysterious way already within) her vocation. Péguy affirmed that in this *Mystery*, he was "at the awakening of hope in Joan,"[32] an awakening that will prove long and arduous.

Joan takes her place within the "axis of distress," to borrow a phrase from elsewhere in Péguy, and not because of any morbidity of style or theological taste on the part of the author. Rather, distress calls to grace with the same insistence with which Joan calls to God. Conversely, it also opens man to this grace, granting him a disposition or a "taste" for Christianity. Delaporte explains that "[t]he fissure and the point of application that grace finds in man is his distress"; he cites a text from Péguy's *Clio* which identifies "a deep, essential, intimate, axial infirmity" as the "very nature of man." It is the source of his "deep taste for Christianity, and it is always by this road that Christianity returns. . . . Much distress makes us almost innocent; when distress appears, it means that Christianity is returning."[33] *"Much distress makes us almost innocent."* Here, perhaps, we have the key. Péguy is a great lover of poverty—poverty of style

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[30]*Jeanne II*, *OPC*, 1258.

[31]Jean Delaporte, *Connaissance de Péguy*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librarie Plon, 1959), 332.

[32]Quoted in ibid., 332.

[33]Delaporte, *Connaissance de Péguy*, vol. 2, 51–52.

above all, and of prayer. He loves the classical style because of this poverty, which grants purity in speech, in art, and in supplication. Now, what is true of Péguy's approach to style is true of his approach to grace. Man must stand before grace as clean and bare as the unembellished word, and only then can he enter into its marvelous fecundity: it is the passage through the consummation of all distress in the *Mystery of the Charity* that allows for the *justesse* of the two *Mysteries* that come after.

Péguy's Joan, with her fierce integrity, stands at a threshold. She has spoken her word within the Master's word, and suffered the terrible stripping of self which that entails. She is a child who has risked everything for her brethren, and in doing so has (inadvertently?) shared in the sorrow of the divine Child, who cries out his terrible anguish just before setting out for his Father's house. She is proud, perhaps, still learning surrender, perhaps . . . but one must leave room for the *Mysteries* that follow. What matters now is that in all her obstinate pride she is humble. The dramatist's note in Joan's argument with Gervaise is important: "*She finds the way to say what follows humbly*: I am sure I would not have abandoned him."[34] Joan has placed everything, her anguish and burning charity and her apparent lack of surrender into the word which she speaks to God—which is already surrender. Her anguished grief bears a humility even greater, perhaps, than Gervaise's unquestioning submission, and it waits, unaware that it has found its way into God's wishes, unaware that it can even pray, waiting for the ultimate word. Before sending Gervaise away, Joan asks, tersely, "And suffering?" The nun answers, "He hears suffering as he hears prayer."[35]

Joan has placed herself squarely within the axis of distress, open to grace, open to who knows what secret of himself God will share in return.

2. *The* Portal of the Mystery*: transition to hope*

Joan speaks last in the *Mystery* and God speaks first in the *Portal*, and somehow, the transition between the two is gentle, as if

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[34]*Jeanne, OPC*, 513.

[35]*Jeanne, OPC*, 524.

the *Mysteries* all together made up one uninterrupted speech. "Orleans, which is in the country of the Loire," Joan says at the end of the *Mystery of the Charity*, waiting and still unconsoled. When we hear the next voice we are almost not surprised. Through Gervaise, this new voice breaks in with marvelous ease: "The faith that I love the best, says God, is hope."[36] Very gently, God the accused takes up the dialogue that was Joan's and quietly shifts the discussion, taking her word into his own and revealing something entirely unexpected. We see, first, a brief glimpse of the world with God's eyes, and it looks so quiet and clean and new, as if it had come forth just that morning from his young hands. It is as if all the anguish of hell and perdition that was just lifted up to heaven left not a trace on this gaze, which dwells so lovingly on creation: "I am so resplendent in my creation," says God, "In the sun and the moon and the stars . . . ./ In the stars of the firmament and in the fish of the sea," in the valley, in the mountains, in bread and wine and fields and grapes, and most especially in children, who are "more my creatures./ Than men are."[37]

There is here no argument, no meeting the challenge head-on, unless one sees in the challenge Joan risking herself wholly into God's hands. Now God risks himself wholly into our hands, laying himself open and showing us his tenderness and his *surprise*. Even God can still be surprised. The world is so resplendent with him that faith is not surprising; the world is so full of misery that charity is not surprising, but there is one other thing, very small and still hiding in the folds of her sister's skirts: "This little girl hope./ Immortal." In her it is difficult to see whether God is surprising himself with his grace or we are surprising God from the misery of the earth, or whether (which is more probable) these two things are one, but he marvels at hope:

> That these poor children see how things are going and believe
> that tomorrow things will go better.
> That they see how things are going today and believe that they
> will go better tomorrow morning.

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[36]Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 3.

[37]*Portal*, 5–6.

> That is surprising and it's by far the greatest marvel of our grace.
> And I'm surprised by it myself.
> And my grace must indeed be an incredible force.
> And must flow freely and like an inexhaustible river.
> Since the first time it flowed and since it has been forever flowing
> . . . .
> And that time, oh that time, since that time that it flowed like a river of blood, from the pierced side of my son.[38]

Our entry into the *Portal* is an entry into speech, a speech so sure of itself and simple, so steady in its momentum and even in its surprise that we sense it has been going on from eternity, as indeed it has. All other words rest on this eternal stream of speech, as we read in the *Holy Innocents*:

> The prophet speaks before.
> My son speaks during.
> The saint speaks afterwards.
> And I speak all the time.[39]

"The good Lord" (Hauviette's *le bon Dieu*) speaks all the time, and in his speech we hear very much of children, and of the "little girl hope." He loves what has just begun, what has just come out of his hands and has not yet been worn out by life, and he knows very well, like the poor woodcutter in the icy forests of Lorraine, that "Children are never the ones who work./ But no one ever works but for children."[40] He loves baptism, the "newest sacrament . . . the sacrament that begins,"[41] and, we sense, he loves the woodcutter's life and cottage and family, and the steaming bowl of soup he eats in the evening before falling exhausted onto his cot, all because he loves the little girl hope. He loves the woodcutter's love for his children because, one gets the idea, God understands living on hope. He understands the woodcutter looking at his children raising their heads playfully for a kiss and seeing in them "the very confidence of hope," knowing that children "are the

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[38] *Portal*, 6–7.

[39] *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents* (=*Innocents*), *OPC*, 800.

[40] *Portal*, 12.

[41] *Portal*, 22.

masters" because they are all "children Jesus,"[42] who was also hope. We are even led to think that he understands the woodcutter's greatest act of daring: that of leaving his sick children in the arms of the Virgin and walking away with eyes clear and arms free, having surrendered his burden to another's care.

No one does anything except for children. No one does anything except for the hope which they are, and the great peculiarity of the *Portal* is that, just as we find it a little difficult to distinguish between Gervaise's word and God's (Gervaise is the one speaking all throughout the poem), between Joan's terrible love of the earth and God's, and between Joan's anguish and the anguish of the dying Christ, so we find it a little difficult to identify the subject of the little girl hope. She is the woodcutter's, that is clear; as such she is a virtue that arises from below, totally natural. She is France's, that is also clear. But then, God loves her so much; this seems to be the one thing he understands best out of all his slightly puzzling creation. Might it not be that, just as he is the one who speaks, and all other speech is spoken within his speech, he is also the one who hopes, and all other hopes rest upon his hope?

Here, too, the transition is almost seamless: the woodcutter has been ruminating on the boldness of his deed, bypassing all the usual patron saints to go directly with his sick children to the Mother of God herself. As he contemplates the saints he has just bypassed, we read,

> Geneviève, my child, was a simple shepherdess.
> Jesus too was a simple shepherd.
> But what a shepherd, my child.
> Shepherd of what herd. Pastor of what sheep . . . .
> Pastor of the hundred sheep that dwelt in the fold, the pastor of the lost sheep, pastor of the sheep that returned.[43]

The woodcutter's hope, the easy and natural movement of hoping in one's children, the easy and natural hope of the Good Shepherd for his sheep . . . and we wonder how we passed so effortlessly from one to the other. Time and eternity, natural and supernatural hope have had their boundaries blurred. Something has

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[42]*Portal*, 25.

[43]*Portal*, 41.

"happened" that so intermingles God and man that even God has difficulty seeing who it is who is the more anxious, who it is who experiences the sweet springtime of hope rising in his heart out of the most bitter fear. It has made it difficult to see, even for God, who needs the more to be saved, himself or his creature the sinner, now that his Son has come and told his creatures that "It is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that a single one of his little ones should be lost."

Jesus is a man, and learned hope like a man. He is the shepherd whose sheep goes astray, and he learns "The mortal anxiety of having to condemn it./ But finally he is saved./ The savior himself is saved" from letting this one sheep lose itself into an eternal night.[44] God who knows everything in knowing himself allows himself "practically . . . as if" to learn something new from that sinner who is his sheep. Or better, he allows the sinner to open him to the sweetness of a movement we had thought confined to time and to our poor flesh: "Young hope . . ./ When a young blood begins to surge back into the heart./ As the young sap of April that begins to flow, to gush underneath the rough bark."[45] God was surprised at the little girl hope at the beginning of the *Portal*. Now, when we read about Jesus, the "Man who hoped," we begin to guess why: this hope made God somehow young, like his creation the morning it came out of his hands. God surprises God, surprises hope in God, *God is eternally new*. We are surprised, too, when we read that the sinner is ashamed of having to repent,

> But God is not ashamed of it.
> Because the wait for this repentance.
> The anxious waiting, the hope for this repentance
> Triggered hope in God's heart,
> Practically unknown, as if it were unknown, I know what I mean to say,
> Caused a feeling, as if it were unknown, to rise, to beat in the very heart of God.
> As though it were a new heart.
> As if it were a new God. I understand, I know what I'm saying.
> Of an eternally new God.[46]

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[44] *Portal*, 48.

[45] *Portal*, 55.

[46] *Portal*, 78–79.

God understands what it means to take all one's hope and deposit it into the arms of another, and so to discover in himself the source of perpetual beginnings. But—and this is important—he does this inversely with respect to us. The woodcutter hopes because he can deposit his children into the arms of the one creature who was at once carnal and pure, sure that they will be most courteously received. The sinner hopes because he has heard the story of the lost sheep who can, exhausted and bruised, deposit himself onto the shepherd's shoulders, sure that he will cause him more joy than the ninety-nine for whom he did not have to seek. But God takes his hope and deposits it with the *sinner*, who is notoriously unsure. If it is the sinner's return that triggers the sweet rising of hope in an "eternally new God," this means that God has given over himself, his word, his youth, and his joy into our unsteady and ephemeral hands.

It is up to us to hope that we do not disappoint God's hope: "O misery, o misfortune . . . O misery, o happiness"[47]; it is up to us to guarantee, in some unfathomable way, the beatitude of God. God speaks, and in speaking he hands himself over to us. He loves, and in loving he hands his happiness over to us. He hopes, and his hope is his answer to Joan. The God we hear speaking is efficacious hope, a God new from all eternity (hope is, we remember, a perpetual beginning). As Onimus points out, creation itself was an act of childlike confidence on the part of God: "'All the sentiments . . . which we must have for God, God had for us, he began by having them for us.' And, among them, the initial sentiment was trust: the creation of man was an act of trust."[48] God begins with this lavish prodigality, placing, from the moment of creation, "his eternal hope in our hands, in our weak hands,/ In our ephemeral hands,"[49] so that we might place our ephemeral hope, our weak hope, into his eternal hands. Here we have the way to surrender: the path is that "remarkable mystery" by which "God made the first move,"[50] doing everything that we are supposed to do before

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[47]*Portal*, 60.

[48]Onimus, *Introduction*, 69.

[49]*Portal*, 73.

[50]*Portal*, 72.

we do, and granting to the "tiniest of sinners" the power to "uncrown," or "to crown/ A hope of God."[51]

God has made the fearful decision to submit to his creature in love, and therefore, if we may dare to say this, to *need* this creature, handing his word into our feeble hands for safekeeping. This is not what we thought when we thought of surrender: "He who is everything needs him who is nothing . . . ./ He who is everything is nothing without him who is nothing."[52] God hopes in us so that we might hope in him, and surrender to him with the same gesture of confident abandon with which he created us. But, lest we think that this hope of God simply speaks at cross-purposes to Joan's initial question ("And suffering?"), or that he proposes a childlike abandon that simply displaces all distress, all God's long speech of tenderness and children and the little girl hope converge on one story, a parable told by his son. "A man had two sons," we read, and everything we have heard thus far slowly begins to coalesce. God's hope is as insidious as his word. Unfailingly accurate—lest we forget that all this magnificent monologue was prompted by a cry of distress—both his word and his hope strike a point of resonance in man, a point of supreme purity and poverty (so difficult to find in this fitful creature) because it is the point of distress.

We have heard God speak very much: of children and innocence and hope, but he did not reveal until now that he knows man's secret. He, God, knows the point where man is the most vulnerable to grace, and therefore where the heart of God and the heart of man most nearly meet. He knows that at the point of the strange intertwining of God's word and man's, God's hope and man's, God's prayer and man's, he can insert a word that remains "driven into the heart of the impious/ Like a nail of tenderness./ *Then he said: A man had two sons*."[53] He has found the precise spot where his grace can enter into time and never again be driven out. It is a place of hope, but who can tell whose, man's or God's? All man knows is that for him, the point struck by these words is "A point of suffering, a point of distress, a point of hope . . . ./ A spot one shouldn't press . . . a place of laceration" which, when pressed,

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[51]*Portal*, 83.

[52]*Portal*, 84.

[53]*Portal*, 93.

can make men cry like children again.[54] Perhaps it can even make men children again.

The point is pressed, the word spoken ever so briefly, only to be submerged again in the ever-flowing tide of God's speech. Two or three pages, and then other themes appear, as if the Father has touched this point of suffering with magnificent accuracy and scarcely even noticed, his vast stream of conversation pressing onward toward eternity. But the word was spoken with such tenderness, and while it lays dormant for a while, we may at least dimly remember another word, inserted even more briefly into *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*: "*O fils le plus aimé qui montait vers son père*."[55] The image catches our attention in its brevity and isolation, and seems, given the tone of the page, even a little out of place. Jesus the lost child (the first of the lost children we see in the *Mysteries*) is dying and cries out his abandonment to his father, when we catch this brief glimpse of a son coming home from the farthest country there is.

The reference stands alone in the *Mystery of the Charity*, but it provides a context for the meditation in the *Portal*. We have been hearing, in the *Portal*, of the wound in the heart of man which is an opening to grace, but, we might be tempted to ask, how does God know? Whence this magnificent tenderness and simple familiarity when God says that no one does anything but for children, that no one hopes but for them, and that hope is a child who makes everything new? How does he know the sorrowful point where feverish man needs to be calmed by the sweet coolness of night, unless the "point of application" of grace in man is also the point of the wellspring of grace in God? What if the wound in the sorrowful heart of man corresponds to a wound, at exactly the same point, in the sorrowful heart of God?

God speaks in the *Portal*, and all the things that we thought most simple take on, in this speech, an infinite value and surprise. We are lulled into a long tapestry of images and words in which all of creation and all of our lives seem to be handed to us again, new in the newness of God's gaze: our children and baptism, innocence and hope, children who are lost, and sleep. Last of all, we are lulled into the night. All of God's speech flows toward this last and most

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[54]*Portal*, 93.

[55]"O most beloved son who went up toward his father" (*Jeanne*, *OPC*, 433).

majestic address to the night, his "most beautiful daughter," which is in the *Portal* the final resting place of his tenderness, of his hope, and of children who sleep. Children sleep, and so they please God, because they surrender to his daughter the night with the same sort of abandon with which he wishes men would surrender to him, though they do not. How God loves this "reservoir of being" which the days interrupt, a little too harsh and too bright, this dance of starry nights joining their hands over the days, always willing to receive creation into her bed of a few hours, "Promise kept in advance/ Awaiting the bed of every hour./ In which I, the Father, will lay my creation."[56]

Now, for the first time, this marvelously simple gaze of God which rested upon the wheat and the grapes, children and mountains and eagles in the first pages of the *Portal*, begins to reveal, in that same speech of quiet admiration for his creation, a hidden sorrow. God loves the night because she makes men childlike again, resting in the arms of his providence; because she reminds him of the silence he loved before he opened the floodgates of time; and because she calms and soothes, bringing rest "To aching limbs/ All out of joint from the day's work . . . ./ To aching hearts."[57] And yet it is God, too, who seems just a little tired, just a little—at least a little—out of joint when he speaks to this his loveliest daughter:

> O my daughter, *glittering and dark*, I salute you
> You who restore, you who nourish, you who give rest
> *O silence of darkness*
> Such a silence reigned before the creation of anxiety.
> Before the beginning of the reign of anxiety
> Such a silence will reign, now a silence of light,
> When all this anxiety will have been consummated . . . .
> After the consummation, after the exhaustion of all this anxiety
> Man's anxiety.[58]

And God's. It is God who must watch this flood of anxiety; it is he who must listen to the perpetual tumult of feverish man ("this man really makes a lot of noise"). Finally, it is he who must watch and listen to one other thing, the only thing he sees and hears,

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[56]*Portal*, 131–132.

[57]*Portal*, 132.

[58]*Portal*, 133.

and in speaking to his most beautiful daughter, God the Father gives his own secret right out of his hand. He can no longer keep hidden what lies behind all his words, the source of the immense tenderness he bears for man, for all the "earthly earth," for children who sleep, children who are lost, and children who die. Night is holy, says he, and not only because she receives all his children who sleep. She also received, a long time ago, his child who died.

At this point in the *Portal* (the last two pages), God has been speaking for a long time, weaving Gervaise's speech entirely into his own, weaving Joan's prayer and—now we see—Joan's anguish into his own grief, both quiet and acute. God hears suffering as he hears prayer, says Gervaise. He hears it so well that it catapults him back to that night of nights, the first of all Christian nights: "And I will remember it eternally./ The ninth hour had sounded./ It was in the country of my people Israel."[59] Evening fell on a very long day, and God grieved. Speaking to Joan who suffers, to men, and to himself, God the Father remembers the night and the day when he was so near to his feverish creature that he was more disconsolate and poor than a poor man, because his Son had tied his hands forever in coming so near to man. God the Father discovers himself to be the Father of the man who died:

> Now every man on earth has the right to bury his own son.
> Every man on earth, if the great misfortune befalls him
> Not to have died before his son. And I alone, God,
> My hands tied by this adventure,
> I alone, father at that moment like so many fathers,
> I alone was unable to bury my son.[60]

And God, in this gently spoken, terrible consummation of his submission to his creature, finds himself in need of his creation.

The blessed daughter night to whom he speaks ceases to be simply a soothing balm for all of his weary and aching creation; it becomes "that night," the night which buried the day in which God suffered for man, and God suffered for God. Reminiscing quietly, God hands over his secret, just as if he were, once again, surprising himself. He learned it and learned himself once again on that singular night: *he loves his Son*. He loves him with infinite tenderness, and

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[59] *Portal*, 136.

[60] *Portal*, 137.

when he heard the "cry that will never fade," his heart broke, and the weary and aching Creator needed his creature the night. The *Portal* closes softly over the dead Child, blanketed by a long, dark shroud of consolation:

> It was then, o night, that you arrived.
> O my daughter, my most precious among them all, and it is still before my eyes and it will remain before my eyes for all eternity
> It was then, o night, that you came and, in a great shroud, you buried
> . . . that valley, upon which the evening was descending,
> And the people of Israel and sinners and, with them, he who was dying, he who had died for them
> And the men sent by Joseph of Arimathea who were already approaching
> Bearing the white shroud.[61]

We are awakened slowly, as gradually as the Father was awakened by this new and very old cry from the earth: Joan's prayer, which "cries for help and renews in him the clamor of Jesus dying on the Cross."[62] Our realization is sudden, but just as familiar: in all his tender and everlasting speech, God has been speaking of only one thing. All the tumult and anguish and prayer rising from the earth converge for him in the one thing he hears, and we realize that in everything he loves, God the Father has loved one surpassingly beautiful and sorrowful thing.

One might have said until this point that God has loved hope and childhood and even his fretful creature, man, a little beyond reason, he being God. But then he tells us that he loves the night, and in this last and first creation we see clearly the source of this love. In the *Holy Innocents*, God says, "all life comes from tenderness."[63] No one does anything but for children, not even God. No one lives but from tenderness, not even God. No one is really surprised or really young (which is the same thing) but for the perpetual birth of hope in his heart which children bring, not even God. God is perpetually surprised, and the surprise is his Son.

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[61] *Portal*, 137.

[62] Delaporte, *Connaissance de Péguy*, vol. 2, 131.

[63] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 680.

So it holds true, even for God, that all words converge on a word of love and a word of hope, on *prayer*, if there can be prayer in God. Even—and especially— God finds his words caught up into an eternal presence, an eternal conversation. We find, shortly after the opening of the *Holy Innocents*, a note of grief that finally goes beyond an apostrophe to the night: "Alas my son, alas my son, alas my son;/ My son who on the cross had skin as dry as dry bark . . ./ my son had been a tender milky infant."[64] The change in the address is ever so slight, but in it we finally see that in the last instance, and always, God is speaking to his Son.

Here we find ourselves at the source of all grace, and, because we are at the source of tenderness, at the source of life in God. A few words escape him in his long apostrophe to the night, and we are sure, if we were not sure before, that Joan's cry has found a way into the most hidden and surprising secret of God's heart. We have said that Joan speaks her word, even without knowing it, within the word of Christ. She could not know that in hearing her suffering as in hearing her word, God would take her so literally as to hear his Son.

Faced with a word rising to him from the suffering earth, God is reminded that he is a Trinity. A word rose once and forever to him from the earth, the perfect response to his word, the echo of a perpetual and perfect conversation, and how like that word this word sounds to him. Disarmed, unable clearly to distinguish any longer between these creatures and his Son, God forgets himself and responds, and we see his life. We hear him mourning:

> He had had too much to bear.
> This drooping head, which I used to rest on my bosom,
> This shoulder which I used to lean against my shoulder.
> And this heart beat no longer, which had beaten so much out of love.[65]

After this glimpse of the inner life of God, there is nothing left of him which has not been surrendered. God, the terrible God of *The Mystery of the Charity*, has betrayed himself right out of his hand.

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[64] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 681.

[65] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 682.

3. The ground of our hope: at the center of the life of God

Once the "betrayal" has been made, we find ourselves once again at the beginning, which is prayer, but no longer in prayer as the painful stretching of the human being to the dimensions of eternal life. Rather, when we take our places with this eminently theological poet at the mighty source of all reconciliation, we come also, and at last, to that place where God is three and also one. He is the wellspring of the word and of union, and ultimately, in the *Holy Innocents*, of the joy of the infant martyrs playing hoops in Paradise, but he can be all this only because he himself is prayer, the primordial ground of "being with" and hence of hope. Now, if in us the consequence of prayer is a twofold openness, to God and to our brethren—an openness that must be stretched until it begins to approximate the infinite dimensions of its source—what of that supreme and inimitable source? What if the observation we made at the beginning of this meditation, that "every act of hope is an act both for my brethren and borne by them, and brings us together into Life," is preeminently true for the source of Life?

We come at this mystery by degrees; first, at the beginning of *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, we must listen just a little longer to God mourning. In an uninterrupted continuation of his address to the night, the Father weeps over his dying Son, who had been a tender milky infant. But this time he weeps, too (though differently), because that consummate obedience and anguish of his Son was also, as he describes it, a perfectly orchestrated attack upon himself, who is infinite justice. In perhaps the most famous image of *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, God sees all the prayers of the world advancing like an immense fleet of battleships braving the flood of his wrath, led by the vessel of his Son, and he watches helplessly as the whole divine strategy is delivered into the hands of men: "My son delivered to them the secret of judgment itself."[66] Men tremble before the secret of judgment, but now, with this *traditio*, so does God. The "secret" is pronounced on earth as in eternity by those same "lips of tenderness," but pronounced from within time, from among men, and *as men*, as if "He had thrown over his shoulders/ The mantle of the sins of the world":[67] "*Our* Father, he invented that." The word

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[66]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 696.

[67]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 698.

is familiar and strange, like his newly-clothed Son, and God throws up his hands, defeated: "And I am supposed to judge them. How do you want me to judge them, now, after that."[68]

Things happen in time, and God knows this, having made it. But some things also "happen" in eternity, when one makes the act of confidence of creation, and this the God of the *Mysteries* does not quite seem to expect. His Son surprised him, entering into time. The Father seems so defenseless before that cry which will "never again be silenced, in any night," and those thirty years and three years and three days and three nights in which his will was more thoroughly accomplished than he ever expected it to be accomplished from the earth. How can God any longer judge the earth, now that it looks so unexpectedly beautiful to his eyes? He remembers the exact moment of the change: "An event happened in the meantime, an event intervened, an event created a barrier./ It was that my son came."[69] His son took it upon himself to imitate man, "When so faithfully and so perfectly he imitated being born . . . ./ And living. . . ./ And dying,"[70] so well that the Father no longer quite recognizes his restless creature, man. Henceforth, every "imitation of Christ" that will rise to him from the earth will recall to his eyes this first and perfect imitation of man.

After this, God who is perfect and changeless finds himself faced with something new in his eternity: "he knew very well what he was doing, that day, my son who loved them so much . . . ./ Who brought a certain taste for man, a certain taste for the earth into heaven."[71] One might say that God would never have known that he could have such a taste for the earth, were it not that his Son one day revealed his own will to himself, and he found himself the Father not only of the divine Child, but of a multitude of brethren. His will, as his Life, is expansive: the love God gives to God is somehow greater now, we cannot help but suspect, and he is a little bit more "magnified" than before. Before, we hear that he loved his quiet eternity of shared life with his Son, in the unspoken unity of the Spirit. Then, for three days, his Son died, and he heard no word

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[68] *Innocents*, *OPC,* 696.

[69] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 713.

[70] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 692.

[71] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 695.

and saw no face but this infinitely sorrowful silence of his will being done. And now, he sees millions of his one Son, all with the same face, all with the same words pronounced on the same lips of tenderness, all committing the same act of sweet violence against their (powerless) father in heaven. What can he do but love this Son millions of times more? God knows very well what this means, and for a moment the old God lets forth an exclamation that echoes the youth and indignation of little Hauviette: "*Je suis Dieu, je vois clair.*"[72] As he watches the advancing battleships of prayer, graceful, well-curved and strong, fanning out in formation behind the spear which is the folded hands of his Son, God the Father once again realizes that he loves his Son:

> At the head is the innumerable fleet of *Paters*
> Breaking and braving the flood of my wrath.
> Powerfully seated upon their three levels of oars.
> (See how I am attacked. I ask you. Is this fair?)
> (No, it is not at all fair, for all this is of the kingdom of my Mercy)
> And all these sinners and all these saints advance together behind my son
> And behind the clasped hands of my son.
> And they themselves have clasped hands as if they were my son.
> Let's say it, then: my son. Each one as my son.[73]

So man has found his way into God. The flood has been breached, and we see, more clearly than ever before, the perpetual and vital dialogue at the heart of God.

God's heart has been laid bare, and so we peer into—and enter—the wound which is the space of the Son. The wound exists from the Passion, of course, but it is also, one might suspect, a wound that existed from eternity, an eternal "wound" that allowed for this wound of time, a space that made possible this absolutely successful betrayal. Péguy's God does, after all, know himself well. He knows he betrayed himself into his Son's hand, and that the one who loves places himself in servitude to the one he loves. He made that rule, we are told in the *Portal*, and he does not exempt himself from it. The Father who "occupies himself with damning souls" is

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[72]"I am God, I see clear," which echoes Hauveitte's earlier, repeated declaration that she, a little girl of Lorraine, "sees clear."

[73]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 700.

so wholly in this servitude of love that he is helpless, like a little child. He is God, and in the "betrayal" of his Son, his will is done:

> the same God who weeps softly over the Son's "treachery," his *traditio*, because he has given away the Father's secret to men, himself gave away, handed over, "betrayed" his own Son to the world out of love. The powerlessness of the Father, whose justice is fettered by mercy, is the expression of his own omnipotence, and the powerlessness of this omnipotence is equally the omnipotence of his powerlessness; this is the *kabód*, the true glory of God that Péguy seeks to extol, and the aisthesis of which he cultivates in all possible ways.[74]

The God of glory has handed over his will to his Son, and it is the totality of an obedience so great that it looks to be almost rebellion which at last "bears away" the Kingdom of heaven.

Never before has man so needed God, says Joan in the *Mystery of the Charity*. But also: "Never before have you so needed man,"[75] The primordial prayer or beatitude of God had been God, Father and Son loving one another in the unity of the Spirit—until that day when the Father watched legions of men sail bravely into the flood of his wrath and realized, with a start, that he *had* to love them, because they were his Son and he could not cease being the Father. His Son was right, he tells us, who could not be at rest with man ("since for them as them he suffered/ A martyrdom of man"),[76] so that the Father might learn once again the power of his grace, and delight to be at rest with man. "And my grace must be so great," says the Father, echoing the opening of the *Portal*, in which his creation reveals his glory to himself. But this time, something is added, and the God who is everything wishes for more in his eternity: "And eternally I will be at rest with them/ For in my paradise itself they will eternally love me just as much,"[77] that is, his legions of children who are to him as his one and eternally surprising Son.

God's eternity, which was perfect, has suffered an augmentation. One might even say that God himself has suffered it, so happy he is to be thus loved. This is still God loving God, but a God able

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[74]Balthasar, *Glory*, vol. 3, 503.

[75]*Jeanne II*, *OPC*, 1217.

[76]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 737.

[77]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 737.

to love his Son anew, sharing in the sweet rising of sap under the old bark in the heart of the Man who hoped. So we see now that the Son loves men because they are beautiful to his eyes, but beautiful because of the Father; and the Father loves men because they are beautiful to his eyes, but beautiful because of the Son. This is God's paradise—God loving God—and man has found himself, inadvertently, right at its center.

Man can hope, then. God can hope, then, and even eternity is made new. This is, at last, the passage from the quiet weariness that longs for the night, which dominates the first part of *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, to God's paradise, which, like him, is eternally new. Throughout the first seventy pages of the *Innocents*, we hear the refrain, "Shall it be said . . . ?" Shall it be said that men should be so full of bitter weariness that they will desire nothing but forgetfulness and sleep, and nothing God can give them in eternity will ever wash this weariness away? The answer comes only after God's discovery of being loved in freedom by these new brethren of his Son. What ends the question is a movement of hope, in which, we remember, God himself is new:

> Now it would be thus, says God
> And all that I could place on the edges of the lips
> Of the wounds of the martyrs
> Would be balm, and forgetfulness, and night.
> And everything would end in lassitude,
> All this enormous adventure,
> As a blazing harvest ends
> With the slow descent of a great summer evening.
> Were it not for my little girl hope.
> It is because of my little girl hope alone that eternity will be.
> And Beatitude will be.
> And Paradise will be. And heaven and all.[78]

God will be in his heaven with his Son again resting on his bosom, and with all his other children in whom he has hoped. They are also his Son, and to them he knowingly and wisely betrayed the secret of his heart.

In a way, Onimus is right when he makes the passage in the *Mysteries* from the dark anguish of Joan to the fresh and indefatigable little girl hope to be a glance at childhood: "To a silent and, it seems,

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[78] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 745–746.

indifferent Providence, Péguy opposes the plenitude of innocence. And everything is quieted, all this tumult and revolt . . . . [I]t was . . . in meditating on the mysterious limpidity of childhood that Péguy discovered grace and penetrated into the kingdom of God."[79] But Onimus does not say all. The opening to grace in the *Mysteries* does not lie, in the first place, in childhood as such. It lies in the wound in God's heart caused to him by one Child: his Son whom he loves, and whom he used to carry in his eternal bosom until that day when his Son took the pain ("his very great pain") of leaving God's right hand and imitating man. God is conquered by childhood and hope because he was conquered first (and eternally) by his Son; our penetration into the kingdom of God comes precisely at that most mysterious fissure and opening in God that makes him to be, to use Delaporte's image, a "Christian God." He is trinitarian life, and so everything is new.

Upon reading the *Innocents*, one gets the impression that, now that he can trace out the features of his Son upon men's faces, God sees everything, the night and the great summer evenings, the harvests and men who harvest, the tender shoots of April, and even his Paradise, newer than on the first day of creation. It is like a great, cosmic spring that reaches even into eternity. In something of an exhilarating discovery, the Father finds that he can love his Son "more" (there is always an infinitely more in God): in time, in weary man, in sinful man, in saintly man, and most of all in children. And in this discovery, he discovers his creation. He made men free; their freedom looks to him like the freedom of his grace, and more, like the infinite freedom of his Son. He made the budding spring, which looks to him like the hope of redemption, who was a tender, milky infant resting in his mother's arms. He made the night, which looks to him so much like the death and surrender of his Son, sleeping his terrible sleep of exhaustion in the will of his Father. Most of all, he made children, whom his Son was so right to love, and who—not are like—but who *are* his Son. We at last understand something we have touched upon throughout the progression of the *Mysteries*: "the secret similitude, the secret familiarity/ Of my Grace with tenderness and milk."[80] Children make the thought of Paradise arise almost unsought-for in God, because they make him think of his beatitude,

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[79]Onimus, *Introduction*, 53.

[80]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 809.

which is love, in the presence of the ever so discreet "Consoler," of One who had been a very tender child.

If the love between the Father and the Son gives rise to perpetual surprise in God (the Holy Spirit is invisibly but ubiquitously present in these poems), it also gives rise to the "flowering" of childhood at the end of the *Holy Innocents*, which is in this poem synonymous with the flowering of Paradise. God's Paradise will be as young as God, and young precisely because God is young. Of course there is still weariness in the world; there are still the broken bodies and weary hearts that would wish only for forgetfulness and the balm of the night. There is still, even to the end of the *Innocents*, the clear recognition that life wears away that initial freshness of being, and even Jesus had the wounds to prove that living a life on earth among men is a wearisome affair. No one is like children, God repeats; nothing that is old and made new again is like that which never grew old. "Shall it be said," he asks, in an echo of an earlier question, "that of so many saints and so many martyrs/ The only ones who are really white/ Really pure" should be "Those unhappy children whom the soldiers of Herod/ Massacred in the arms of their mothers."[81] So much is reserved to these innocents who stole their way into heaven without having lived that there seems so little left to those who have. Except for one thing.

The *Holy Innocents* is, ultimately, a poem about Paradise. It is about the life of God, superabundant, immeasurably fruitful life, and for that reason it is about presence, prayer, hope, expansion: *God's* twofold openness to God and (since God became man) to his brethren. For God, too, that twofold openness is one, and so his one, infinitely expansive love can, not just color, but transform everything he sees. We see this in God's long last monologue about the newborn "flowers of the martyrs." In it, he is still, and more than ever, speaking of his Son. His Son came, and when that happened, there came into the world something that suffered weariness and exhaustion and even death, and yet remained utterly, indefatigably new. Children remain in the world as a sign of the coming of the divine Child, when the source of perpetual beginnings came to meet, and entangle itself in, the world. They are the reminder (and the reality) that when the love of the Father met the love of the Son, man found himself right at the center of the source of Life.

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[81] *Innocents*, *OPC*, 802.

It may be that Onimus is to some extent right when he points to the last part of the *Innocents* (the monologue explaining why the Innocents infinitely surpass all other saints and martyrs) as indicative of a pessimism and "secret despair" latent in Péguy's work,[82] but that secret sadness is not the poem's last word. "Shall it be said," asks God again, that these martyred infants who did not even know the name of Jesus are the only ones who are pure and without stain. It would be so; the whole world would sink in its ocean of bitter weariness and long for the night, but for the one thing which is ever new. *God* is what is new, the God who is the source of hope itself, who is perpetual, living speech, and God has taken time into his eternity. God's Son has thrown on the mantle of mankind and loved his Father in heaven; God loves the God prostrate on the face of the earth, and man has been brought into this tremendous exchange of love.

The innocents bear witness to this complete and surprising repositioning of man, because they, being more literally than any other children "children Jesuses," are loved for the sake of, and because they so nearly resemble, God's Son. The word of God has been given to man deeply, so deeply that man finds himself part of the word of love from God to God, enveloped in the mystery of an eternal freshness and youth. From now on, in both his action and his being, he serves the word of life, and he serves Life. From now on, too, he stands poised at the threshold of the kingdom of joy. The innocents and the grace accorded to them are and will remain, even in Paradise, the sign of that divine fecundity which is the entrance (for God as well as man) into the domain of joy. Péguy, the poet who stood in the "axis of distress," once wrote about joy: "We enter here into an unknown domain which is the domain of joy. A hundred times less known, a hundred times more strange, a hundred times less ourselves than the kingdoms of sorrow. A hundred times deeper and, I believe, a hundred times more fruitful . . . . Blessed are those who one day will have some idea of it."[83]

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[82]Cf. *Incarnation*, 179.

[83]*Note conjointe sur M. Descartes et la philosophie cartésienne*, in *Œeuvres en prose* 1909–1914 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961), 1551. The page, written in 1914 just before Péguy's mobilization for the war, was the last thing he wrote and was left unfinished.

The last word of the *Innocents* is again about the beatitude of God. Or rather, one guesses that this is the beatitude of God; he is so powerless to untangle his startlingly beautiful creation from his eternity. He is happy, watching these martyred child Jesuses playing hoops with their crowns and palms: "Such is my paradise, says God. My Paradise is the most simple thing there is."[84]

After this panoramic vision that led us from the suffering in the face of hell to heaven, our initial question, prompted by the encyclical, arises again: how do we hope, how do we persevere in hope? How do we look on a life that wounds and wearies us and find in it, deep within it, surprised, the source of the clear streams of salvation? How do we allow ourselves to be stripped by the difficult school of hope which is prayer, until we are bound, in suppleness, in transparency, in love, to God and our neighbor? How do we stand in the face of death and worse, of the mystery of hell? How all of this, except that God, who is the wellspring of prayer, suppleness, transparency, and who is love, has already hoped, already stretched himself to the dimensions of his children and brethren, already surrendered himself into our hands? How, except that every act and every effect of bitterness and despair, every genuine suffering, *man*, has already been enclasped in the ever-greater love of God for God, which provides a way (the only way) to the hope of man? Here, at last, in this strange meeting of the poet of hope with the Pope who wishes to discern anew "the true shape of Christian hope," and in a deeply theological and poetical articulation of this "shape" by one whose task it was to be a "minister of hope" for his brethren, we begin to understand something of the efficacy of hope. Hope keeps God open to the world, for which reason it also keeps the world open to God. It is, for the world and us, the promise and gratuitous participation, already now, in Life. For God, it is simply Life, his own Life, opened in divine simplicity to his brethren. For both, perhaps, if we may dare to speak for God, it is the entrance into the kingdom of joy.[85] □

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[84]*Innocents*, *OPC*, 823.

[85]Parts of this article appeared in a slightly different form in the author's STL thesis, published as "At the Center of Life: Poetry as Trinitarian Conversation in the *Mysteries* of Charles Péguy," *Anthropotes* 19 (2003). Published by permission.