

JULES CHEVALIER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

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IT IS INTERESTING to note that Jules Chevalier (1824 - 1907) and Karl Marx (1815 - 1883) were near contemporaries. Both were concerned about the future direction of society and developed theories about the nature of society: one with the 'class struggle', the other with the power of divine love.

While Marx was working in the British Library, composing his critique of capitalism, *Das Kapital*, the young seminarian in Bourges, was dreaming of founding a new religious congregation that could transform the character of society in his part of France. Both young men wanted to change society—but by different means. Each in his own way was a 'revolutionary'.

Fr Dennis Murphy in a paper entitled 'The Heart as the Centre' (1995) argues that Father Chevalier 'was convinced that the nature of God and of human beings, the whole of our faith, the meaning of human existence, and the meaning of the universe itself could be discovered and presented to the world in the revelation of God's love in Jesus' pierced side on the cross, or in other words, in the pierced Heart of Christ'.

Both thinkers were deeply troubled by the modern evils of egoism and indifference that were destroying the fabric of society as a result of the French and Industrial Revolutions (fuelled by the principles of the Enlightenment). Marx was convinced that humanity

could only be changed by violent disruption: the destruction of the old and its replacement with a new more egalitarian society. Chevalier was convinced that the answer was found in practical love.

Both men favoured quite different responses to the challenges of their times. Both were 'missionaries' but each found his inspiration in a different source. Unlike Chevalier, Marx rejected the role of the transcendent in the transformation of human values.

Chevalier strongly believed in man's ability to grasp the transcendent love of God; man was the bridge connecting the world with the intentions of God: 'Man is king and pontiff: king through his intellect, pontiff through his heart'. Whereas for Marx, man was the barrier to a just society.

Christ had become man to establish on earth God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace. Chevalier wanted to proclaim and continue Christ's mission in all its dimensions, in all its fullness. He did not want to limit it to the 'spiritual' world; as Fr Cuskelly has noted, Chevalier was a pragmatist rather than an idealist. The inspiration for his vision of a new society was Christ's personal mission.

However, it would be a misunderstanding of the spirit of Chevalier to reduce that mission to a purely social or political one. Chevalier understood the Lord's mission in a much richer way than that: it has a transcendent di-

mension—it was rooted in Christ’s intimacy with the Father. It is about building the intimate relationship between God and humanity, sharing in the divine life. On the other hand, we would be unfaithful to the vision of the Founder were we to reduce his vision to a sort of pious spirituality: to ‘spiritualize it’. The spirituality of the heart is practical.

Chevalier was a man open to the problems of his time, to the real-life difficulties people encountered and also open to new possibilities for the laity faced with the concrete challenges presented by the social environment of the times. He was convinced that you cannot preach the Gospel without taking seriously its human and social consequences. He had a sense of mission ‘without limits’ which cannot be reduced simply to a ‘spirituality’. It has been said that Marxism proved so popular because of the failure of Christians to address the real issues of the time.

Chevalier had a far more positive view of human possibilities than Marx did. He saw his missionaries as people who were directly involved with the creation of a new and better world; he understood this as one of the principal aims of his young Society, promoting what he called the ‘social reign of the Sacred Heart’. On one occasion we know that he became indignant when one of his younger confreres accused him of being disinterested in the promotion of the ‘social reign of the Sacred Heart’.

No, I am in no way indifferent, as you seem to believe, to the establishment of the social reign of the Sacred Heart. No one wants this more than I. Be sure of that. If time had permitted, I would have had a long time ago, a series of articles in our *Annals* on this important subject that I regard as one of the *principal works* of our congregation. I have spoken of this on numerous occasions and no one was able or wanted to undertake the task.

To prepare our Associates to hear about the social and universal reign of the Sacred Heart, you could send us each month a serious, theological article on the Sacred Heart. For example, to begin with you could prove the inalienable



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rights of Jesus Christ over all nations, first as God, as Redeemer and as conqueror. Once this point has been solidly established, it will be easy for you to show that Jesus Christ wants to reign by his Heart, and that it is necessary, in order to respond to his desires, that we all work to establish and spread this reign of his love.

Father Chevalier clearly understood that the promotion of a society based on the self-giving love revealed in the pierced Heart of Christ on the Cross was one of the main aims of the *Archconfraternity of the Sacred Heart* that he had established. This was not simply a pious aim, it was also practical, as he demonstrated in the talks on social issues, such as the problems caused by urban poverty, that he gave to the men of the parish of Issoudun.

There is also evidence in his correspondence of his interest in direct political action. He seems to have raised with the Count Albert de Mun, one of the leading French politicians of the time (who was profoundly concerned about the Church’s response to the plight of the workers), a scheme for the formation of a Christian political party, the ‘Chevaliers of the Sacred Heart’. However, the count rejected the proposal: ‘he has told me that since the Holy Father has forbidden him to create a Christian political party in the Chamber [of Deputies], he does not want to become involved with our project, at least not directly, as long as the Pope does not favour such action’ (Letter to Fr Delaporte, 1866). Sadly there is little information available in the archives about this project, which would suggest that Chevalier shared Marx’s concern about social conditions.

It is clear from his writings (as Fr Dennis

Murphy has demonstrated) that Father Chevalier had a ‘cosmic’ understanding of the spirituality of the Heart. It was a spirituality that embraced everything; its agenda was universal, its concern, all that affected the human condition—a spirituality that could bind together the whole of creation and unite it with God.

In his almighty genius, God has found the means to unite matter and spirit. What a miracle is the body of man! God has formed this privileged matter in such a way that the whole lower world is united in it, summed up in it...

Man is not only a mineral that blossoms, a shrub that feels, an animal that reasons: he is a mineral, a tree, an animal who prays, who adores, who gives thanks. In us matter becomes religious.

Man’s vocation—individual and social—is to live the love that unites and builds communion. Thus, Father Chevalier understood that the way of the spirituality of the Heart, that had so taken hold of him, was the continuation of God’s mission of love in the work of creation.

Knowing himself, God loves himself. For him to know himself is to generate his Son. And the Father and the Son love each other with a unique love, and this love is the Holy Spirit, third person of the holy Trinity, whose existence is equally as necessary as that of the Son and the

Father. God’s creatures resemble him more in so far as they are more perfect; he wills then that, in his spiritual creatures, knowledge should produce love. It is in order to be loved that he wants to be known. What would it matter to him to be known, if one did not love him?

From this comes the *whole of religion*: knowledge producing love, and the result of this is adoration and obedience. Such is the external glory that the Creator seeks in his creation.

An authentic human society will reflect the life of the Trinity: a communion of love, or what Pope Paul VI once called a ‘civilization of love’, in which the dignity and development of man in society is assured. What a contrast there is between Chevalier’s vision for the transformation of society and that of Marx. Any visitor to the ‘War Remnants Museum’ in Ho Chi Minh City, is dramatically reminded of the tragic consequences of the destructive solutions proposed by the alternatives of Western militarist/industrial capitalism and Marxism: violence and the destruction of society and nature—not their transformation.

As followers of Father Chevalier and the spirituality of the Heart, today, we are being called to work hard for the transformation of society after the pattern of God’s self-giving love revealed in the Heart of Christ pierced on the Cross.

Jesus, recognized as the King of Peace, is the founder of the civilization of love, the civilization of peace. This is what it cost for Jesus to be the Messiah, to be the Christ, to be the victim of his love and of our peace, as he will be proclaimed to be, in the coming days of Holy Week...

But meanwhile we greet with great joy...the message of peace which Jesus Christ has brought to us ... And we pray that this peace, human, civil, and spiritual will produce brotherhood between people, and that the instincts of egotism, of deceit, of crime will be replaced by a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation...

The events, the symptoms, and the shudders of war arise even today in the life of the world, paralyzing the progress toward peaceful coexistence, producing hatred and cupidity and terrible armaments, producing a precarious and threatened peace, sadly making civilization itself unsure.

—Paul VI, Palm Sunday 1977.