

“The Redemptive Vision of Georges Rouault”

When I was a young student here at Seton Hall in the 1950s, wrestling with my own vocation to be a priest, it seemed like all the best literature and art came from France. As I read the writers who made up the Catholic Renaissance of the time, it seemed that most of them were French: George Bernanos, Francois Mauriac, Leon Bloy, Charles Peguy, Paul Claudel, etc. These authors seemed to plumb the depths of a people whose lives had so recently been ravaged by terrible wars; and yet in their midst were lives deeply touched by religious faith. It was at that time that I read Rene Voillaume’s **The Seeds of the Desert** that recounted the life of Charles DeFoucauld, who had recovered his own Catholic faith through his encounter with Moslem people of the Sahara. I also read the French philosophers, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain who found in artistic creativity a human openness to the divine. In fact, Maritain’s **Art and Scholasticism** featured the paintings of his friend, Georges Rouault.

Recently Stephen Schloesser’s **Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Post-war Paris 1919-1933** has uncovered in detail the broad historical story of this period in French Catholicism and what I found so intriguing as a young person in the midst of the twentieth century. The people of France had lived through terrible sufferings and something had happened to their soul. For some, perhaps, these sufferings had only confirmed a secularism and nihilism, but for others deep meaning was found right in the midst of suffering.

Georges Rouault fits into that framework. Born into a poor Catholic family in the midst of the Franco-Prussian war, he developed a distinct artistic style that was quite modern, and at the same time deeply religious. In his etchings and paintings of the poor, the lonely and the condemned he sought to express a universal human experience. That

experience can be discerned in the experience of that first century Jew of whom it was said, “Tax collectors and prostitutes were all gathering around him and the Pharisees complained, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

The philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) once noted that redemption is not a category unique to Christianity. The longing for redemption can be found in the seemingly most profane of places: in the displacement and immigrations of peoples and families, in prisons, and in the lives of women abandoned and lonely. But in a Christian context that longing for redemption takes on a new meaning: it does not promise the elimination of all evil but it does set it within a new context: the context of divine love. Paul’s admonition, “Do not return evil for evil but overcome evil with good,” demands taking evil seriously and at the same time it demands being open to God’s love in that very place. It seems that this is what Georges Rouault sought to do throughout his work. He sought to express, through color and form and emphasis, the deep sorrow of this world transformed only through an even deeper love. His passionate vision is also joyful. In the words of his friend, Leon Bloy, in the novel, **The Woman Who Was Poor**: “Here the only unhappiness is not to be one of the saints.”

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