

Connaturality and the Rosary: The Sense of Touch and the Leap Beyond Discursive Reason in Jacques Maritain

Preface: The Quest for Connaturality

Drawing from Jacques Maritain's seminal works, "Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry" (1953) and "Notebooks" (1984), with references to "Degrees of Knowledge" (1937), this paper examines Maritain's evolving conception of acquiring knowledge of God. By intertwining his theories of artistic creation with reflections on the Rosary, particularly in relation to his sister-in-law Vera, we explore the sense of touch and the Rosary as transcendent vectors.

In "Degrees of Knowledge," Maritain asserts, "All knowledge of God by ideas or concepts is irremediably deficient, disproportionate by its very mode of grasping and signifying the object signified and known" (Maritain, 1937, p. 93). He acknowledges that transcending conceptual knowledge while remaining within the bounds of intelligence is a contradiction. Progress beyond this realm must be through love, with supernatural love facilitating the transition. The mind, here on earth, can only overleap all modes of knowing through a renunciation of knowledge, where the Spirit of God, using the connaturality of charity and the effects of divine union, gives the soul an experience of that which no concept can approach.

Maritain proposes a theological conjugation where the subject surpasses discursive reason, entering into a "holy ignorance" and losing itself in God, renouncing all scientific gifts. This renunciation yields a comprehension beyond intellectual grasp, accomplished through affective connaturality, or as in aesthetic perception, the intuition of the senses.

Jacques' 'Notes' on Vera's Russian Childhood Imagination

At 79, Jacques Maritain joined the Little Brothers of Jesus, a Dominican monastic order whose founder was presented with the Rosary in a vision by the Queen of Heaven. Three years earlier, he wrote his "Notebooks," dedicating a chapter to his sister-in-law Vera, who lived with the Maritains for 53 years until her death.

Born in Russia on the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Vera's childhood, as recounted by Raïssa, was marked by a state of atemporal innocence: "a world where no one cried or was sick, where flowers and fruits grew all the year round, where children played with birds and could fly like them" (Maritain, 1984, p. 24). This reflects a theology of childhood that emphasizes intuitive openness over discursive reasoning,

resonating with the scriptural assertion that childlike qualities are prerequisites for divine revelation.

Raïssa further describes their upbringing where the idea of evil was deliberately excluded: “When we were big enough to have an idea of good and evil, the very idea of evil had to be shut out of our world... It was an extraordinary exercise for the little minds of children, and we often made mistakes, but we would catch ourselves and would try to correct our way of speaking and thinking” (Maritain, 1984, p. 25). This practice mirrors the Slavophile critique of Western rationalism, which emphasized the importance of maintaining spiritual and moral purity over intellectual fragmentation.

Vera's life continued to reflect this childlike wonder and purity. Despite her frail health, she trained as a nurse at the Hôpital de la Pitié in Paris, one of the most dilapidated hospitals, where she encountered human suffering and misery firsthand. When her health forced her to abandon nursing, she devoted herself to supporting Jacques and Raïssa, always in the background, embodying a spirit of selfless service.

In her later years, Vera found solace in the works of Louis de Montfort, particularly his writings on the Rosary. Montfort compared the Rosary to the Psalms of David, deeming it more valuable because it bore the fruit of the Word incarnate. Bedbound, Vera would sketch birds and boats and write children's stories, reflecting her unwavering devotion to the Rosary and meditative practices.

Connaturality and the Rosary

Maritain's reflections on Vera's life and the Rosary offer insights into connaturality—knowledge through a congeniality with the object, achieved through love. The Rosary, as a contemplative meditation, serves as a transcendental vector, aiding in the ascent beyond reason into a divine reality.

Evagrius Ponticus's teachings on dispassion and lucid dreaming resonate here. Pure prayer, according to Evagrius, inhibits the form-generating capacities responsible for mental representations, allowing the ascetic to enter “the place of God.” Maritain parallels this with the Rosary's role in facilitating a leap beyond discursive reason, aligning with Evagrius's notion of prayer as surpassing virtue.

Maritain's concept of connaturality integrates Thomistic aesthetic experience, where beauty is accessible through the senses but fundamentally ordered towards intellectual delight. For Aquinas, the beautiful consists of integrity, proportion, and clarity—properties made intelligible through the senses and the mind. Maritain extends this to the Rosary, where praying it involves a creative impulse akin to an artist bringing an unrealized vision to life.

The Role of Imagination and Intuition

CS Lewis trusted the capacity of imagination as a "faculty of truth," asserting that while reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning (Lewis, 1947). Imagination, producing new or reviving old metaphors, conditions truth but does not cause it. Truth is deduced from nature, but meaning—how that truth relates to being—is derived from imagination. Imagination accurately grasps reality, involving not just understanding precise concepts but also imaginative longing, akin to von Balthasar's "beauty," as a foretaste of ultimate reality.

Maritain highlights this dynamic in "Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry," where he notes that "the deeper the intellectual intuition, the more vital and intimate is this spiritual expression by which it is accomplished, and the more inexhaustible it appears in relation to oral and material expression" (Maritain, 1953, p. 58). This intuition goes beyond concepts, relying on affective connaturality to grasp the truth.

Maritain describes this process as akin to aesthetic perception, where the senses themselves participate in understanding reality. In his view, "For when the intelligence knows without seeing an intelligible, for example, divines or obscurely experiences, or plays with a beautiful thing, the fact is that it knows, I do not say without concepts, but by making use for formal means of something other than concepts" (Maritain, 1953, p. 64). This "something" includes affective connaturality, intuition, and the senses, which together create a holistic understanding of reality.

Conclusion

The Rosary, in Maritain's view, exemplifies connaturality, facilitating an ascent beyond discursive reason through affective participation. This parallels the artistic process, where intuition and imagination unlock deeper truths and meanings. Vera's life, her devotion to the Rosary, and her childlike imagination reflect this transcendental journey, embodying a pure and profound approach to divine knowledge.

Maritain's exploration of connaturality through the Rosary and his artistic theories offers a richer understanding of how touch, imagination, and intuitive knowledge contribute to spiritual and intellectual growth. His insights invite us to transcend the limitations of discursive reason, embracing a holistic, affective approach to understanding the divine and the beautiful.

References

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