

referred back to a superhuman order, which here below we cannot grasp apart from its signs and indications, that their truly sacred character becomes apparent. Accordingly, as events have gone on showing for the last quarter of a century, wherever man betrays faith in man, wherever treason becomes a habit and then a rule, there can no longer be room for anything but insanity and ruin. It can scarcely be different wherever the claim is made to establish a way of private life which disregards the vow of fidelity. The truth is that humanity is only truly human when it is upheld by the incorruptible foundations of consecration – without such foundations it decomposes and dies. Do not let us say, however, that it returns to nothingness. If this word has any meaning, which is not certain, it is on a level of reality far below the human structure. When man, by denying the existence of God, denies his own, the spiritual powers which are dissociated by his denial keep their primitive reality, but disunited and detached they can no longer do anything but drive the beings of flesh and soul back against each other in a despairing conflict – those beings which, had their union been safeguarded and preserved, would have gone forward towards eternal life. What all this amounts to is that if, as is certain, we have to recover today the sense of a certain fundamental reverence towards life, it cannot be by starting from below, that is to say from a biology of racialism or eugenics infected with ill-will. On the contrary, only an affirmation which reaches far beyond all empirical and objectively discernible ways of living can gain for us a sense of life's fullness and, besides this, set the seal of eternity upon the perpetually renewed act of creation, that act by which the whole family preserves its being and grants to the soul, which it forms and guides, the fearful power of completing or, alas, of repudiating it.

Le Peuch.
March–May, 1942.

To JEAN DE FABREGUES
THE CREATIVE VOW AS ESSENCE
OF FATHERHOOD¹

The thoughts which I want to propose for your consideration today follow directly from those I put before you last year at Lyons and at Toulouse in my lecture on the *Mystery of the Family*. One might even say that in the last analysis I am only presenting an application of the general idea which formed as it were the framework of that lecture. I think therefore that as this idea can serve as a guiding thread through the sinuosities of the developments which are to follow, it will be useful to place it in abstract outline at the head of my talk. To-day, experience seems to show us clearly that the unbeliever is indulging in an illusion when he imagines that he only has to make a clean sweep, that is to say to demolish what he regards as the superstructures of religious consciousness, and he will have at his disposal a clear field, or let us say arable ground in which all he need do is to sow the good grain distributed by reason in order to see rich harvests of natural morality spring up before his eyes. In reality everything goes to show that the crumbling away of religious beliefs, which has been going on for the last century and a half in vast sectors of the western world, brings as its consequence *a weakening of the natural foundations* on which these beliefs had grown up. The philosopher, when faced with a fact of such dimensions, is obliged to seek an explanation and to wonder if the principle of these foundations does not contain a certain piety clearly religious in essence. This we might without any offence call sub-Christian, for it is the understructure upon which authentic

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Christianity is built. It is this understructure, or foundation, which is being destroyed before our eyes today, so that the work of reconstruction, of which all recognise the need, has to be carried out, not on the ground level, as is ordinarily imagined, but in an underground region which has to be examined and cleared. On this point I can only express my agreement with two of the most vigorous and penetrating minds of our time, two men who might appear to be opposed by temperament and formation, but who from their different standpoints reach identical conclusions with equal lucidity as they face the spectacle of a fallen world. They are Marcel Légaut, the author of *Prières d'un Croyant* and *La Condition Chrétienne*, and Gustave Thibon, the gifted observer of human nature whom certain people have tried vainly to enlist in the service of an official doctrine.

The simplest reflection is enough to show that fatherhood cannot be considered as a mere given fact, or even as an objectively determinable relationship between beings united to each other by laws which can be compared to those governing natural phenomena. Thus, to take only one example, it would be obviously absurd to conceive of fatherhood as a mode of causality or, for the matter of that, of finality. My child cannot be considered as an effect of which I am the cause, nor, though it is a little less absurd, can I say that he is the end in relation to which I must appear to myself simply as the means. The truth is much rather that fatherhood, like all the realities underlying the natural order, starting with incarnation, that is to say the fact of being united to a body, contains within it innumerable aspects which analysis can bring out only at the risk of unduly isolating and thus distorting what is organically united, thereby appearing to misunderstand the concrete unity with which it is concerned. If we try to define fatherhood in strictly biological terms, we are really not talking of it at all, but of procreation. If we introduce considerations of a judicial or sociological order, we expose ourselves to no less a danger; it is that of allowing fatherhood to be absorbed in a conception which is completely relative. From this point of view, it could only be defined in relation to a given historical civilisation whose religious and judicial institutions are purely transitory. But in an age such as ours should we not, on the contrary,

resist as deliberately and persistently as possible the deadly fascination of relativism for intellects which are already uprooted, and should we not strive to recognise a constant element which can doubtless be covered up or misunderstood, but only at the cost of serious consequences for the whole spiritual economy. It is precisely for this constant element, considered, be it well understood, as a demand rather than a law, that I am here proposing to seek. The fact of living in a time of crisis and transition affords obvious advantages for such an investigation. Here, as always in life's domain, exceptions and anomalies are likely to guide our reflection and to help us to discern an order which we should be less likely to notice and of which we should not so easily understand the implications if it presented a more even and strictly regular character and thereby became more thoroughly incorporated in our consciousness. We have to insist tirelessly that this order not only presupposes the collaboration of a natural determinism whose detail escapes us, and of all that is most deliberate in the human will, but also, at the very root of such collaboration, an impulse of which the principle itself is metaphysical and evades our scrutiny. It belongs to faith alone, under whatever form it may attain consciousness, not indeed, and this by definition, to achieve knowledge of this principle, but to sense its mysterious efficacy and to bow to it humbly. This actually amounts to saying that, certain conditions being granted, or on the contrary eliminated, it is extraordinarily easy and tempting for man to start by ignoring it and then to deny it. Let us at the same time add that in a world where such ignoring and subsequently such denial have become systematic, it is only at the price of an heroic and seemingly desperate effort of reflection that what in other periods appeared as an evident fact, less to be considered than lived, can be regained as it were at the sword's point.

My aim here will be to mark what I think are the successive stages of this recuperative reflection – reflection of the second degree – to which the thankless but indispensable task falls of remaking, thread by thread, the spiritual fabric heedlessly torn by a primary reflection, a reflection not only unable to distinguish the universal implications of life, but further, and above all, obstinately opposed to gratitude and respect for what is sacred in any order whatsoever. From this point of view the words piety and impiety –

words well-nigh forgotten by philosophy for lack of use – will regain their irreplaceable value. A task such as the one we have all undertaken here is only conceivable under the sign of piety; but it goes without saying that I am not taking the word here in the vague yet narrow sense which is given it in the expression “works of piety” (*ouvrages de piété*). Piety means neither devotion nor edification. No, we are here concerned with reverence, with the spirit of piety, or rather, to go more deeply, with a piety in knowledge, united to a notion which really concerns the hallowing of the real. It is the province of the most metaphysical thought to give its true value to this term, and it must be recognised that a second-rate intellectualism has helped with all its power to eradicate the notion of it from our minds. Moreover, it goes without saying – and I say this categorically to prevent any fatal mistake – that this piety in knowledge, if it is not to degenerate into a caricature of itself, not only permits, but demands the most lucid examination of the anomalies, or even the aberrations which a misunderstanding of his own particular condition entails for man.

Perhaps the best method of treating the problems which are going to engage our attention would be to start, not from human facts considered in their almost inextricable complexity, but from the facts of revelation, and in particular the dogma of the Trinity, seen once more in its amplitude and in the unfathomable wealth of its concrete manifestations. Indeed, contrary to what a humanism incapable of understanding its own metaphysical implications supposes, there is every reason to think that the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is not in any way the product of a sublimation of strictly human relationships. It seems much rather that these relationships themselves, in the course of history, have been deepened and renewed under the action of a transcendental idea, without which what we call our nature would never have been able to evolve fully. I own, however, that I did not consider that I had the right, or perhaps I simply did not feel able to adopt this method, so that I have chosen to proceed as usual to a phenomenological examination of concrete situations of which it seems to me thought cannot make abstraction without a danger of being lost in words. I will then take as my point of departure a very simple

remark concerning what is fundamentally paradoxical, one might almost say absurd or scandalous, from the point of view of logical reasoning, in the way the act of procreation is accomplished. The act of procreation: it would seem theoretically that this should be the very act above all others by which it is given to the creature if not to equal the Creator, at least to accomplish in his sphere a reflection, an analogy of the divine act without which he himself would have no being. Experience, however, seems to show us that this is not the case. If, in order to catch a glimpse of what creation can be, we go to the only domain to which we have more or less direct access, that is to say to the realm of art or of thought, we shall be obliged to recognise that to procreate is not in the least to create. In the last analysis what is required of the male is not really an act, it is a gesture, which can be performed in almost total unconsciousness and which, at least in extreme cases, is nothing but a letting go, an emptying of something which is over-full. When we say that in generation the active part belongs to the man, it is only true if we play upon the word active to some extent, giving it the impoverished and vague meaning which it commonly bears in the natural sciences, instead of the full meaning which is associated with it when we are speaking of human action and its special value. There is no idea of disputing that a natural dynamism is introduced here by which extraordinarily powerful energies are freed. That would be absurd. What I want to say is that it is quite possible for this dynamism not to come to the surface on the plane of consciousness of effort or trial. The gesture of procreation can be accomplished under such conditions that the man only has an indistinct recollection of it and is able to wash his hands of all its consequences since they will take place outside him, in another world as it were, a world with which he has no direct communication. It must be well understood that I am here making abstraction both of social institution and of the demands of the affective side of our nature; but really these institutions are so imperfect and the demands are in many cases so vague that man can claim the privilege in this matter of a fundamental irresponsibility; a privilege, be it understood, in respect of the egoistical individuality which confuses liberty with the absence of obligations. Moreover, all this only takes on a meaning if we evoke in contrast the part which falls to the woman, a part,

humanly speaking, so much more active: gestation, which symbolises creation in so direct a manner, not as it is in itself, but as we are able to imagine it. After all, it is the woman, and she alone, who brings children into the world. And it goes without saying that from the biological point of view it would be absurd to put too strong an accent on her onerous privilege. But this only shows that human perspectives, which are all that interest us here, in no way coincide with those offered for our consideration by an objective study of life. We shall assuredly have to return later on to this non-agreement, this asymmetry which will certainly be enough to prove the impossibility of establishing a "biological morality." The sole object of these preliminary remarks is to bring out the elementary fact, too often hidden under words and prejudices, that the experience of fatherhood, whatever it may be, or rather become, whatever its special characteristics and its almost innumerable varieties, develops from what must certainly be called a nothingness (*néant*) of experience. It is exactly the contrary of what is true of motherhood. Let us, however, notice in passing that everything here is still unavoidably complicated by the existence of strictly sexual facts. I am thinking here not of biological but of human sex, that is to say of the way in which man and woman react as conscious human beings to the act by which they are mated. It is only too clear that the intimate reaction of the woman to gestation and her feeling towards the child she bears can be determined, in certain painful cases, by the servitude and humiliation in which she conceived, and in others, on the contrary, by the exaltation of total self-giving which consecrates happy unions. It might actually happen in the first hypothesis that the child was cherished all the same as a compensation and a return – or on the other hand detested as the permanent evidence of an insult and a defeat; and it might also happen in the second hypothesis that the child should awaken feelings of adoration because love found in it an extension and consummation – or else, on the contrary, feelings of bitterness and resentment because this same love fretted against it as a permanent hindrance. As always in the psychological realm, any of these possibilities may occur. But what we can perhaps be right in saying is that in general there is a network of much closer connections and much more delicate innervation in the woman than in the man between the strictly sexual modes of

experience and the special aspects of emotional activity opened up by the existence of the child. In this respect we should be tempted to say that the man is perhaps more naturally detached than the woman; or, more exactly, detachment which generally is of a morbid character in the woman, is on the contrary almost normal in the man, for in him it comes down to the originally distinct existence of modes of experience which can, and even, in a last analysis, should harmonise without encroaching on each other.

These preliminary observations will help to give our investigations an axis and a direction. If, as we have seen, the experience of fatherhood develops from a nothingness (*néant*) of experience, we have to ask ourselves not only how this development can take place and work itself out, but, going further and deeper, whether beyond this initial blank we have not to discover, at least in the man who is truly a man, to borrow the words of M. Blondel, a secret motion of the will which prepares for the initiative he is to take in the future. It will indeed be well to face the central question squarely. Why and under what conditions can a man wish to have children? And, secondly, how can it come about that this wish becomes weakened or even destroyed in him?

Let us first notice, and this is of capital importance, that the question does not suggest itself to man's consciousness during periods of great vitality any more than does the question of why he himself is in the world. It really only arises where, as in our own age, there is an ebbing of life's tide. We must add that from the moment when man has come to ask this question and to find it quite natural, he tends almost inevitably to establish a state of affairs, a way of living, which makes life more and more agonising and continually diminishes the possibility of finding a satisfactory or even a satisfying solution for it. It might be said that the question tends to become more difficult to answer from the very fact that we ask it. To search our minds here for the *why* is not, as in other matters, simply to formulate a question which had already arisen before we put it into words. It is much nearer the truth to say that this question had not previously arisen, and that consequently it did not need an answer. But man's inner attitude towards life, that is to say both towards the life which he has received and the life which he has to transmit, has undergone a deep change.

Some people will not fail to have recourse here to a theme which has been very thoroughly exploited by Malthusian propaganda. Is not this change of inner attitude simply the emancipation of the poor human race which has at last understood that it must itself shake off the despotic yoke of vital force and put this force to the service of far-seeing and deliberate thought? From the moment when, by means of a carefully elaborated hygiene and scientific methods based on reason, we find it possible to discipline those obscure powers which for such long ages held our ancestors in bondage, it seems to be normal and even indispensable that we should ask questions which it would have been useless to ask so long as we were helplessly at the mercy of the tyranny of sex.

We can leave a preliminary point which only interests historians on one side. There is every reason to think that the use of contraceptive practices is nothing new in the history of mankind. There is therefore no reason to speak of a decisive point which has been reached in the history of the emancipation of our species. What is far more important is to ask ourselves how far this destruction of the fundamental relationship between man and life really corresponds to an effective liberation. It will be as well to begin by examining very closely the meaning of the word *why* in the question under consideration: we shall thus be led towards the profound views of Bergson on the transcendence of life in relation to the world of causes and ends. As a matter of fact, the more circumscribed an action is, the more it consequently belongs to the order of those actions which can either be reproduced by the agent himself in identical circumstances, or imitated by others – the more it is obviously legitimate to wonder why it is performed, or in other words what calls for it. On the other hand, the more totally an action involves the personality of the agent, the more it is of the nature of a vocation, and the more it is unique by its essence so that there can be no question of the agent repeating it or of others imitating it from outside, the less the question under consideration can be asked without absurdity. Let us say more exactly that the answer does not appear to the questioner as capable of informing or instructing him; it therefore seems as unsatisfying as the terse "*Because . . .*" with which we reply to a question we think tactless or idle. This means that the act performed by vocation seems essentially gratuitous to him who judges it from

outside, whilst on the other hand the subject himself experiences it as something absolutely necessary, as over-motivated and, indeed, too necessary to be explained or justified. But, from the moment when man asks himself why it is that he can possibly want to have children, we can say that he is establishing between his reflective consciousness and the living being he still remains in spite of everything, the same order of systematic incomprehension which prevails between the man who is animated from within by a vocation and the one who questions this vocation from outside and at bottom challenges it.

It will no doubt be retorted that it is not legitimate to compare the genetic instinct to a vocation. But this association only seems arbitrary if one forms an anæmic and colourless idea of vocation. If it were no more than an inclination or an aptitude it is clear that the comparison would not hold good. But if it is really a call the case is quite different. Here and there an individual is in some way commanded to immolate his immediate personal aims, or again to make a clean sweep of all the arrangements which might seem most in harmony with common sense and the demands of reasoning calculations. It would never enter anyone's head to claim that vocation, precisely because strictly speaking it cannot be justified by the very person who intimately recognises it as his own, is situated outside the realm where motives are expressed and formulated. Experience shows distinctly that the more imperious it is, the less easily can it be explained by some aim ordinarily recognised as good (money, for instance, power, security, fame, etc.). We might say that this transcendence of the vocation is always bound up with the presence of a generosity which cannot be confined by any possible self-interest: this is particularly clear in vocations such as that of the priest, the artist, the doctor or even the soldier, and is less so for that of the technician in whom the vocation tends to be confused with the exercise of a strictly specialised function. It is evident that to refuse to follow a vocation, whatever the motive and however reasonable the refusal may be, is in no way to emancipate or free oneself. It is exactly the opposite, and we cannot dispute the fact except in the name of a conception which amounts to the admission that wisdom for each of us consists in planning all our actions to fit in with some object which can be readily accepted by public

opinion. But we see only too clearly to what actual degradation we should thus be exposed. The kind of plebiscite to which we should, virtually at any rate, be making our appeal would mark the triumph of a certain mediocrity and would consecrate a standardisation, bearing not only upon the externals of existence, but even upon our inner experience of it. Where we dared to speak of emancipation we should have to become able to discern the progressive narrowing of the human horizon, or, in other words, the systematic levelling of the vital soil on which a human existence is built up.

Thus in meditating on the obscure question of the why, one is led, if not to recognise, at least to have some sense of the junction which tends to occur in a centre which is beyond our reach, between what I shall call for the sake of simplification the *infra* and the *supra*, the intermediate space being that in which our interests are asserted and our calculations worked out. This middle zone is the one where understanding, that is to say a certain limited and repetitive experience, articulates with emotions which are reduced to their simplest expression, and it is centred on the satisfaction of the appetites. It is instructive to observe that the spontaneity of subconscious life as it spreads out beyond a world where the Calculable triumphs, corresponds to a vow which only becomes conscious of itself infinitely above this sphere, in a zone where thought, disengaging its special essence, proves to be pure generosity or utter disinterestedness.

It would of course be absurd and really scandalous to suggest from all this that we have any grounds for exalting, or indeed for approving, or even for merely excusing the man who gives free rein to his progenerative instinct – a Restif, for instance, boasting that he has peopled the whole of France with his bastards. It is simply a question of recognising that in performing this gesture, which at bottom he is incapable of understanding, man does at least place himself at the axis of his destiny, that is to say that he adopts a position in which he can face one of the essential tests he has to satisfy in order to be master of his own life. On the other hand, in opposing this instinct with the timid objections of calculating prudence, he avoids the test and tends to convert his life into a prison however well-appointed and comfortable it may be. In any case, in order

to face the test it is still necessary that he should recognise that he is responsible for his child. We might even go so far as to say that the words "his child" only acquire a meaning which can be accepted when this responsibility is fully recognised and shouldered. It is precisely here that we see the abyss opening which separates procreation from fatherhood, and it is this responsibility whose nature we now have to elucidate.

It is quite clear that in a legally constituted family this responsibility of the father is of an objective character. It exists whether he is conscious of it or not. At least in principle he incurs definite penalties in so far as he avoids it. This is the case theoretically at least, for in fact each of us has probably known careless or even unnatural fathers who have never been proceeded against in any way and who have perhaps gone on living right up to the end without any suspicion of their own unworthiness. But the question which concerns us here is not really to know whether, in a civilisation such as our own, a father is obliged to see that his child is fed and educated, etc. What matters to us is rather to know what such an obligation can inwardly correspond to for him, when, as we have seen, the carnal bond which unites him to his descendant is found to be almost non-existent. "But," someone will be sure to exclaim, "is it not absolutely natural that in the presence of this being, who without me would not exist, I experience a feeling of tenderness and compassion – a feeling later to change its nature, becoming transformed into a lasting affection as a precise consciousness of the duties which are incumbent upon me develops?" It is, however, well to be careful here to avoid a moral optimism which is so often flatly contradicted by experience. In reality, this tenderness, even where it is genuinely felt, is very likely to be superficial and passing, and the feeling which in many cases has every chance of triumphing is a growing irritation in the presence of a mewling, unclean creature who demands ceaseless attention and exercises a veritable tyranny over its relations. Conjugal love in the frequent cases where it is only an egoism in partnership is likely, at any rate in the man's case, to turn against the child and to degenerate into a sort of organic jealousy, that actually one would loathe to admit because it is so unreasonable. It would certainly be going much too far to generalise and to disregard the humanising part often played

here by a family spirit which is actually almost impossible to analyse, but it is still more necessary to recognise how this family spirit is jeopardised by the conditions of life which tend to prevail in an industrialised society, and we should be exposing ourselves to the worst disappointments by treating this family spirit as something unchanging, able to assert itself everywhere and always, and normally ensuring an atmosphere of mutual understanding and affection between parents and children. The truth is rather that men in general are so incapable of sincerity towards themselves and are still so dominated by prejudice – that is to say, by the idea of what it is fitting to feel – that they are not even conscious of the inadequacy of what they so ingenuously call their natural feelings.

Actually, to be sure, nobody would deny that ordinarily a sort of habit or familiarity creates strong enough bonds. But here again a definite question arises which cannot be avoided; it concerns the special character of the sense of fatherhood and the grounds on which the father can have authority over his children. Moreover, I must insist that we are not here concerned with the objective basis of this authority and with the powers which, it can be admitted, have been as it were delegated to him by society. No, what is in question here is the consciousness of a right, whether he uses it or not, to exercise special authority over the child, at least when it reaches the age of reason and starts to claim to control its life as it chooses. This question deserves our attention all the more since we cannot help noticing signs of growing disorder in this matter. It seems to me that we are becoming increasingly familiar with the case of a father who develops something amounting to a bad conscience, because he sees the authority, which in theory he knows to be vested in him, more and more in the light of arbitrary coercion. In general I have a sense of disorder when I have to face a situation on which I have no hold; let us suppose further that with the situation comes the perception of a special call which I feel clearly is being made to me but which it is beyond my power to reply to directly: yet I cannot take it upon myself to ignore it: some kind of vague human respect, some indistinct scruple prevents me. It follows that I have nothing left but to indulge in some kind of ineffective gesticulation, which I have not the courage to keep up for too long because in my heart I feel that it is inane and ridiculous. Thus

I am reduced to just hoping that things will somehow arrange themselves; but all the time the call I heard remains in my consciousness, not as a distinct idea but rather as a sense of uneasiness. I cannot succeed in persuading myself that it came to me by mistake and that I am therefore free to take no notice of it. I therefore go on being worried and obscurely dissatisfied with myself. Moreover, this dissatisfaction is liable to change into irritation with the other person, or to degenerate into a sort of diffuse metaphysical bitterness of which we see only too many examples around us.

I do not think I am mistaken in suggesting that many fathers, if they were clear-sighted enough, would find that what has just been said about the general disorder is directly applicable to their relations with their children.

I will describe for you a definite example, that of an artist I used to know, who, without being an unnatural father, lived as it were outside his children's world, showing no interest in what they said or did, treating them like creatures of another species whose behaviour one observes with a short-lived curiosity. Without his knowing it, his daughter suffered deeply from this detachment which she could not understand. One day she made up her mind to write to him asking the reason for his attitude and telling him how much she wanted to come nearer to him. She wrote the letter, made sure that it was delivered, and vainly awaited an answer. . . . Certainly that is a special case from which I would not dream of generalising. What remains true, however, is that for reasons which I do not think have been fully elucidated, fatherhood nearly always presents the character of a more or less hazardous conquest, which is achieved step by step over difficult country full of ambushes. At any rate it is like this (and I shall deal with the subject at length further on) wherever the child has not been really wanted, wherever its presence is regarded as an abuse of confidence on the part of hidden life-forces towards the two conscious beings who had intended to regulate their existence secure from such intrusions.

Would it not bring us nearer to a solution of the problem which concerns us, to observe that man tends to compensate for what we called his initial *néant* of carnal experience by forming for himself a preconceived idea, not so much of the individual being who is to be his child as of the part he is called upon to play? Moreover, this is

above all true in the case of a son, and more essentially still of an only son. In a civilisation like ours the son normally appears to the father as his heir, as the one who is to continue the succession, or at any rate this was the current idea in the society of yesterday. And where the father does not expect his son to take his place and carry on his work, he often requires of him to succeed where he himself has failed, to carry off the palm of victory which an unkind fate has refused him. Hence very often a sort of tension is created on both sides, the father distrustfully watching over this new being, concerning whom he has very definite views, but who appears to be possessed of a will of his own, a strong and incomprehensible will, capable of bringing his wise and long-cherished plans to nothing; the son, on the other hand, unless he is a model of docility, or too stupid to be moved by anything, almost bound in the end to feel a dull irritation when he understands that his future is as it were mortgaged by his father's plans. All this, I repeat, is specially true for an only child, and still more for people in modest circumstances, where a good education calls for onerous sacrifices and where a more or less quick return is expected. Now I have no hesitation in saying that where the creditor-debtor point of view influences the relationship between father and son, this relationship is hopelessly compromised and loses its true character. I recall here, as an analogy, a play in which I once portrayed a woman, deserted by her husband, sacrificing herself, or thinking she was sacrificing herself, for her only son, but actually using the most odious form of sentimental blackmail against him. In a case of this kind a disastrous transfer is made in favour of the mother who thus acquires the double rights of herself and of the absent defaulter of a father. Because of her son she refuses to be married again to a man she thinks she loves, and in this way she adds still more to the weight of the debt oppressing the child. It is indeed to be doubted whether so unhealthy, so fundamentally perverted and destructive a relationship could ever exist between a father and son. Everything actually happens as though the carnal intimacy between mother and son here turned against itself, weakening the soul of the adolescent at its foundations and disintegrating it. It is none the less true that misunderstanding between father and son can also bring about the most fatal of consequences.

To be sure, there are cases which appear to be quite the opposite and which have gone on increasing as family ties have tended to become weaker and our way of life softer; cases where the father's chief aim is to enable his son to enjoy the fruit of his own labours to the full, and to spare him the hard toil which he formerly had to endure. Without even recalling the mythical figure of the elder Goriot, it is enough to think of all those fathers who, having suffered the greatest privations in their youth, doubtless find a compensation for their past hardships in the fact that they can give generously to their child what was pitilessly denied to themselves. We know well enough what ingratitude often repays a liberality which takes the form of adulation, and it is worth asking ourselves whether this ingratitude has not a deep meaning, whether it is not life's ironical and cruel reply to an improper complacency by which the father has, without knowing it, undermined the austere rule which it was really his duty to maintain. "Idolatry," Gustave Thibon says very strongly, "is only a projection of individualism; it wears the mask of love but knows nothing of love. For it is not enough to love (everybody loves somebody or something); we have to know whether the beings and things we love are for us doors leading to the world and to God, or mirrors which send us back upon ourselves." And he denounces with admirable clarity "a state of mind where the child is simultaneously adored and repulsed and can only be treated as a god or an enemy" (*Retour au Réel*, pp. 77, 81).

Two additional remarks are necessary here. First it must be noted that on the whole the father's feeling for his daughter is probably more likely to become intimate and to spread out in generosity – except in the tragic cases, perhaps less numerous today than they used to be, when the unmarried daughter is deliberately treated as an unpaid servant and practically enslaved. But it is to be thought that where she has every chance of leading her normal life as a woman she is generally more capable than the son of inspiring the father with a feeling whereby he forgets and consequently passes beyond himself. And this happens without any need for introducing psychoanalytic references to unfulfilled incest which have been so wearisomely misapplied for the last quarter of a century. We only need to remember that it is, alas, quite in accordance with

human nature for the father, without actually admitting it to himself, to see his son not only as his successor or heir, but as the rival fatally destined to eclipse him. Hence comes an ambivalence whose principle lies at the very heart of our condition. Why should not many a domestic enmity originate from this hidden jealousy – a jealousy which takes root in the very essence of time and at the core of our existence?

The second point is infinitely more important. We can state without hesitation that the limitations and deformations to which the fatherly feeling is liable seemingly tend to disappear in large families, and one might say that this is like the reward, the imminent sanction, of the act of prodigality by which a man generously sows the seed of life, instead of sparingly doling out the smallest possible number of descendants compatible with his need of survival. In this matter it would be impossible to exaggerate the extent of the difference which separates a large family from a family of one or two children: a difference comparable to that which in the philosophy of Bergson separates the Enclosed from the Open. It is a difference of atmosphere in the first place: that which exists between fresh air and the air in a confined space. We must, however, go much further. By the multiplicity, the unpredictable variety of the relationships which it embraces, the large family really presents the character of a creation; there is a direct relation between the persevering and often literally heroic effort by which it is built up and the new wealth, the wealth of life which it receives. It must of course be understood that a reservation previously formulated must be again made here: wherever the parents, and specially the father, are oblivious of their duties and their responsibilities, the large family, which in this case is scarcely more than a brood, can degenerate into a veritable hell. Here as elsewhere: nature only gives its best fruits if an upright way of thinking and a courageous will succeed in directing it without forcing it by violence, in short, if a way is found to govern and to serve it at the same time.

"The fathers of families, those great adventurers of the modern world." These words of Péguy, which I have already quoted last year, come naturally to one's mind here. We should fail to go to the bottom of things if we did not at this point remember the acceptance of risk which the establishment of a large family involves –

and the horror of this very risk which prevails in an ever-increasing fraction of a country on the way to progressive devitalisation. The adventure here really implies a state of mind which scarcely attains to distinct consciousness and which is for that very reason hard to describe in precise words; it is at bottom an essentially religious state of mind, which can actually, though this is relatively rare, survive the loss of positive beliefs, but which can also be lacking where the practice of a faith is being sincerely maintained. It is certainly not enough here to speak of love of life. The Malthusian couple who go to the cinema twice a week and treat themselves to an expensive meal every Sunday at Pontoise or at Bourgival can no doubt claim that they love life, and it is precisely in order not to spoil it for themselves that they take such care, and if necessary efface the consequences of their amorous frolics without a scruple. But nothing brings out better how hopelessly ambiguous the words "life" and "loving life" are. "Those were the good old days; life was worth living then," exclaim innumerable French people of both sexes as they sigh for the era of the tandem and the Simca 8. It would be possible to say that they nursed in the depths of their being, and stored up for the time to come, the pretension of acquiring life as one puts electricity or central heating into a house. Life really seems to them like an element to be used in order to obtain a few patent satisfactions, without which the world would be nothing but a prison. But is it not clear that for the "great adventurer of the modern world" the relations between man and wife are precisely the opposite? For it behoves him to place himself at life's disposal and not to dispose of life for his own purposes.

We must however recognise that the man of today tends to establish, as far as he can, an order of things in which the words "to place oneself at life's disposal" have literally no meaning. This is true above all in so far as he asserts the primacy of technics and technical knowledge. As this may not be immediately evident, perhaps I may be permitted to insist upon it. Technics are seen *as* all the systematised methods which enable man to subordinate nature, considered as blind or even rebellious, to his own ends. But it must be noted that the point at which man's powers of wonder are applied is thus inevitably shifted: what now seems worthy of admiration is above all technical skill in all its forms, it is no longer in any

way the spontaneous course of phenomena, which has on the contrary rather to be controlled and domesticated, somewhat as a river is by locks. This admiration is tinged with a shade of defiance of a truly Luciferian character, it can hardly be separated from the consciousness of a revenge taken by emancipated humanity upon Nature whose yoke it has borne so long and so impatiently. This is particularly clear with regard to living nature; without even receiving a scientific grounding worthy of the name, men's minds are so saturated with naturalism that they tend to see human life as a particularly complicated and baffling case of the nature of living beings in general. As a result, without any given reason, they agree to regard life itself as a "*sale blague*" (rotten humbug), or at least as the rumbling of threatening possibilities against which it would be impossible to take too many precautions, whereas formerly it was hailed as a revelation, or at the very least a promise and pledge of a marvellous and unlimited renewal. It is perfectly clear that the obsession concerning possible illness and the preventive measures to be taken against it has in the last century become far more virulent than ever it was in the days when the science of prophylactic medicine was practically non-existent. It is to be noticed in passing that the development of prophylactic methods and of systems of insurance, because at bottom these correspond to analogous inner tendencies, have helped to foment in souls a spirit of suspicious vigilance, which is perhaps incompatible with the inward eagerness of a being who is irresistibly impelled to welcome life with gratitude. Let us consider this word for an instant. We feel gratitude for a gift we have received; but from the moment when we are no longer at all sure that we have literally received anything, when we wonder whether we have not rather been enticed into the trap of existence, and moreover that this does not result from the decision of some superhuman will, but from the play of blind forces with no possible consciousness, there can really no longer be any question of gratitude. Gratitude? To whom? For what?

It seems very much as though this radical and generally unformulated pessimism constitutes the foundation on which an ever increasing number of existences are building themselves up today. We should, moreover, take our analysis further and ask ourselves under what conditions an existence can justify itself, by which I

mean recognise that it is worth the trouble it costs. Trouble here stands for the ceaseless and thankless effort by which we daily climb the slope which it would be so tempting to let ourselves slide down towards a total relinquishment and death. I am inclined to think that those people are becoming ever more numerous whose existence coagulates round a few satisfactions which from outside seem almost incredibly petty: the daily bridge party, the football match, some recreation connected either with love or food. They would not miss these pleasures *for anything in the world*. If for some reason or another they have to do without them, existence itself becomes a desert, a blank night of gloom. There is, of course, the most direct relation between the exaggerated value which is given to them and the insipidity which characterises the general substance of life – an insipidity which can in an instant become nauseating. In every department the passage from what is insipid to what is unendurable is imperceptible. We must not forget that a man's work ceases to have any attraction or even any meaning for him in so far as he has lost his relish for life. Normally it is in our work and through it that we become aware of this relish – which all the same does not rule out of existence the halo of leisure and holidays without which the daily prospect would become hard and gloomy. But the conditions of life deteriorate to the point of perversion when, as Thibon has said, that which was only the aureole tends to become the heart.

I should like now to gather together the conclusions we have reached in the course of our wanderings. Fatherhood, we have seen, cannot by any means be restricted to procreation which, humanly speaking, can hardly be considered as an act. It only exists as the carrying out of a responsibility, shouldered and sustained. But on the other hand we see that it degenerates as soon as it is subordinated to definitely specified purposes, such as the satisfaction of ambition through the medium of the child treated as a mere means to an end. It utterly denies its own nature when it is the mere blind generation of a being not only incapable of providing for his progeny and guiding their spiritual development, but of realising and acknowledging the obligations he has undertaken towards them. It is probably in contrast with such inertia and blindness that we can best understand what the pure act of fatherhood should be. By that

I mean a self-spending which can be compared to a gift, because it prepares and requires an engagement and because without this it is nullified. This pure act is inconceivable without what I propose to call the *vœu créateur*. But here a preliminary analysis is necessary, the notion of the *vœu* being one which very often contains a confusion, sentimental in its essence.

When we say to anyone, "I am making *des vœux* for your wife's recovery," we merely mean that we wish for this recovery, that it would please us. There is no active participation on our part, we are not involved. But here, on the contrary, the *vœu* cannot be reduced to a simple wish, it is an engagement. We must further notice that an engagement made in the presence of a transcendental authority is always liable to be degraded in so far as it takes on the character of a bargain and by so doing imposes conditions. "If you grant me this favour, I undertake to accomplish such and such an action calculated to please you." But this really comes to the same as saying: "To get this action you want out of me, you must agree to grant me the favour for which I am asking." The *mu* is seen here as a bribe. But of course bribery is quite impossible in the religious order, or more exactly that which is genuinely religious is to be recognised from the very fact that it is essentially opposed to any attempt of such a kind. Suppose that I undertake to respond to the favour, when I eventually receive it, by an action which proves my gratitude, this visible action should only be the sign of the invisible act by which I consecrate myself to the power which has helped me. There is still something equivocal, however, in this interpretation. Does it not actually seem as though I said "I will only consecrate myself to you on condition that you first give me this proof of your benevolence towards me"? Thus the defective reaction denounced above still persists here. I should not even say: "If you reveal yourself to me by granting this favour, I will consecrate myself to you in return." But rather: "If you reveal yourself to me, you will give me the strength to consecrate myself to you." Or again: "The act by which I shall respond to the favour you grant me will be, as it were, the pledge of the revelation I receive, not so much of your special benevolence towards me as of your essence which is pure liberality." The best formula for the *vœu* would then be to offer it as a prayer: "I beg you to reveal yourself to me, to make your presence

real for me, so that it will be possible for me to consecrate myself with a full understanding – since in my present state I can only see you through the clouds of uncertainty which encircle me. Moreover, I do not claim that you should attach any value on your own account to this consecration which can add nothing to what you are; but if you love me, if you consider me as your son, it seems to me that, not for your own sake, of course, but for mine, you must want me to know and serve you, since, if it is not given to me to know and serve you, I am doomed to perdition."

Such seems to me to be the significance of this appeal which is of the very essence of the *vœu*. We easily see that this appeal has a mediatory function here, in relation to a certain process of inner creation which actually can never be understood if we approach it as a matter governed by the will alone.

On the other hand, it seems to me essential to notice that, in spite of appearances, the *vœu* does not in any way imply a dogmatic theory, nor, *a fortiori*, any definite idea of the power to which it is offered. If we reflect upon æsthetic creation, particularly that of the novelist and the dramatist, we shall realise this. The *vœu* only takes shape after the artist has as it were been possessed by some form of reality which is revealed less by sight than by a sort of inward touch: but reality thus apprehended appears to him at the same time (and this is a paradox and a mystery) as independent in relation to his personal will and as nevertheless subject to the act by which he makes it pass into existence. The *vœu créateur* is no other than the *fiat* by which I decide to put all my energies at the service of this possibility which is already imposing itself upon me, but only upon me, as a reality, so that I may transform it into a reality for all, that is to say into an established work. This means that the *vœu*, far from being reduced to a mere wish, has the character of an engagement and a decision. But this engagement or this decision is not made simply within my own being, something transcendent is involved, however indistinct my consciousness of it may as yet be.

At the root of fatherhood, if I am not mistaken, we can discern something which is obviously analogous to this *vœu créateur*, and it is by this alone that fatherhood can be considered as a human act, or even as an act at all, and not as the special term given to the

biological process of procreation. It must however be added that this *væu créateur* cannot here be separated from a general attitude taken by man as he faces life or, to be more exact, the operation of life. This attitude is, first and essentially, an acquiescence by which man adopts and makes his own the words at the opening of Genesis: "God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good." Moreover, we must be careful not to interpret this acquiescence purely as a judgment of worth. It would be better to recognise that judgment of worth is an intellectualised and for that reason an imperfect translation of something which is much more like admiration or simple wonder. It is this reaction, originally springing from the consciousness, which is expressed in the father's act as he falls in adoration before his newly born child. It goes without saying, of course, that this adoration is always in danger of degenerating into sheer idolatry, and that when this degradation comes about fatherhood *loses its special essence*. I insist on the paradox expressed by these words. In the order of concrete philosophy the essence is always liable to be defective. It has nothing in common with those entities, those unalterable *ousiai*, which classical metaphysics fixed in the pure heaven of speculation, thereby putting itself outside the conditions which alone can enable us to understand human existence and the place which failure in all its forms occupies in it.

Under these conditions, as we have already suggested, we must certainly recognise that a shaking of the metaphysical order, a severing of what last year I called the nuptial bond between man and life, is at the root of the crisis in fatherhood and paternal authority which is apparent even to the most superficial observer. But in our perspective today it seems to me still easier to explain what we should understand by this bond. It is at bottom a question of spontaneous confidence in life which can almost equally be regarded as a call or as a response. It is this, and this alone, which enables man to establish his roots in the universe and to develop to his full stature. We should moreover be mistaken if we spoke here of optimism, for we are dealing, as we have seen, with a far more fundamental tendency which lies hidden, as it were, deep below the work of the intellect. But from the moment when this confidence becomes dissolved in the poisonous secretions of superficial thought, aroused by the sight of suffering and failure, it is quite clear that

man no longer knows what attitude to adopt regarding the act by which he is continued in other beings who would not exist without him. This act is less and less wished for, it is considered as the troublesome and theoretically avoidable complement of an act with quite another object – an act which takes and at the same time, if possible, gives pleasure without looking beyond the mere enjoyment of the moment. From this point of view, I repeat, the child tends to appear as an accident which has acquired shape, which has acquired not only a body but a soul. Hence the kind of pity tinged with remorse which will probably be felt in the presence of the child by him who engendered it without any idea of a *væu créateur*. This means, I repeat once more, without the slightest consciousness of participating in a work of life, infinitely beyond him and yet requiring his contribution as an essential element which nothing can replace. Let us reiterate that he who wants a child to take his place or to make up to him one day for his personal inconveniences, cuts himself off by this very fact from all idea of transcendence, for this child is nothing for him but an element, or let us say a trump card, in the closed system which he has formed with himself. The situation is transformed from the moment when he really understands that what he has been allotted is in truth nothing but the reflection, the likeness of a creative gift which could not belong to him as such. I can no more give existence to someone else than I can to myself, and there is an obvious connection between these two impossibilities. But in so far as I refuse to allow myself to admit it, I am exposed to a double temptation. The first consists of organising my life as if I myself were the author of it, as if I did not have to answer for my actions to any person or thing; the second, of treating my children as though I had produced them, as though, strictly speaking, they were there for me, as though I had the right to decide what they were to become. That is precisely what is incompatible with the *væu créateur* as I have tried to define it. Negatively this *væu*, or this call, signifies that our child no more belongs to us than we do to ourselves and that accordingly, he is not there for our sake, nor, to go a degree further, is he there for his own sake either. It signifies, moreover, that for this reason he must not be brought up as though one day he would have to assert that in his turn he was responsible to no one but himself. It would indeed be contradictory on my part

to admit for him what I deny for myself; I could not agree that he should one day be guilty of what on my own account I regard as an infringement of the deep law of life. Only one way remains open. We have to lay down the principle that our children are destined, as we are ourselves, to render a special service, to share in a work; we have humbly to acknowledge that we cannot conceive of this work in its entirety and that *a fortiori* we are incapable of knowing or imagining how it is destined to shape itself for the young will it is our province to awaken to a consciousness of itself. We can see clearly enough that the *vœu créateur* implies the combination of a deep personal humility and an unshaken confidence in life, conceived of not as a natural force but as an unfathomable order, divine in its principle. Now it is exactly the opposite combination which tends most often to be effected before our eyes, that is to say a maximum of personal pretension associated as we have seen with a radical agnosticism concerning life, its value and its meaning.

Here we must emphasise the close relationship which binds fatherhood not only to a special conception of love but to a definite way of experiencing and desiring it. Where love is degraded, fatherhood is degraded also. This degradation of love can take on two precisely opposite forms, according to whether the union of the couple is relaxed until it is no more than an engagement of short duration when no diversion is barred, or whether this same union becomes hardened and opaque, and is at the same time sterilised so that everything threatening to upset the routine of pleasure or simply of comfort, which eventually is the only law it knows, is excluded. Here again the only way of salvation is found in a transcendence which can alone prevent the couple from degenerating into an enclosed system. I will add that we can not give an opinion *a priori* on the idea of this transcendence which consciousness is able to form in any particular case. All one can assert is that the conception of the work of life which we attain to in the light of Christ frees us most surely from illusions and ambiguities. It is to these illusions and ambiguities that thought is still exposed when it claims to interpret this operation, either as a function of cosmological metaphysics, or, and for stronger reasons, of a racial, national and class philosophy, which in a last analysis invariably degenerates into idolatry. But this must not prevent us from recognising that it is

quite possible for the Christian idea of the operation of life only to attain to an imperfect and relatively indistinct consciousness of itself, quite dissociated from any dogmatic profession of faith, without losing its genuine and stimulating value on that account.

Do all these considerations enable us to get a glimpse of how to set about solving the ethico-religious problem which here towers above all the others: the problem of knowing to what extent the father can and should regard himself as invested by God himself with the authority which he is bound to exercise over his own children? It seems as though the idea of the *vœu créateur* can help us to avoid the excesses of a fatherhood orientated in a theocratic direction. I will show you how.

In a profound study published in 1942 in the *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses*, Father Fessard drew attention to the fact that the formula *omnis potestas a Deo* is dangerously equivocal if taken by itself. "Most of the time," he says, "we only see in this union the relation of the human power to do all things to the divine power of the Almighty. Authority appears thus to be delegated from outside without any consideration of its special nature, as is the authority of a prince who confers all or some of his power to his lieutenants without reference to any law except his own good pleasure and, following from it as a sequel, theirs. So long as one remains at this feeble degree of reflection one can draw conclusions from this formula as contrary as possible to the essence of authority and of the common good. . . . Because the All-Power of God is only extended to bring about the rule of justice, a second degree of reflection leads to a recognition of authority not only as power which is fact, but as power which is righteous, and to make the universal ideal of Right the necessary end of all authority. Hence all power is required to tear itself away from its selfish ends and to reach out towards the universal in order to prove its divine origin." Yet, right or equity remaining still an indeterminate idea here, the conception of authority comes up against endless contradictions of fact and right, parallel with those which our reason perceives between the absolute power and the absolute justice of God. It is thus necessary that between fact and right the link should appear which forms the basis of their distinction, which gives meaning to their conflict and

makes its end clear, In order that the contradictions of the All-Powerful and All-Just may be reconciled before our eyes, the All-Merciful has to be manifested. Through Him we are permitted to call the All-Powerful: *Father*, the All-Just *Son* and *Word*, whilst He finally reveals Himself as the *Spirit of Love*.

From a great height, too great for my liking, these dialectics illuminate the concrete situations which I have striven this morning to make clear to you. I think that personally I should prefer to express myself as follows: the father, as we have seen, is almost irresistibly inclined to treat his child as being *for him*, as being obliged to fill the place which he is reserving for him in a scheme of which one can easily say he is still the centre, since it is he who claims to establish its principles. A mortifying experience teaches him, however, in so far as he is capable of learning the lesson, that this scheme is as precarious as his own existence, if only because the son has the advantage of being likely, in the normal course of things, to outlive him and to have the power one day to upset the plan which he himself has worked out. Under these conditions, the father can reach such an excessive degree of humility that he treats himself as the mere means to an end, which he persuades himself lies beyond him and is incarnated in the autonomous will of the heir. Better thinking, however, leads him to transcend this double relationship, and to discern an organic unity where the imperfect and deceptive sequence which takes shape in the succession of generations is no more than the phenomenal and misleading expression of a substantial union which itself can only be consummated in eternity. In the last analysis it is in relation to this constitution of an organism, spiritual no doubt, but carnally rooted in the eternity of God, and in relation to this alone, that the *vœu créateur* can be defined, in so far as thereby a fidelity which is itself creative, the fidelity to a hope which transcends all ambition and all personal claims, takes a body. Yes, this word eternity, to which it is so difficult to give a positive, conceivable meaning, and which we can hardly translate into understandable language without becoming involved in insoluble difficulties, yet remains the key word here. Without it the whole human edifice will crack and in the end fall to bits in the horror of absolute absurdity.

It will be well to state here, explicitly and with force, that, as I

have already suggested, fatherhood is not a mere function which is carried out blindly in order that a certain objective continuity should be secured. After all, there is no apparent reason why, taken by itself, the continuity of a progeny should have more ontological value or dignity than the life of a forest or a plantation. But it is quite different if this continuity of a human family is in truth one of the approaches by which the super-conscious and super-historical union of all in all is to be attained – the union in which alone creation can find its full meaning.

Let us notice something here, which, although it is only stated in passing, has very great importance in my eyes. It is that in this perspective it becomes possible to understand the metaphysical foundation of adoption, and to recognise that it is not merely a pale and bloodless copy of real fatherhood, but that it can be a means of grace, destined to make up for the deficiencies of biological filiation. Would there not, indeed, be something intolerable in having to admit that a purely accidental defect should utterly and inevitably deprive the human being of what is perhaps the most substantial of his attributes? But reflection shows us none the less clearly, that adoption must always be exceptional, that a society in which it became very frequent would be in danger of devitalisation, for it can only be a graft on the tree of life, sometimes marvellous and sometimes, alas, abortive.

From this general point of view, and probably from this point of view alone, it becomes possible to understand the fundamental nature of the *vœu créateur*, wherein we believe we have found the essence of fatherhood to lie. It is the quivering anticipation of a plenitude, of a pleroma in the bosom of which life, no longer an endless improvisation of disappointing variations on a few given themes, will be satisfied, concentrated and reassembled around the absolute Person who alone can give it the infrangible seal of unity.

Le Peuch.
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