



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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September 12, 2007
Holy Name of MARY

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

AUGUST 1997 : John Paul II is in France for World Youth Day. It is announced that the Pope has overturned his carefully planned schedule, and, despite pressures to the contrary, makes a detour to Châlo-Saint-Mars, a small town in the Ile-de-France, to pray at the grave of his friend Professor Lejeune, who had died in 1994.

Jerome Lejeune was born in Montrouge in 1926, into a family that would be ruined by the war of 1939-1945. At the age of 13, he discovered two authors, Pascal and Balzac, who would mark him for life. Captivated by Dr. Bénassis, the hero of Balzac's novel *The Country Doctor*, he too wanted to become a country doctor, dedicated to the care of the lowly and the poor. After the war, he threw himself passionately into the study of medicine. Soon a second motivation spurred his work ; he met a young Danish woman, Birthe, and fell passionately in love with her. On June 15, 1951, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis. That same day, his future was decided in a direction completely different from what he had planned—one of his teachers, Professor Raymond Turpin, suggested they collaborate on a major work on “mongolism,” a condition that affects one out of every six hundred fifty children. Jerome accepted, and his path was set. On May 1, 1952, in Odense, Denmark, he married Birthe Bringsted, now Catholic, with whom he would have five children. Family life was his priority, especially during vacations. During his stays abroad, he wrote to his wife daily.

In 1954, he became a committee member of the French Genetics Society, and a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research. Since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the effect of nuclear radiation on human reproduction was the topic of the day. Turpin directed his team toward this field, and, in 1957, Jerome was named an “expert on the effects of atomic radiation on human genetics” by the United Nations. From then on, he participated in international conferences, where he was noted for his frank language in the face of certain delegations' desire to control the proceedings.

Three children were already the joy of his home when his father's health began to fail. Jerome was faced with the fact that it was lung cancer. The agony of his beloved father made him realize how “unbearable it is to see loved ones suffer.” From then on, his view deepened—in each patient's face he recognized Christ Himself.

Making use of new photographic techniques, Jerome discovered, in tissue from a young “Mongoloid,” the presence of an extra chromosome on the 21st pair (human beings have 23 pairs, or 46 chromosomes). This was the cause of “mongolism,” a condition that would from then on be called “Trisomy 21” or “Down's Syndrome.” The Académie de Médecine was informed of the discovery in March 1959. In November 1962, Jerome was awarded the Kennedy Prize. In October 1965, he was given the first chair of fundamental genetics at the University of Paris. Everything looked hopeful : his discovery and the publicity it received in the scientific world, he thought, would encourage research, and appropriate treatments would be developed to cure the afflicted and give hope to their parents. The families of the sick, drawn by Jerome's international fame and his warmth, came to him in ever greater numbers. He treated thousands of young patients, who came to him from all over the world, or with whom he corresponded. He helped the parents to understand and accept this trial with a Christian perspective—these Down's Syndrome children, created in God's image, were promised an eternal future in which none of their disabilities remained. He assured them that their children, despite a serious mental handicap, would overflow with love and affection.

Chromosomal racism

But Jerome noticed, especially in the American medical establishment, a tendency to recommend abortion to prevent affected babies from being born. He saw with horror the risks his discovery had brought for those with Down's Syndrome. To fight this form of racism, he saw recourse to experimental reality as a critical weapon. It demonstrated, in effect, to impartial minds, that one could not view as strangers to the human race those who, biologically, belong to the same species : the embryo is a person.

August 1967 : Professor Lejeune was invited to the seventh world assembly of the Israeli Medical

Association, in Tel Aviv. The group alternated between work and excursions; the first being to the Sea of Galilee. "I entered a small chapel done in poor taste," Jerome would relate. "I prostrated myself and kissed the imaginary footsteps of the One Who was there." At the moment, he experienced a strange feeling: "A son finding a very dearly beloved Father, a Father finally known, a revered Master, a very holy Heart discovered, I felt all this and much more...." Everything melted in this blaze of love: the world, honors, success, fear of the opinions of others. There was nothing but the Lord, and the need to respond to His loving kindness.

When Jerome rejoined the others, a force took hold of him. What was its purpose? An incident would put him on the path. On arriving at Cana, the guide asked if anyone knew the reason for the international fame of the city. Jerome took the microphone and naively recounted the story from the Gospels of the wedding and the miracle of the water turning into wine. Silence. Then the guide: "That's not it at all! Cana is important because the Helena Rubinstein cosmetics laboratories are here." Everyone burst out laughing. Jerome kept silent: he felt powerless to avenge the insult Christ had just received right before his eyes. And then to Nazareth. Leaving the bus, everyone headed toward the Basilica of the Annunciation. But some spoke in loud voices, others indulged in obscene jokes about the Angel's visit and MARY'S Virginité. Jerome felt he was being provoked. What should he do? He entered and, slowly, made the sign of the cross and knelt out of reverence for the mystery of the Incarnation that had taken place here. Curiously, his humble and courageous attitude silenced the mockers. After this public profession of faith, no one provoked Professor Lejeune again, but he was excluded from the group.

"I've lost my 'Nobel' "

In August 1969, the American Society of Human Genetics granted Jerome the William Allen Memorial Award, the highest distinction that can be granted to a geneticist. On his arrival in San Francisco, where he was to receive the award, Jerome clearly saw that the abortion of Down's Syndrome children was expected to be authorized. The pretext was that it was cruel and inhuman to allow these poor creatures to come into the world, doomed to an inferior life, and posing an unbearable burden on their families. Jerome trembled. "By my discovery," he said to himself, "I've made this shameful calculation possible!" After receiving the prize, he was to give a talk to his colleagues. Would he have the courage to speak the truth? A famous phrase from Saint Augustine came to him: "Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self." What did his stature in

the scientific world matter: *As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me* (Mt. 25 :40). He would speak! The physical nature of man, he explained, is completely contained in the chromosomal message, from the first moment of conception. This message makes the new being a person, not a monkey, not a bear; a man whose complete physical potentiality is already contained in the information given to his first cells. Nothing more will be added to these potentialities, which will serve his intellectual and spiritual life—everything is there. He concluded plainly: the temptation to kill by abortion these small people afflicted with disease is contrary to moral law; and genetics confirms this conclusion. This moral law is not arbitrary. Not a single clap; but hostile or annoyed silence from these men, the elite of his profession. Jerome had collided head-on with them. He wrote his wife: "Today, I lost my Nobel prize in medicine"; but he was at peace. He confided in his private diary: "Chromosomal racism is brandished like a flag of freedom. ... That this negation of medicine, of all the biological brotherhood that links mankind, is the sole practical application of the knowledge of Trisomy 21 more than breaks my heart ... Protecting the abandoned—what a reactionary, retrograde, fundamentalist, inhuman idea!"

Media battle

With the medical world coming up short, could the political world be convinced? In June 1970, a member of the French Parliament, Peyret, drafted a bill that would allow the prenatal detection and abortion of children with Down's Syndrome. When parliament went back into session, the media set the debate in motion. Jerome was invited to be the guest on a biweekly television current events show with a large viewership. His appearance generated a huge volume of mail, including deeply moving letters from people who had been severely handicapped from birth, testifying that their life had not been the nightmare that others claimed, as well as letters from parents of children with Down's Syndrome, who spoke of their son's or daughter's panic at realizing that some thought that people like them should be killed. In reality, the campaign to allow the killing of children with Down's Syndrome was a way of introducing the right to abortion. People worked to discredit Lejeune. After trying to contradict him in numerous conferences, on March 5, 1971, at a large public meeting in Paris, the opponents, armed with iron bars, began attacking women, elderly people, and even the severely handicapped. The police were needed to put the attackers to flight. As for Jerome, he received some tomatoes in his face.

At the time all Europe was discussing the issue of abortion. Great Britain followed the lead of the United States, which had legalized screening for Down's

Syndrome and its “treatment” by abortion. The media battle in France extended to the abortion of all unwanted children : “A baby does not legally become a person until it is born” ; “a woman has the right to do what she wants with her body”... Specious arguments, to which many Catholics were susceptible, sometimes even to the point of spreading them.

During a trip to Virginia in October 1972, Jerome was shown a protocol to be used during physiological or biochemical experiments on five-month-old fetuses “removed” by Caesarean section for this purpose. He wrote to his wife : “The text says to treat them like any tissue or organ sample, but specifies that one must kill them after a short period of time... I simply said that no text could regulate crime.” How had his very qualified colleagues come to this ? They had been molded, under the pretext of scientific rigor, to a point of view in which God had no place. “Good” is not that which conforms to the law of God, but that which is efficient ; “bad” is that which interferes with material progress. For them, the fetus is no longer a person, a creature of God destined to see Him and love Him for all eternity. It can then become the target of any attack, as long as a majority agrees.

The weakest link

1973 : The United States had just recognized the “Constitutional” right to abortion in general. During a talk on the subject at Royaumont Abbey in Ile-de-France on March 18, a woman in authority made this statement : “We want to destroy Judeo-Christian civilization. To do so, we must destroy the family ... by attacking its weakest link, the unborn child. We are for abortion !” On June 7, a bill decriminalizing abortion was filed in the French National Assembly. Jerome noted that false statistics and extreme cases, which he too was very sensitive to, were being used to get abortion legalized. Alleged surveys claimed that half of the medical profession was in favor ; but, at the same time, thanks to the initiative of Madame Lejeune, the signatures of more than 18,000 French doctors (a majority of the medical profession) were collected and published, stating their opposition to abortion, thus showing the fraudulence of the media campaign. Soon the doctors were joined by nurses, then judges, law professors, lawyers, and more than 11,000 mayors and local elected officials. The bill was derailed. In this battle, in which the stakes were fidelity to the Ten Commandments and the saving of human lives, much of the clergy were silent. Madame Lejeune’s parish priest wrote to her : “The Church cannot appear to be a pressure group. I think this is why the bishops’ conference is silent right now.” Jerome was grieved by this. One year later, on December 15, 1974, the “Veil Law” allowing abortion, was passed by the National Assembly, for a period of five years.

On May 13, 1981, Jerome and his wife were in Rome. The Holy Father wished to receive them in a private audience. After the discussion, the Pope spontaneously invited them to stay for lunch. The same evening, on their way back to Paris, they learned about the attack on John Paul II, a few hours after they had left him. Jerome’s health was shaken by this news. That autumn, concerned by the international situation, the Pope decided to send each leader of a nation possessing nuclear weapons a delegation of members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, carrying a report on the dangers of nuclear war. For the USSR, he appointed Lejeune and two others. The meeting took place on December 15, 1981. “We scientists,” Jerome said plainly, “know that for the first time, the survival of humanity depends on all nations’ acceptance of moral laws that transcend all systems and all speculation.” There was no whisper of this diplomatic mission in the press. The administrative harassment that, starting with the passage of the Veil Law, had begun to strangle Jerome, particularly in the form of repeated tax inspections, became more severe. His research grants were withdrawn ; he was forced to close his laboratory. American and English laboratories, indignant at this conduct, granted him no-cost private loans. This impartial solidarity allowed him to rebuild a team of researchers moved by the same motivations.

In spite of the derision

In August 1988, Professor Lejeune was urged to testify in Maryville, Tennessee, in a spectacular trial, in which the survival of thousands of frozen embryos hung in the balance. In spite of exhaustion, Jerome wanted to lend support to those who, wherever in the world, suffered persecution for their respect for life. Above all, he wanted to help his Catholic colleagues follow the Church’s teaching, despite the world’s derision. In August 1989, the King of Belgium, Baudouin I, in a difficult situation with respect to his parliament, which was about to legalize abortion, asked for his counsel. At the end of the conversation, the king suggested to him : “Professor, would it bother you if we prayed together for a moment ?” We know the exemplary stance the king later took in this affair, to the point of renouncing his throne rather than offend God.

In 1991, Jerome embarked on “reflections on professional ethics in medicine,” in seven points : “1. ‘Christians, be not afraid !’ It is you who possess the truth ; not that you invented it, but you are the vehicle for it. To all doctors you must repeat : you must conquer the illness, not attack the patient. 2. Man is made in the image of God. For this reason alone he must be respected. ... 3. “Abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 51). 4. Objective morality exists ; it is clear, and it is universal,

because it is Catholic. 5. The child is not disposable and marriage is indissoluble. 6. *You shall honor your father and mother*: Uniparental reproduction by means of cloning or homosexuality is not possible. 7. The human genome, the genetic capital of our race, is not disposable.” Note this courageous phrase: “In so-called pluralistic societies, they shove it down our throats: ‘You Christians don’t have the right to impose your morality on others!’ Well! I tell you, not only do you have the right to try to incorporate your morality in the law, but it’s your democratic duty!”

Dying in action

On August 5, 1993, the Holy Father approved the creation of the Pontifical Academy for Medicine, dedicated to protecting life. Professor Lejeune would be its president. There was in fact between him and the Pope a meeting of the minds. In their eyes, abortion was the primary threat to peace. If doctors begin to kill, why would governments hesitate to do so? Jerome was stunned by this nomination. He gave himself several days to think about it, because he felt a great fatigue. Around All Saints’ Day, he was examined by his friend Professor Lucien Israel who, with a drawn face, showed him the x-rays of his lungs: they indicated an already advanced cancer. Jerome accepted the situation with courage and submission to the Divine Will. He had to break the news to Birthe and his children: “You shouldn’t worry until Easter—I will live at least till then”; suddenly, he added, “And at Easter, only wonderful things can happen!” The chemotherapy sessions started at the beginning of December—they were very taxing, as he expected them to be. Nevertheless, he continued to receive phone calls, to comfort the families of patients. Having informed the Holy Father of his state of health and turning down the presidency of the Pontifical Academy for Life—as he had the presidency of France’s Academy of Moral and Political Sciences,

which had just been offered to him—he was told that the Holy Father refused to appoint another president. Jerome smiled. “I will die in action.” To the end, he endeavored to write the Academy’s bylaws. He felt his weakness, but his spirit of faith showed him the fruitfulness of the setbacks themselves. He never complained; his suffering, united with love to Christ’s Passion, could put the world back on its true axis!

Wednesday of Holy Week, March 30, 1994, as he lay in a delirium, in the grips of a fever of over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), he was placed in hospice care. The next day, at dawn, he regained consciousness. On Good Friday, he confided to a priest who was giving him last rites: “I have never betrayed my faith.” This is all that counts before God... He told his children who were asking him what he wished to bequeath to his little patients: “I don’t have much, you know... So, I have given them my life. And my life is all that I had.” Then, moved to tears, he murmured, “O my God! I was supposed to have cured them, and I am leaving without having found... What will happen to them?” Then, radiant with joy, he spoke to his loved ones: “My children, if I can leave you a message, this is the most important of all: we are in the hands of God. I have experienced this a number of times.” The next day, Holy Saturday, passed quietly: Jerome was calm. However, at the end of the afternoon, his respiratory problems returned, worse than before. Suddenly authoritative, he ordered his wife and other loved ones to go home. He did not want them present at his agony. Sunday morning, around seven o’clock, he said with difficulty to a colleague he barely knew, who had been holding his hand for much of the night: “You see... I’ve done well...” and he breathed his last. Outside, the first ringing of the church bells could be heard—it was the day of the Resurrection, the day of the Life that does not end. For “*Christ is eternal life*” (I Jn. 5 :20)!

The next day, Pope John Paul II wrote these words about Jerome Lejeune: “We find ourselves today faced with the death of a great Christian of the twentieth century, a man for whom the defense of life had become an apostolate. It is clear that, in the situation of the world today, this form of apostolate among the laity is particularly necessary...”

Dom Antoine Marie
O.A.B.

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