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Jérôme Lejeune – a Scientist and a Mystic

Anxiety of the seeker of God

Jérôme Lejeune was a seeker of truth and of God. He spent all his life looking for the supernatural and fighting with obstacles that stood in his way. What first comes to one's mind when one thinks of Lejeune is a figure of a young doctor who, with time, became a world famous scientist. He used to say that medicine was his true vocation and that he became a scientist simply out of necessity. When he started working in a hospital he met patients suffering from mongolism – a disease impairing cognitive ability and physical efficiency – and decided to devote his life to finding a cure for the disease. He became totally occupied in his attempts to understand the nature of the disease and to find a remedy for it. It didn't take him long to find the source of the pathological abnormalities, which is the presence of the additional chromosome in the 21st pair, which he identified as trisomy 21. This significant discovery is recognised in the whole world as the basis of modern genetics. Lejeune defined the range of research for the foundation that bears his name but didn't manage to find any cure for trisomy 21. He died broken-hearted, unfulfilled and with a feeling that he betrayed his patients. At the end of his life he said: "I was supposed to cure them and now I am abandoning them". He knew what kind of life awaited people affected by trisomy 21 – death before they were even born, contempt and social exclusion.

The passion with which he devoted himself to his research was a reflection of the internal fire that burned in him. Thanks to his intelligence, soul and heart given to him by Divine Providence, he easily noticed relationships between phenomena and the unity of cognition. He always placed every phenomenon in a wider context and easily understood chains of causation. The soul of Lejeune the researcher was open, yearning for and accessible to the truth. The scientific truth he was looking for was only a small fragment of a more valuable treasure. The steep path he was following was only one of the routes to the top he was destined to reach. He knew other paths – those of art, philosophy and of theology and liked to visit them too. The most important thing for him was the truth. As he aptly expressed: "what's important is the truth; whereas we're late with verification". If one wanted to sum up the scientist's work, one could say that Jérôme Lejeune wanted to fill the gap between the truth and what's verified. His intuition showed him the truth and verification was the result of his work.

As a seeker of truth and of God, Jérôme Lejeune was also a man of wandering, anxiety and yearning as all those who seek God. His life was something more than the putting together of his thoughts and deeds into a self-contained whole. It was a path, a trajectory. Lejeune, made for the Kingdom to which his faith led him, decided not to waste time. He didn't bother himself with trifles. He loathed chimeras, entertainment and negligence. It seemed that Lejeune worked only *ad majorem Dei gloriam* but he did it effortlessly and in a tolerant way. His life was, to a great extent, the contemplation of God through his works. The best proof of this fundamental truth about Jérôme Lejeune was the fact that he transferred the surfeit of his contemplative reverie to his family and friends, who, as a result, also turned to God. There was also another proof that Lejeune was the seeker of God, this proof was the feeling of insecurity, sadness and incompleteness that filled him whenever his environment or the world deviated from its course, the course Lejeune thought the only way worth going. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You – these are the words of Saint Augustine. The last moments of Lejeune's life proved that he was a man ready for the longed-for meeting, a man who, with a heavy heart but without hesitation, gets rid of attachments, cleansed, illuminated by the brilliance of the eternal, first and only Love.

The joy of the one who finds God

Someone once said this about scientists: there are many searchers but a discoverer is hard to find. Jérôme Lejeune was something more than a researcher, he was a discoverer. Saint Augustin expressed this in a different way, he put these words into his God's mouth: you wouldn't be looking for me if you hadn't already found me. Apparently Lejeune had found his God sooner. He diligently attended the meetings God asks his beloved children on earth to attend. For him contemplation meant taking a refreshing breath, just like it does for a Russian pilgrim. Didn't he make in his spare time small rosaries out of wood, hoping to turn these simple prayer instruments into a prayer? His humble participation in holy mysteries was a foretaste, trusting anticipation, "a down payment" for the sake of the awaited meeting face to face with God. Some people are afraid of mysteries, they arrogantly reject them and try to belittle them to the size of their own smallness. Lejeune wasn't afraid of mystery, he saw the promise it contains and tasted its sweetness. His faith and hope were the foundation that sustained him and he accepted the mystery with a smile on his face. The mystery made him stronger and brought him peace, because the truth he was looking for was just another name for beauty and love. It wasn't an attack but an invitation to go beyond the tangible world in steadfast confidence that comes from the light we pray for. He asked for *Deo juvante* to be carved on a sword given to him as a professorial insignia.

Could he have lived differently, in happiness? He was sure that he'd found The One he'd been looking for, he knew that he was loved by the eternal love. He knew he lived in an order miraculously established by love and not in a world of tyranny of sheer chance, where the future of the world is played like a game of dice. How could he not have felt the happiness of a child looked at by his loving parents? It was enough to take his Heavenly Father's hand to set off with him. If Lejeune's life had been different, if it hadn't been a trustful God's child's life, how would he have survived all the betrayals, attacks, disappointments, threats and insults? And, above all, how would he have defied the massacre of his little patients killed in their mothers' wombs by frantic medicine, by democratic authorities that became totalitarian, by silent complicity of moral elites. According to those who knew him, Jérôme Lejeune knew the joy of a man who knows no fear because he is submerged in the love he gives and gets. Supernatural happiness that doesn't necessarily mean joy and peace was Lejeune's trait, the trait of a man who chose obedience to God before men, who chose to be a paragon of contradiction and who, when brought to his knees, didn't surrender but kept on fighting.

The repairer of icons

Ask me about his days. What did he do? How did he experience his spirituality of a lay Christian – doctor and researcher. Seeing the reflection of the Lord in every being Lejeune always tried to go back to the source. Man was created in the image of God. What a program for a poet, a man filled with love, a mystic! To put a copy on the original, to see the frame of a painting, heal it and admire what is left untouched in the work. To know that despite all the harm done by the children of God, the painting will always be the painting and the resemblance – the resemblance. To feel the reflection of light, even if it seems so very distant, to love the copy when the original is nothing but a memory, to repair the icons that priests want to write off and burn. Irrespective of everything and everyone, always repeat that a man is a man. To save the honour of medicine by disagreeing to call 'doctors' the ones who kill, the ones who are not able to heal or at least to love. Scream into the faces of the ones belonging to the race of lords – whoever kills his own children, because they are not beautiful enough, will be judged by God's innocence.

The repairer of icons was sometimes ashamed of the modesty of his work. He often had to repeat simple things, things obvious to the humble, the ordinary but not for the masters. He had to remind them, for example, that a child is created by its parents and that it has never been and will never be a descendant of huge monkeys. Jérôme Lejeune tried to wake our memory, he had to tell the story of man a thousand times and show that there's nothing in genetic sciences that would negate the fact that humanity is born from a unique relationship of two people, just like the Book of Genesis tells us, instead of emerging from an ongoing process of humanization, in other words – evolution. What is more, it is the simplest and most probable of all scientific hypotheses. Men as images of God – it is so today, it was like that yesterday and it will be tomorrow. In the beginning there was a message, this message is also in life, this message is life. And if this Gospel is human, so is life. With this sentence Lejeune paraphrased the truth about our incarnation – a small but noble reflection of the Lord's Incarnation.

Saint Irenaeus used to say: A living man is the Glory of God. Jérôme Lejeune and pope John Paul II met on the same road of service of humanity and honour of God, that is why they became friends. John Paul

II, the pope of life, asked Lejeune for professional advice many times. But Lejeune owes to the pope, above all, the warmth of a meeting of two hearts beating in the rhythm of eternity. We were witnesses of these meetings. They weren't starting points but the destinations of wandering, they were meetings of two roads, a series of crossroads drawn by Providence, they were images of the communion of saints. Jérôme Lejeune died in 1994; in 1997 John Paul II visited his friend's grave during World Youth Day in Paris. One of the French journalists commented on the event with the following pun: The Pope visited the young (les jeunes) and Lejeune. An Italian poet wrote: In a look of a man one sees not what that man saw, but what he will see. In Jérôme Lejeune's and the pope's eyes we saw heaven. Today they are looking at us from above.