

Introduction

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

—Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

This suggestive assertion by the great Paul VI is the springboard for this book. The true “helmsman” of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI was also an emblematic figure in the always difficult and complex dialogue of the Church with society and culture.

Considered “the godless age,” the twentieth century has concluded leaving behind, in several respects, an emptiness and senselessness that led many to live with anguish or indifference. History’s great stories and utopias no longer enlighten spirits and thoughts, and we often lack paradigms to guide our existential journey. Nevertheless, during that age, there lived men and women who were true witnesses to coherence and holiness, capable of putting forward admirable ideas and aspirations. And in these individuals, there are profound signs of hope for the future.

The present work is dedicated to an exceptional and enigmatic woman: the philosopher and French Jewish mystic, Simone Weil. Her writing and, above all, her life constitute a testimony so unique that they are impossible to ignore.

In a Europe where authoritarian regimes were dominant and heading, in a sinister manner, toward WWII . . . where factories were synonymous with exploitation and dehumanization . . . where the intellectual

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environment was marked by an atheistic existentialism, this woman of fragile health but indomitable spirit denounced the contradictions of the capitalist system, the brutality of Nazism, and the paradox of bourgeois thought that hid behind the figures most characteristic of French philosophy at that time (Simone de Beauvoir, for example, with whom she had contact). At the same time, her spiritual journey was one of zeal and sorrow—that of a true mystic—but her radical intransigence and passion for freedom kept her from actually approaching the institutional Church. In that sense, she not only anticipated the Vatican II years, but was also congruent with contemporary awareness and with other traditions.

Curious and insatiable, she wanted to experience, in the flesh, the suffering of society's least fortunate and the truths of other religions. Implacable toward her own Jewish tradition, she lived filled with love for Jesus Christ and yet far from the sacramental life for which she yearned. The reader will need to develop a discerning empathy for Simone Weil's sensibility, beyond her particular passion and zeal, in order to appreciate her in depth. Her words move from the political to the spiritual, from the testimonial to the philosophical, from the intuitive to the sensual.

. . . To understand some of her initiatives or propositions, such as nurses on the front lines or her criticisms of violence in the Old Testament, it is important to try to place oneself in her time as well as understand her culture and her radical, passionate sensibility. But undeniable are this truly singular woman's authenticity, her capacity to suffer, her identification with "the other," her inner passion, her almost magical perception of the depths of the human spirit. And that is why her story merits being told as one of the great witnesses of our age.

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