



## Love, Life and Death in “*The Tidings Brought to Mary*” by Paul Claudel

A presentation on the eternal human questions in the French poet’s masterpiece  
through the eyes of Msgr. Luigi Giussani

**Speakers:** Mr. Christopher BACICH—US Coordinator of Communion and Liberation  
Fr. Peter CAMERON—Editor-in-Chief of *Magnificat*  
Mr. Peter DOBBINS—Artistic Director of the Storm Theater  
Dr. Evelyn (Timmie) Birge VITZ— Professor of French at NYU

Friday, February 6, 2009 at 7:00 PM  
Earl Hall Auditorium, Columbia University Main Campus  
117<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, New York

**Crossroads:** Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. A special thanks to Columbia Campus Ministry who helped us to organize this event. Among the great "Catholic" masterpieces of the 20th century, Paul Claudel's *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is certainly one of the most neglected today. Such neglect is certainly not surprising as far as mainstream secular culture is concerned. However, it is remarkable how much Claudel has been forgotten also in the Christian, and especially Catholic, milieu. In fact, the "disappearance" of Claudel is very revealing of certain trends that have come to the fore in the half-century following his death in 1955. Generally speaking, the following generations had a hard time relating to Claudel's deep sense of the human drama in front of Destiny, to his passion for the beauty of Christ, to his vivid perception of the significance of virginity and the call to sanctity. In hindsight, we can say today that this was a symptom of a serious spiritual and cultural short-sightedness, and that the time is ripe to rediscover Paul Claudel. We think that rediscovering Paul Claudel has not only literary significance, but it is also very important for us as Christians, because Claudel always brings us back to the very core of the Christian experience, which we often take for granted. It is not by chance that tonight we also want to link Claudel's work to the thought of Fr. Giussani. Giussani especially loved *The Tidings Brought to Mary*, precisely because he felt that it is one of the works of art that reveals most beautifully what Christianity is about.

To accompany us tonight we have a great group of speakers. They will be introduced by Father Peter Cameron, our moderator tonight. Fr. Cameron is a Dominican priest ordained in 1986. He is a professor of homiletics and the author of *Why Preach: Encountering Christ in God's Word*. In 1998, Fr. Cameron founded Blackfriars Repertory Theatre, and he serves as its artistic director. His other books include *The Classics of Catholic Spirituality* and *Jesus Present Before Me: Eucharist Meditations for Adoration*. Fr. Cameron is the editor-in-chief of *Magnificat*.

**Cameron:** Professor Timmie Birge Vitz is a Professor of French and a medievalist who is affiliated with the Religious Studies Department, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and Comparative Literature at New York University. She has worked a great deal on literature and culture. She is the author of a wonderful book called *A Continual Feast* which is a book about food in the Christian tradition. She is married to Professor Paul Vitz and she is the mother of six children, one of whom is Rebecca Vitz who is a dear friend of ours.

Mr. Peter Dobbins is the cofounder and the original participant of The Storm Theatre. Mr. Dobbins studied theatre as an undergraduate at Temple University and then at Southern Methodist University in the professional

actor training program. As the Artistic Director of The Storm Theatre, Mr. Dobbins directed over 20 shows and produced over 30 shows. Quite notably in 2007, under Mr. Dobbins's direction and under his producing, he produced the *Karol Wojtyla Theatre Festival* producing four plays of the previous Holy Father, three of which he directed, and the festival received wonderful media attention and excellent reviews.

Mr. Christopher Bacich will be presenting Msgr. Luigi Giussani's reading of the play. Mr. Bacich is a high school teacher here in New York, and the U.S National Coordinator of Communion and Liberation. He was a long time friend of Msgr. Giussani and has a deep knowledge of his works, which makes Mr. Bacich uniquely qualified for the job.

So we welcome all our panelists and we are happy to begin with the comments of Professor Vitz.

**Vitz:** The French playwright Paul Claudel was born in 1868 in Villeneuve-sur-Fère, a tiny, ancient, austere, wind-swept town in the Tardenois district in Champagne. His father was a civil servant who handled taxes and mortgages; his mother, from a "good family" of Villeneuve, the daughter of a physician, and the niece of the local priest. Claudel always felt close to Champagne—and always retained his strong regional accent. The family was culturally Catholic, but was essentially non-practicing, and once Paul had made his first communion, that was the end his religious practice.

Paul was one of three children—he had two older sisters. The Claudels were apparently not a happy or congenial family; the members did not get along well and were not close. The family moved around a good deal as the father was appointed to different towns. In 1882, when Paul was 14, Mme. Claudel moved to Paris with her children so that her daughter Camille could study sculpture there. (Camille Claudel is well known today: she became the mistress of Rodin; had a breakdown over the unhappy affair, and spent the rest of her life in a mental institution—a story there!)

Paul did his *lycée*—advanced high school—studies in Paris. Then he studied law, oriental languages, and political science in Paris. As a student in Paris, he was clearly very solitary, and extremely unhappy. And he was a great reader of literature. He had abandoned Catholicism—but he also despised the Materialism, Realism and atheism that dominated the intellectual world of his time; for example, he couldn't stand Zola. The one literary movement that he discovered, and loved, was the Symbolists, such as Rimbaud and Mallarmé. But he was in great inner turmoil during his student days in Paris. He was close to despair. One day he put a gun to his head.

But then, on Christmas Day, 1886, when he was 18, apparently on a (Providential!) whim, he attended Christmas Mass and then Vespers by himself at Notre Dame de Paris, and had a powerful religious experience. As he wrote later:

"I was standing in the crowd, near the second pillar at the entrance to the choir, on the right at the sacristy side. And then the event happened that dominates my whole life. In an instant my heart was moved, and I believed. I believed, with such a strong assent, such an upheaval of my whole being, so mighty a conviction, such a certainty leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that since then all the books, and the reasonings, and the chances and changes of an unsettled life have been powerless to shake my faith, or indeed even to touch it. I had suddenly had the excruciating sense of the Innocence, of the eternal Childhood of God." It was an ineffable revelation. He felt: "It is true. God exists, He is here. He is Someone, a being as personal as myself! He loves me, He is calling me."

Later that day, he found a Bible that had just been given to his sister Camille, and he read passages that also moved him tremendously the story of Jesus at Emmaus. And he read chapter VIII of Proverbs which is the Epistle for the feast of the Immaculate Conception: themes of the Mother of God, the Church, God's Wisdom.

So these experiences changed him powerfully—and forever—he says. He never doubted again. But this did not make him a Catholic. He still pretty much despised Catholicism—his religious experience was between him and God. And he knew nothing at all about Catholicism. It wasn't until 1900—4 years after his experience—that he came back to the Church; after a great deal of reading: Pascal, Bossuet, Dante, and others, such as Anna Catharina Emmerich. His primary teacher was, he said, the cathedral of Notre Dame: He went there often. He loved the liturgy—the Mass and all the different offices. He said that Notre Dame of Paris was “his haven, his teacher, his home, his doctor and his nurse.”

Claudél's Catholicism was, for many years, and always to some degree, fraught and complicated. Let me give you two major examples of his struggles: He went twice briefly into monasteries—at Solesmes and at Ligugé—hoping to become a Benedictine. But he felt that God's answer to him was “no!” He felt rejected by God. The second crisis: In 1900 he was on his way to China, and onboard ship he joined in a game of “Find the Slipper.” And the slipper he found was on the foot of a pretty young married woman with four children. He fell madly in love. For him, she left her husband and children, and Claudél's affair with her lasted for 4 years. All this while he was struggling with his Catholicism, and reading Thomas Aquinas! Eventually he and his mistress parted. He referred to this period as a long nightmare—a “cauchemar.” His play *Partage de Midi / Break of Noon* tells the story of this affair. He said later: “I wrote that play with my blood.”

But it is important to understand that, however terrible Claudél may have felt about this affair, he felt at the time (and to some degree always) that it was irresistible. He felt that he did not have sufficient grace to say no to it. And he was persuaded that, as we might say, “God writes straight with crooked lines.” God uses our sins and our desires, as a means, an opening, to grace.

This adulterous affair ended in 1905. Claudél returned to France; he went to Lourdes, where he witnessed two miraculous cures. He felt renewed. Within months of his return, he married a very Catholic French woman named Reine Sainte Marie-Perrin. It was something of an arranged marriage: Paul had asked the Virgin to find him a wife; he and Reine met at Mass...

Paul and Reine appear to have been very happy together. They had five children, and Claudél became quite a family man. He was present at the birth of his first child—a remarkable thing at the time. He said it was beautiful and moving, “not bloody and repellent, the way that disgusting Zola describes it.” He was devoted to his children, and later to his numerous grandchildren. There are many published letters between Claudél and his children; they are sweet, beautiful, paternal, encouraging, Catholic letters.

Claudél became a writer—or rather, he was already writing even as a young child. His first real play dates from 1888, when he was 20. But he was primarily, professionally, a diplomat: you recall that his studies in Paris were in law and political science. He once said “I am above all an official; it is some whimsical fairy that made me also a playwright.” His first posts were in the United States—in New York in 1893, and then in Boston.

Unlike many artists who have combined their creative work with a “day job”—often rather regretting the need for that job—Claudél was a committed and successful diplomat. He served under several titles, but finally as Ambassador of France. He served in many places: several cities in China and Japan—he spoke the languages. Also in Prague, Frankfurt and Homburg, Rome, Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen, Brussels, Washington—an amazing list of places! And for someone like Claudél, who did not come from a powerful French family—even from the “grande bourgeoisie”—it is all the more remarkable.

Moreover, this was not one of your charming, affable Maurice Chevalier type Frenchmen! He was clearly a gruff, stern-faced, rather tactless person; he sometimes had people who irritated him thrown out of his office.

But as he moved around the world—with his wife and five children—he wrote prolifically. What Claudel is primarily known for is his theatre—on which we focus tonight. But he also wrote about poetry, and art, and Asia, and the Bible, which he loved. And he had a vast correspondence, much of which has been published. He carried on a long series of letters with Andre Gide, whom he tried (unsuccessfully!) to persuade to become a Catholic.

Claudel's best known plays are *Break of Noon*—the play about his adulterous affair in China—and *L'Annonce faite à Marie / The Tidings Brought to Mary*, the play we are here to talk about tonight, and soon, to see. Also very famous is *Le Soulier de satin / The Satin Slipper*: that slipper is back!—as is the story. There are many other impressive plays as well. One important and interesting aspect of his work is that he rewrote several of his plays over and over, trying to sort it all out—to make sense of sin and grace.

Now *Tidings* is set in the late Middle Ages, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of Joan of Arc. Its full title is *The Tidings Brought to Mary: A Mystery Play*—so Claudel is attempting to connect this work with the late-medieval religious plays called “mystery plays”: plays that are drawn from the Bible or from lives of the saints, and that often show miracles.

It is interesting that Claudel chose to focus on the Middle Ages. A number of other great Catholic writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also turned to the medieval period for inspiration—such as Sigrid Undsett, in her Nobel-prize-winning trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Claudel, like Undsett, did not turn to the Middle Ages to show how wonderfully Catholic everything was then—the good old days! the “Age of Faith”! everybody's Catholic!—but rather to show (or so it seems to me) what tremendous problems Catholics had, and how some saintly characters coped with and even overcame these trials. So *Tidings* is set in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century: France is in turmoil, with no king (the legitimacy of the heir to the throne has been seriously questioned). And Catholicism is a mess: three men—a pope and two anti-popes (but who is which?)—are contending over the See of St. Peter.

This sense of how terrible and disturbing the times were is central to the play: this is why the father, a wealthy farmer, a landowner, leaves to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This was a common practice in the Middle Ages: for hundreds of years, pilgrims went, in groups and on their own, to Jerusalem, as to Compostella, or to Canterbury (as in Chaucer), or to other pilgrimage sites. Those who went far away—as to the Holy Land—sometimes returned, sometimes not: they died, or they stayed there.

At the end of the play we hear that a young shepherd girl—Joan of Arc—has arrived on the scene, and we know that, thanks to her, the dauphin, the heir to the throne will soon be crowned as King Charles VII, in Reims. The schism in the church has also been resolved, and the pope is back in Rome, no longer in Avignon.

You will forgive me if, as a professional pedant, I note that Claudel has messed a bit with historical chronology—Charles VII was crowned 1429; the great schism and the papal mess were resolved by 1417. Moreover, the great era of cathedral building was in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, not the 15<sup>th</sup>. But never mind—that is poetic license!

Let's look briefly at a couple of other issues about the medieval period—and see how Claudel used them. One of the major themes in the *Tidings* is marriage. We all know the basic Catholic take on “married”: you get married, and you are married!—at least once the marriage has been consummated. And the two of you remain married until parted by death.

But in the Middle Ages, it was more complicated, for three reasons. First, there was important step along the way to marriage—the betrothal: before actually getting married, you were already significantly bound to the other person once the two of you were betrothed. Second, though there was of course typically a marriage ceremony in a church, you were married as soon as you had definitely said “yes” to each other—as soon as you

had fully consented to the other person. The priest and everyone else were just there as witnesses. So, marriage could be a private act. And third, although consummation was normally required for a marriage to have taken place, the model provided by the Virgin and St. Joseph was a powerful one—and there is a strong tradition of “white marriage” in the Middle Ages: some marriages that were never consummated, were nonetheless seem as true marriages.

Back to marriage in this play. The bottom line is that in *Tidings* it is not entirely clear who is married to whom. Though Violaine and Jacques had been betrothed and were deeply in love, he ends up marrying her younger, rather bitchy, sister Mara, and he has a daughter by Mara. When the baby dies, Violaine, now a leper in the final stages of the disease, miraculously restores the baby to life. But the little girl now has Violaine’s bright blue eyes, instead of Mara’s dark eyes! Clearly, she is not only Jacques’s and Mara’s baby. Spiritually, miraculously, she is Jacques’s and Violaine’s child. What I take this to mean is that for Claudel, individual characters are to be understood as united to each other in complex and varied ways. This is not your simple, straightforward Catholic understanding of marriage.

What kind of man was Claudel? Clearly, forceful. “Leonine” is an adjective used in reference to him. Not chummy—he said “I have never had the spirit of camaraderie.” André Gide said of him: “He gives me the impression of a solidified cyclone.”

There are certainly Catholics who love (or at least want to love) Claudel because he was a Catholic writer—though it is clear that he had some rather odd ideas. I think it would be true to say that Claudel was the great literary and dramatic success he was largely in spite of his Catholicism. France is not now, and was not then—in the first half the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a very Catholic country. And the world of the theatre was certainly not devoutly Catholic. The producers who put on his plays then and now, and the audiences who have admired him, have not been for the most part Catholics. He just was a very great dramatist. He holds the stage! And he was a great lyric poet as well in his plays—though I am not sure that his lyricism comes through well in translation.

As one scholar has argued, and I think it is true: Catholicism provided Claudel with a powerful conceptual and symbolic framework: he both believed in it, and sometimes he struggled with it. One of his mottos as a Catholic (and a symbolist) was a line from Ecclesiasticus: “Do not hinder the music”—that is, God’s music. Claudel was increasingly a deeply mystical poet.

That he was admired in France is clear: he was elected a Member of the Académie Française in 1946. For a French writer this is the greatest honor there is—though interestingly, for him it came late: he had been defeated for a seat in 1935. Election to the Academy made him one of the “immortels”—though there is of course an irony to this for a Catholic writer.

He died in 1955. On his tomb the inscription reads: “Here lie Paul Claudel’s remains and seed (“semence”)—the seed of his resurrected body.

Even today, hardly a year goes by in Paris without a play of Claudel’s being put on. He has survived! He is just great theatre.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this event. It has been a pleasure to spend this time in Claudel’s company.

**Dobbins:** First of all, excuse me, I’m a little under the weather, and I am not used to talking in universities, but I will do my best to imagine that I am in a bar and that you are all my friends and that there is a beer in front of me, and then I think I can lecture nonstop.

What my job is here is to tell you a little bit more about the plot and talk a little bit about the themes of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* and also the rest of the Paul Claudel Festival—*The Satin Slipper* and *The Break of Noon* and what it is that made me want to bring this festival to fruition, what made me want to do it. So first of all I must say that I have not started to direct it yet really. I have not really started working with the actors; I had a few preliminary rehearsals, and as a great conductor was once asked when he got a brand new score, how it was, he said that he hadn't heard it yet because he hadn't actually conducted it and heard it out loud. I have not done that either with the play, really, but I put some time in and I'll give you my two cents about it for what it's worth.

For some reason, I don't know why, when I think about Claudel's massive ideas, what the arch of his thought is and what goes through the themes throughout his plays, for some reason I'm reminded of this short scene in *Hamlet*, and it is a section in *Hamlet* where Hamlet is very morose and things are bad; "Things are rotten in Denmark," as everybody knows. But there is a moment when the players come, the actors from out of town come, and he is so excited to see them and he has this whole plot that he's going to do with them. But basically he is very excited to see the actors and he tells this very pompous lord, Polonius, to look after them and to treat them well, and Polonius says, "My Lord, I will use them according to their dessert." And I've always loved this line. Hamlet says, "Much better. Use every man after his dessert and who would escape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less that they deserve, the more merit is in our bounty. Take them in."

Well, I think that with God, and I think that one of the points with Claudel is that we are not treated according to our desserts; we are treated according to His merit, His honor and His bounty, because I know for one I wouldn't escape being whipped.

This leads me to the plot of *The Tidings Brought to Mary*. It is again the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century; it is just before the break of dawn, about 5 a.m., out in the countryside of France. A great cathedral builder, a genius, Pierre de Craon is leaving, almost sneaking away from the home of a prosperous peasant family with whom he's been staying. He's been in the area to get stone. He's now accomplished that. He's been there to get stone for this great new cathedral to St. Justitia. Now he is sneaking out and returning to Reims. All of a sudden a beautiful 18-year-old farm girl, Violaine, calls to him, "Halt, my lord knight." He's startled; he tells her to go away; he says that she should know that he is not a man to be trusted. She talks to him in a very loving and playful way, and asks him why he hasn't shown himself, why he hasn't been around this last time.

In the course of the scene we find out that one year before Pierre de Craon was visiting this place and he attempted to rape Violaine. And when he was not successful, he tried to kill her. One week later after that attack he contracted leprosy, what he believes to be a judgment of God.

Now prior to this, Pierre was a very blameless man, extremely pious. He says that Violaine is the only woman that he had ever touched. He believes that this is a judgment of God "according to his own desserts," as Polonius would say. He's still in love with this beautiful, loving girl who completely forgives him. She tells him that she forgives him and holds nothing against him and is bizarrely light and free and just filled with love, but not love for him in a sexual or romantic way. She is engaged to be married to Jacques—well, she's not engaged yet; she's pretty sure that the engagement is going to happen. But Pierre is going through such self-hatred and every second she is trying to reach out to him and tell him that he is loved, that he is worthwhile, that even though he has leprosy and what he feels is just to be a living dead person with just a very short amount of time to die, she tries to give him reasons to live.

Now Pierre knows that he's not cut out for marriage, that cathedral building is an all-encompassing vocation, yet he's bitter that he spends his whole life trying to create something beautiful, that he's given everything to God, and then he sees this beautiful young woman and tries to reach out for it, and it is denied to him, and now

he is dying because of it. It is as if Violaine is the projection out of all the beauty that he has tried to create himself, and yet this is denied to him.

As he is about to leave, awash in self-hatred, self-pity and bitterness about the slow death which he is experiencing—he has not yet any outward sign; he has the mark on him and it is only a matter of time. He has a special dispensation from the bishop to move about, whereas in most cases lepers are moved to a separate place to be away, but because only he can do what he does as a cathedral builder, he is given this special dispensation. As he leaves, filled with this self-pity and bitterness, Violaine in a moment of great compassion and pity, kisses the leper Pierre de Craon. In the shadows this is witnessed by her sister, Mara, who is in love with Violaine's intended, Jacques. However, in that kiss we later find out that Violaine has contracted the leprosy and also in that kiss, as we find out much later, that kiss was the beginning of healing for Pierre de Craon. At the end of the play he no longer has leprosy.

In that one scene, Claudel covers aspects of the creation story, of Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge. In fact, Pierre calls her the tree of knowledge of good and evil at one point, and then also moves to Christ's death and passion on the cross.

In the very next scene of the play we have Violaine's father and mother. The father is a very prosperous peasant farmer who has had nothing but abundance; he has had nothing but wealth. Good things have happened to him even though all these people around him have not fared so well, and one would think that he would be very happy, but he's not; there's a spiritual sickness there. He realizes that with all this abundance there is something more. He decides that he must go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Happiness is not enough; he's bored with happiness; he needs something more; he needs God.

Before he goes away, he arranges Jacques and Violaine's wedding. He makes Jacques master of the estate. The father then sets out on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Whether he will come back at that point no one knows, and it is not known if he will see his wife again when he comes back, and in fact he does not; his wife dies while he is away.

Mara is furious about the wedding to come, and is determined to stop it. She tells Jacques about Violaine's kiss with Pierre. He does not believe, thinking that only she is dreaming it. He meets privately with Violaine to tell her how much he loves her and how much he is looking forward to marrying her and their wedding night. Violaine wants to really make sure that Jacques wants to marry her, not just because he is inheriting the estate, but because he truly loves her. He protests his love over and over. Violaine then asks Jacques for his knife and cuts a hole in her garment. She shows him the flower-like blemish on her skin that is the beginning of leprosy; he is shocked, outraged, hurt, totally then flipping and believing that she has been Pierre de Craon's lover, devastated that he can never consummate his marriage with her.

Violaine and Jacques, after they have finished, make up a long story to placate the family. Jacques says that his mother who lives several towns away is dying and doesn't have long to live and she wants to see her future daughter-in-law. That allows Violaine to leave her home, and instead of going to her mother-in-law, of course, they go to Géyn where the lepers live.

Seven years pass. Mara has married Jacques. They have a baby girl and it is Christmas Eve. The baby girl has died suddenly. Mara takes the dead baby into the freezing cold night. She's searching for her leper sister who she has not seen in seven years. She sees workmen clearing the road for the Dauphin who will be crowned the next day in Reims with the help of Joan of Arc. It is here that we find out that Pierre de Craon has been healed.

The workmen lead her to her leper sister who cannot see because she does not have any eyes. In this scene, the spiritual and the material face off against each other. Mara gives her dead baby to Violaine to hold. She takes

the dead baby to her breast; the baby comes back to life, but now she has the blue eyes of Violaine and no longer the green eyes of Mara. Something happens after this, but I'm not going to tell you.

Anyway, what is it about this play and these other plays, *The Satin Slipper* and *The Break of Noon*, what is it that compels me to do it? I think it's because they get to the heart of existence. That's what theatre or any art should do, to get down to the crucible, to the center of it all. And what is the essence of being human? As far as I can tell, the essence of being human is to love, and you are most human when you love to the greatest possible capacity. This play clearly illustrates that.

If we are to love, really love, then there is no way that that does not come with suffering. It comes hand in hand. There is no way, if you really love, that you can escape the cross. It is inescapable. But what the play illustrates is that if you keep loving and allow the attending suffering as something that is unavoidable and a by-product of that love, then there is a redemptive, transcendent, life-giving power that is unleashed, that transforms everything, that can bring the dead back to life. God doesn't love us according to what we deserve, but according to his own honor.

The other reason to do these plays, not just because of that, but this is part of it and it goes into that, is that especially in these three plays he explores the architecture of salvation and the mechanics of grace. However stark and dramatic the plays can sometimes be, one must remember that they are comedies of divine grace. They are really love stories about how we reach God, and God's crazy, passionate love for us, because that's what grace is; grace is crazy love, love that just doesn't see...it's just not normal how much love is there. And so it's just that within his plays God is calling out in all these amazing different ways; He's inexhaustibly inventive in finding ways to bring us to Him, and that's what Claudel is about essentially. He's bringing us through this; he's bringing us through that, and basically we're all players in this cosmic drama. Sometimes we're the protagonist; sometimes we're the antagonist; sometimes we're obstacles; sometimes we're helping, but the one thing we always are, we're always the love object.

So anyway, how does all this get into motion? How is this divine plan of salvation that Claudel depicts...it's someone like Violaine or like Mary who, as the Bible says Mary said, and Violaine says in her own way, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to His word."

That's it. Thanks.

**Bacich:** Good evening folks. Thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to familiarize myself, to immerse myself for just a little while again in Claudel. I actually, because of Communion and Liberation, because of Fr. Giussani, I read for the first time *The Tidings Brought to Mary* when I was about 17, and I found out about *The Break of Noon* and *The Satin Slipper*, and I read all of those plays, I devoured those plays when I was 17, 18, 19, 20 years old. I am quite familiar with them; I love them dearly, so I'm very happy to find out that you're going to be putting on *The Break of Noon* and *The Satin Slipper*. I am very much looking forward to those productions. I always wondered what they would look like on stage. So I'm really, really looking forward to them, so thank you.

I'm here to present Msgr. Luigi Giussani's vision of this play. For those of you who don't know much about him, just very quickly, he was a high school teacher himself, actually had a life-changing experience you could say. He didn't find the woman's slipper, but was on a train. He was working as a professor in a seminary, a very important seminary, a seminary from which popes had come—the seminary at Benegono, which is the seminary of the diocese of Milan, and on a train in the 1950s in a conversation with some high school students, he became aware of the fact that his vision of Catholicism and faith was much, much, much different from that which he encountered on the train that day. And so he took off to become a high school teacher. He began to work with high school students. (There's a reason for which I'm going through all of this; just be a little bit

patient.) He went and became a high school teacher of religion in Italy in the 1950s where religion was still required for one hour a week in public schools, and so he taught at a public high school, I think the kind of public high school that was educating those kind of very high level bourgeois people that Professor Vitz spoke of before, that Claudel was not a part of. He was teaching those people in Milan for one hour a week. His way of presenting the Catholic faith became very fascinating and deeply touched and moved a number of his students, and he began to work with students after school and soon had founded a group of students called very simply *Young People Who Are Students*. And soon there were also young people who worked.

Now why am I telling you all of this? Because he, from the very beginnings, had his high school students read this play in order to explain to them what Catholicism was. For him this was *the* Catholic masterpiece of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as he says in his book *My Readings (Le mie letture)*, published by Rizzoli back in the 1990s. And essentially what I'm doing is I'm presenting things from this book and things that I have heard him personally say in public meetings about this book.

A very interesting connection with what Peter was saying just now because he opens up his reading of this by saying, "The Theme of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* can be defined as follows: Love gives birth to what is human according to its complete dimensions. That is to say, love generates the history of a person in as much as it generates a people." So for Giussani, what was so key to this play was that it wasn't just a story of two young people in love; it was the story of how two young people's love generates, gives birth to, is connected to an entire people. In fact, there is a deep connection in the play between all that is going on in the foreground between Violaine and Jacques, Violaine and Pierre, Elizabeth and Mara, Mara and Jacques, and the entire situation of Christendom as Timmie pointed out earlier. That is, the world is a place of confusion and difficulty and struggle, and the individual confusion and difficulty and struggle is linked to...there is a link between the individual confusion and difficulty and struggle and the difficulty and struggle and confusion in the world.

And so for Fr. Giussani three characters actually make up the central figure. He says that "the central figure is translated into three characters: Anne Vercors, who is the father, Violaine, and Pierre de Craon." Now "the common denominator," he says, "of these three characters is love. Not love as the expression of one's wishes, not as pure reaction to things, not as fuzzy feelings, rather love is being for, being for the ideal, being for the whole picture, being for a place where beauty and justice are safe." And so Giussani continues, "the theme of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is that of love, is that love creates wholeness. Indeed it is within the person that there can be an awareness of the whole reality, of the entire universe. Understanding this one can understand the work."

And so he goes on to describe the three characters that make up this central figure. First Anne, the father. He says that it's by looking at him that you in some sense understand the other two characters—Pierre and Violaine, because Anne, as was said earlier, possesses everything; he has rich farmland, and this rich farmland for years has produced a superabundant amount of crops and wealth. From this wealth it's interesting to note, and Giussani notes that Anne has been completely gratuitously feeding an entire convent of cloistered nuns. So through his abundance, in good and in bad, he simply feeds this cloistered group of nuns that live very near his land.

The drama opens up with Anne telling his wife, "I'm leaving; I'm going to the Holy Land; I'm going on pilgrimage." And she cannot understand why he needs to do this. And he struggles to express himself by saying, "Don't you understand; everything is out of balance; everything is out of whack. I need to go and I need to do something in order to help put everything back in its place. And since I need to help put everything back in its place, I need to go to the axis of everything. I need to go to that hole in the ground where the cross was placed. There is the axis of the universe. There is where everything is linked and bound. I need to go there and I need to beg that everything be put back in place because, don't you see, we have three popes instead of one, we don't have a king. This is a problem." And so in this first character Giussani says, "You see the heart of the true lover,

the lover who loves the entire world, who loves all of reality, who cannot disconnect, who cannot (this is the key thing for Anne) have his own little piece, his own share.” It’s not that he can have “his own private Idaho,” so to speak. He can’t have his own little piece of earth there that’s for him. His riches can’t take away for him the vision, the understanding, the connectedness with all of the rest of human reality. In this sense he is for all men; he is for everyone, for the entire good of the entire universe. And it’s for this reason that Giussani made high school kids read this play, to say, this is the heart of the Christian person. It’s not enough to have one’s own life, one’s own children, one’s own family, one’s own church. The problem is all of reality, all people, the entire universe, all of creation. So there’s kind of this vast heart like St. Paul. “All creation groans for the revelation of the sons of God.”

Violaine then appears as this character, as was alluded to before, as the one who says, “yes,” as the aspect of the Christian heart that shows the Christian heart, that shows the truly human heart because it continuously says “yes.” Moment to moment she says, “yes.” I’m just going to read to you a little bit of this just going back quickly for Anne I just wanted to read this, just a short point in the play. Anne says to his wife:

ANNE: That’s the point. We’re too happy. And others aren’t happy enough.

MOTHER: It is no fault of ours, Anne.

ANNE: Neither is it theirs.

MOTHER: All that I know is that you are here and I have two children.

ANNE: But at least you can see that everything is troubled and out of place, and everyone is bewildered and trying to find where his place is. The smoke we sometimes see in the distance doesn’t come from useless straw that is burning. And what about the hordes of poor people who come from every direction? There is no longer any king in France, as was prophesied by the prophet.

MOTHER: Is that what you were reading to us a few days ago?

ANNE : Instead of a king, we have two children. One, an Englishman, on his island, and the other, so small you can’t see him, among the reeds of the Loire. Instead of the Pope, we have three popes, and instead of Rome, there is some council or other in Switzerland. Since nothing is held in place by a weight from above, there is conflict and movement everywhere.

And so for this reason he goes off.

Coming back to Violaine quickly...so moment to moment saying “yes” to God’s plan, and at the beginning His plan answers all of her wishes, and so in that scene that was alluded to before with Pierre, they’re going back and forth and he’s saying, “Oh how terribly sad I am.”

And she’s saying, “How wonderfully happy I am.”

And so at a certain point Pierre says, “It’s not for the stone to choose its place, but for the master artisan.”

And she responds, “Praise be to God who gave me my place so early. I don’t have to look any further. And I don’t ask Him for any other place. I am Violaine. I am eighteen. My father’s name is Anne Vercors. My mother’s is Elizabeth. My sister is called Mara. My fiancé, Jacques. There! That’s all. There’s nothing more to

know. Everything is perfectly clear. Everything is predictable. And I am very happy. I am free. I have nothing to worry about.”

And so at the beginning Violaine says, “yes.” As she says “yes” she’s saying “yes” to something that is making her happy; God’s plan makes her happy. But at a certain point, exactly because of this love for whatever is happening right now that God gives to her, she has in front of her a leper, and she loves him as well and kisses him, and so it’s exactly out of this wholeheartedness in front of reality that she contracts leprosy. And that very dream of hers which it would have seemed was God’s plan for her, or rather it seemed was God’s plan for her, is ruined. And so later on in the play we hear between Violaine and Mara this dialogue:

VIOLAINÉ: I never gave myself to a man.

MARA: Sweet lying Violaine! Didn’t I see you tenderly embrace Pierre de Craon on a beautiful June morning?

VIOLAINÉ: You saw everything. There was nothing else to see.

MARA: Why did you kiss him as if he were so precious?

VIOLAINÉ: The poor man was a leper and I was full of happiness that day.

MARA : And so you did it all in innocence?

VIOLAINÉ: Like a little girl who kisses a poor small boy.

MARA: Can I believe you, Violaine?

VIOLAINÉ: It is true.

MARA: Don’t tell me it was willingly you left me Jacques.

VIOLAINÉ: No, not willingly. I loved him. I am not so perfect.

MARA: Did you expect him to love you still when you were a leper?

VIOLAINÉ: No, I didn’t expect it.

MARA: Who could ever love a leper?

VIOLAINÉ: My heart is pure.

MARA: But, how could Jacques know this? He looks upon you as a criminal.

VIOLAINÉ: Our mother had told me that you loved him.

MARA: Don’t tell me that she made you a leper.

VIOLAINÉ : God cautioned me with His grace.

MARA: So that when our mother spoke to you . . .

VIOLAINE: . . . It was still His voice I heard.

So Violaine incarnates this attitude of yes, yes to what God sends me. And again it was for this reason that Giussani put her as a character in front of his high school students.

Finally there is Pierre de Craon, the genius, the man who is chosen, who is gifted, but gifted for a reason, gifted for the good of the whole people. He possesses extraordinary gifts, extraordinary talents, extraordinary strength, but these gifts and talents and strength are given not for himself, but for everyone, and so we have this image of the one who builds the cathedral, that is, builds the temple where God and man live together. He is in charge of the construction of God's plan in the world, the one who gives shape to a place that becomes the unity of the Christian people, but with all of his strength, with all of his giftedness, with all of the grace poured out on him, he unlike Anne, cedes to the temptation of carving out his own little happiness and gives in to the temptation to try to violate Violaine. Now when he does this, he is struck with leprosy. He and everyone in the play interpret it as a punishment from God for exactly ceding to this temptation. But because he is the genius, he understands what a terrible, terrible, terrible thing it was for him to go from the cathedral builder to the one who should carve out his own little happiness, his own little angle of happiness. For this reason his dedication to the cathedrals becomes total at that point; that is, there's no looking back at this point; there's no more hankering after a place in the sun, so to speak. And so he becomes totally dedicated, and as was already alluded to, he will be cured of leprosy by the kiss of Violaine. And so at this point what we see is what Giussani always identified Pierre with, the figure of the virgin in Christianity; that is, the one who gives life without ever possessing anything for himself. For this reason then, he can go and touch everything, even the evil, that is, the leprosy of Violaine.

Why do I say that? We were talking a little bit earlier here. There were several endings to this play. The one that Giussani commented on was always on the version that came from 1912, but as Timmie said before, this play was being worked on all the way up to 1948, so I believe the one you are putting on is the 1948 version which I believe is the one that Claudel finished and so is considered definitive by him I'm supposing.

I hate to spoil the ending . . . after the great miracle, Mara will be jealous and will kill her sister exactly because she has blue eyes and Jacques loves so much the fact that his daughter has blue eyes, and Mara sees in this a leftover love for Violaine and so is stricken with jealousy and so kills Violaine at the end. And as Violaine is dying, it is Pierre de Craon, in the 1912 version, who finds her in the sand pit and brings her back and lies her out. And Jacques and Violaine have a last word with one another and so it's this version that I'm going through because this is the one that Giussani knew and used.

If Pierre de Craon is seen in this way then as the virgin, that is, the one who deals with things as though he doesn't own them, as St. Paul says, the other three characters also represent one figure: Elizabeth, the mother, Mara whose name means *bitterness*, and Jacques. For Fr. Giussani, Jacques is the key by which we understand these three characters, and it is in particular his attachment to justice, that is, to what should be, to what he understands is fair. It's his attachment to his measure of what is fair, what is right, what is just that helps us understand the other two characters as well.

For Jacques, love is not a total giving. Love is not something where someone simply gives, as it is for Violaine, for example, who lives her leprosy as a sacrifice for him and for the whole world. For Jacques instead, love is a contract; love is an arrangement, an agreement. You give me this; I give you that. And so, for example, on the day of their engagement, this is really what's going on—how unfair it is that she should have leprosy, how unfair it is to him that she should have done this to him. And later on in the play in the 1912 version, when Jacques and Violaine again meet, at a certain point Violaine will say to him,

VIOLAINE: Good morning, Jacques. [silence] Do you still care for me then?

JACQUES: The wound is not healed.

VIOLAINE: Poor boy. And have I not suffered a little too?

JACQUES: What possessed you to kiss that leper on the mouth?

VIOLAINE: Jacques, you must reproach me quickly with all that you have in your heart against me that we may finish with all that for we still have other things to say and I want to hear you say just once again those words I loved so much, "Dear Violaine, Sweet Violaine." For the time that remains for us is short.

JACQUES: I have nothing more to say to you.

VIOLAINE: Come here cruel man.

JACQUES: [He approaches her.]

VIOLAINE: Come nearer. [She takes his hand and draws him nearer. He kneels awkwardly at her side.] Jacques, you must believe me. I swear it before God who is looking upon us. I was never guilty with Pierre de Craon.

JACQUES: Why then did you kiss him?

VIOLAINE: He was so sad and I was so happy.

JACQUES: I don't believe you.

VIOLAINE: [She lays her hand a moment on his head.] Do you believe me now?

JACQUES: [He hides his face in her dress and sobs heavily.] Violaine, cruel Violaine.

VIOLAINE: Not cruel, but sweet Violaine.

JACQUES: Is it true then, yes, I was the only one you loved?

VIOLAINE: Jacques, no doubt it was all too beautiful and we should have been too happy.

JACQUES: You have cruelly deceived me.

And it goes on and at a certain point Jacques says,

JACQUES: I believe. I do not doubt anymore.

VIOLAINE: And tell me, what part has justice in all that, this justice you spoke of so proudly?

For Jacques and Mara and Elizabeth, the problem is things and how they should be, what is fair, and for this reason they represent in some senses anti-characters, a foil to the other three central figures for Giussani. And so Giussani will finish his reflections about this saying this:

These pages contain the ideal of all of life; their theme is love, that is, conceiving of one's own existence as being in function of the whole picture. This picture has a name; it is a man, Christ. And living is in function of him through crushing pain, an exceptional urge to generosity, or saying "yes" in the normal circumstances of daily obedience. The alternative to life like this is pettiness. Every day we must choose between these two roots in ourselves, that of Anne Vercors and that of Elizabeth.

That's where I'm going to finish so that we have time for questions. Thank you very much.