Péguy and the Cathedral of Chartres: A Love Story

by Lisa Galalis

What is the connection between French socialist and writer Charles Péguy and the venerable Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, outside of Paris?

In order to bring to life the connection between these two Christian icons, Crossroads Cultural Center brought together art historian Francis Greene, British-born author Tony Hendra, and the Choir of Communion and Liberation, under the direction of Christopher Vath, for an exploration of common themes in Péguy’s poetry and Chartres’s art and architecture, at Pope Auditorium at Fordham University on December 17, 2008.

Prof. Greene opened the presentation by introducing the audience to Charles Péguy. Born in 1873, Péguy grew to become a prominent essayist and writer in France. Throughout his life, he remained passionately committed to socialism and nationalism, and was haunted by his concern with class injustices.

At age 35, Péguy underwent a profound personal conversion to Christianity. According to Prof. Greene, Péguy began to write poetry as a way to express his newfound religious fervor. Péguy’s poetry draws deeply from his fascination with the Incarnation—that is, his conviction that Christianity begins with an encounter with the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was born at a particular time and place in history.

Prof. Greene then introduced the audience to Chartres. The site on which the Cathedral now stands had long been a Marian pilgrimage site when the first Cathedral was mostly destroyed by fire in 1194. The cathedral was immediately rebuilt in the Gothic style, and most of it remains standing today.

Chartres is often described as the “Bible of the poor.” In its stained glass windows, sculptures, and architecture, Chartres educates pilgrims to Christianity as a historical fact. Its stained glass windows describe the essentials of salvation history. One of its portals incorporates the signs of the zodiac—claiming for Christ one of the most enduring pre-Christian symbols. Chartres’ floor famously incorporates a labyrinth design, which is a Christianization of the Greek myth of Theseus slaying the Minotaur. According to Prof. Greene, the journey of the pilgrim, like Theseus, along the labyrinth requires repeated changes of orientation, or conversions; there is just one way to slay the Minotaur, or Satan, which is to approach the sanctuary, which is Jesus Christ.

Peguy himself made a journey along the labyrinth upon his knees on a pilgrimage to Chartres. In fact, Peguy made several pilgrimages to Chartres after his conversion. One of them was made in order to express his gratitude for the intercession of the Virgin Mary in the healing of his son.

In the second part of the program, British-born author Tony Hendra read selections from four of Péguy’s poetic works: The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc, The Mystery
of the Holy Innocents, The Portal of the Mystery of Hope, and Veronique. Prof. Greene characterized Péguy’s poems as those of a man whose piety was shaped by repeated pilgrimages to Chartres. Their rhythmic, litany-like repetitions often suggest the slow, determined progression of a pilgrimage on foot.

Interspersed between Hendra’s readings, the Choir of Communion and Liberation performed choral works ranging from Gregorian chant to a piece by twentieth century composer Benjamin Britten, which reflected Christian veneration for the Virgin Mary and meditated on the fact of Jesus’ birth. These musical performances highlighted the fact that the Incarnation—the same event that inspired the construction of Chartres and the poems of Péguy—has continued to inspire artists from medieval times until the present.