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Father Philippe Put to the Question

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Father "Marie-Do" may have lost his voice but not his words. "I have never spoken so much", admitted this preacher, whom certain people have playfully nicknamed "Double Agenda", and who travels throughout the world teaching, forming, affirming. Next November 21, a symposium at the Sorbonne will celebrate his 80th birthday. This dean of professors, so young at heart, accepted to respond to Proust's questionnaire. It was reviewed and corrected ***by Luc Adrian****.*

According to you, what is the ultimate misery?

The sin against the spirit.
And anguish, the fruit of a voluntary separation with Love, of a total folding in on oneself, of the rejection of mercy. Anguish pervades our era.

Where would you like to live?

On the heart of Christ.

Your ideal of earthly happiness?

I don't have one. The further I advance, the happier I am, and the more I feel my capacity for happiness growing, yet within a continual struggle.

What is the greatest temptation, according to you?

Thinking that one can save oneself.
No need of a Savior! This collective pride is the present-day "meta-temptation", according to John Paul II's expression. A temptation that affects even the Church for the first time in its existence.

Towards which kinds of flaws are you the most lenient?

The flaw of weakness.
A flaw which comes from an affective fragility; it is so prevalent now-a-days. It is a form of poorly-lived love. These are the kind of shortcomings that call the most for forgiveness and mercy.
This fragility is the consequence of a stoicism that had become wide-spread, notably in the Church, and that reduced love to a "voluntarist" self-control over the body and to the pursuit of virtues. This impossible perfectionism led to the present breakdown. We must renew ethics under the light of friendship-love.

Who is your favorite novel hero?

I read very few novels.
… ever since I entered the Order of Saint Dominic on November 11, 1930.

Who is your favorite historical figure?

Joan of Arc.
So strong in her fragility, so touching in her piety towards her nation.

Your favorite saint?

Saint John.

Your favorite female saint?

The Virgin Mary.

Your favorite philosopher?

Aristotle.
He is the incarnation of "the one who goes back up to the source", as Peguy defined the philosopher. The search for truth is indeed a going back up to the source, all the while knowing that although we get closer to it, we never possess it. It also means accepting to be alone: it is easy to float down a river. Even corpses float down a river, and they go faster than the others…

Your favorite artist?

The anonymous sculptors of the cathedrals.

Your favorite painter?

Fra Angelico.
And among the non-religious: Rembrandt, Rouault, Manet, Gauguin… and many others. There are so many! I am a bit like Saint Thomas who said about each virtue, "That is my favorite one!"

Your favorite musician?

… I am less drawn to music than to painting – the art of light.

The career you would have liked to practice?

Architecture.

Your preferred quality in a man?

A loving and kindhearted strength.

Your preferred quality in a woman?

Tenderness in mercy.
And therefore, her poverty: because there is no tenderness without poverty.

The ideal couple?

Mary and Joseph.
Mary, the strong mother who brings the tenderness; Joseph, the tender man who brings the strength.
In a union of love, a complementarity far from any sort of dialectic.

Your favorite pastime?

Silent prayer.
… (Only in silent prayer can we truly rest!) The search for truth (but it's more tiring!). Meeting again my friends, my brothers.

Who would you like to have been?

The beloved disciple.

Your dominant personality trait?

Ask my brothers…

What do you value most in your friends?

Faithfulness.

Your chief defect?

Pride. No need to go on an eighth-day retreat to know that… Pride, which causes the intelligence to measure love; whereas the only thing that can measure love is love itself.

Your dream of happiness?

None, I live in the present.
I no longer have a second to myself, so I have no time to think about the past nor to dream about the future.

What would be, for you, the worst misfortune?

To be "the one who no longer loves".
… as the little St Therese of Lisieux called the Devil.

Which book would you take with you on a deserted island?

The Gospel of Saint John.

… and the Book of Revelation, and his first Epistle. Out of these three writings, one fortifies our Faith, another our Hope, and the third one our Charity.

Your favorite prayer?

A love-bearing silence.
… and the great prayer of the Beloved Son, Chapter 17 of the Gospel of Saint John, in which Jesus reveals to us the secret of his heart: his sonship with the Father. For St Thomas, the summit of all mystical experience is saying, “Abba, Father!”

Your favorite adage?

“Love God with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, with all one’s strength, and one’s neighbor as Jesus loves him…”

What kind of flower do you like?

The edelweiss, the flower of the altitudes.

Your favorite animal?

Me!
It’s the animal that I know best… And besides, I do say to myself sometimes, “Come on, you disheveled creature!”

And which kind of bird?

The Patmos eagle.

Your favorite poet?

Peguy, I like him more and more. He is so French, clear, true.

Who are your heroes in real-life?

The saints.
And as a philosopher, Socrates, he was so lucid. Faced with the sophism of our day – our rhetoric-filled era resembles his era quite a bit –, his method remains astonishingly relevant and extremely needed to save the question: what is the meaning of words?

Who are your heroines in history?

Martha Robin. Mother Teresa. Hidden contemplative sisters.

What do you detest more than anything else?

An absolute, voluntary hatred.

What is the greatest evil of our times?

The loss of the sense of finality.
This has given rise to the current destruction of the fundamental covenant between God and man, because man no longer acknowledges that his intelligence is capable of re-ascending to God, its source, nor that he is called to cooperate with Creation through fruitfulness. Hence there is a terrible anguish.

At the end of this millennium, how would you describe our world?

As a people who are wandering.
This is exactly what the Book of Revelation describes: humanity taking refuge in caves (6: 15-16), huddling up with itself in a state of anguish which reaches everyone. We are living in a transitional period in which we are touching something ultimate: the sign of the end of time is not war – war has always existed – but this anguish.

What is your definition of man?

An animal capable of adoring.
Capable, thanks to his reason, of ascending to the existence of God and of rediscovering, in adoration, his dependency on God.

Which virtue is most needed today?

Adoration.
And on the human level: a sense of responsibility.

What do you disdain the most?

A lack of respect for man's dignity.
… he is reduced to being a tool by the primacy of efficacy which is crushing us today.

Which military feat do you most admire?

The heroic death of my younger brother in 1944.
He was 22 years old when, in front of Toulon, he sacrificed himself to avoid the massacre of innocent victims in a blind bombardment of the city.

Which reform do you most admire?

The one that John Paul II preaches.
… the renewal of the life of Faith, of the family, of religious life.

Which natural talent would you like to have?

I take myself as God made me.

If you were elected President of the Republic, what would your first action be?

To restore meaning to words.
And to try to rebuild the family. The current destruction of the family destroys love as well, because the family is the first source of love.

If you could perform a miracle, which one would it be?

The miracle of the Eucharist.
I received the infinite grace of the priesthood to be the instrument of this miracle *par excellence*: God's Almightiness at the service of Love, giving itself in the most humble appearances.

How would you like to die?

Like Mary.
Everything offered up, in pure love, giving all, in radical poverty, that is to say, without any human glory, because along with pride, it is the greatest obstacle to love.

What is the present state of your spirit?

… a bit more poor.
The old Aristotle said once: offering our intelligence to God is the most beautiful thing we can do. I'm trying…

Your motto?

"*Veritas*".
The Truth, is Jesus. My happiness is like Saint John's: to follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

Your will and testament?

The Charter of Charity of the Community of Saint John.
The Brothers, priests, Contemplative Sisters, Apostolic Sisters, Oblates are all united in it into our one Religious Family. This large family which is trying to live, for over fifteen years already, that which the Holy Spirit is asking from us: to be for today's Church what Saint John was for Jesus. That is to say, to be ready – in a great poverty of heart – to do anything He may ask us to do in order to glorify the Father and cooperate with Jesus in the salvation of men.

What are your favorite "last words"?

"Everything is grace".
… as St Therese of Lisieux said.

And your last words?

I'm not there yet…