

Emmanuel Mounier

Photo: courtesy of emmanuel-mounier.org;
reproduced with permission



THE ENDURING WISDOM OF EMMANUEL MOUNIER

BY ROBERT G. CHRISTIAN III

Emmanuel Mounier's contributions to intellectual history came during one of the most turbulent periods in world history, when Western civilization was seemingly imploding. Bourgeois liberalism, with its materialist and individualist roots, was proving unable to respond to an unprecedented economic crisis or to satisfy the moral and spiritual aspirations of the human person. The rise of totalitarian ideologies would lead to a full-fledged assault on human dignity, as Hitler and Stalin destroyed tens of millions of lives in their reigns of terror.

Within this context, Mounier articulated a clear, powerful, and accurate defense of the human person, one that remains relevant today. Mounier became a principal architect of the philosophy of personalism and the personalist communitarian approach to politics. These contributions remain valuable as we live in an age in which hyperindividualism remains a serious obstacle to progress toward the common good.

Mounier's personalism was rooted in a thoughtful understanding of the anthropological roots of the human person. He wrote that personalism "includes every human problem in the entire range of concrete human life, from the lowliest material conditions to the highest spiritual possibilities."¹ Mounier saw men and women as "free and creative persons,"² capable of responsible liberty. He defended the unity of the human person as both a material and spiritual being and affirmed human equality as a reality rooted in the dignity of all. He rejected the idea that men and women are nothing but automated machines, programmed to pursue their own selfish interests, devoid of authentic free will.

Mounier recognized that persons do not reach their potential as an impersonal cog in the machinery of the state or in some imagined splendid isolation from society, but by living freely and virtuously, by choosing to participate in the building of the Kingdom of God. The meaning of life is rooted in this participation to which each person is called as children of the same personal God, made in God's own image. Each person is entirely unique; he or she is irreplaceable in the position they occupy in the world of persons. It is for this reason that everyday lives can have extraordinary meaning and value.

Mounier contrasts personalism with individualism, which he saw as "a system of morals, feelings, ideas, and institutions in which individuals can be organized by their mutual isolation and defense."³ The failure to

protect the lives of unborn children, assist those who are standing up for their basic rights in the face of repression and terror, or ensure the basic needs of all is rooted in the individualism that is embedded in both contemporary American liberalism and conservatism. While love and community drive personalism, egotism is the basis of individualism. Yet freedom and justice demand real sacrifice. This can only be found in love, not egotism, however enlightened it might be.

Personalism is rooted in the recognition that humans can only flourish in community. As Mounier says, "No one can find salvation, either spiritual or social, in himself."⁴ This is grounded in the fundamental unity of the human race. Solidarity is not rooted in the desire for survival or mutual material benefit, but the desire for communion. History itself is the co-creation of free men and women. The effort to achieve truth and justice must be undertaken with others.

The egotism of individualism inhibits communion and results in alienation. Alienation from others causes self-alienation and the fracturing of personal unity. Love is what gives existence meaning and life value. When love and communion are not valued, nihilism and relativism will often take their place, as they have in many places in our society.

Nihilism is the most logical and rational response to the belief that we live in a strictly material universe, though it often develops more organically through personal alienation from others and a sense of meaninglessness in one's everyday life. Once it is embraced, nihilism opens up a full panoply of horrors. If nothing can be condemned, if nothing has meaning, the most brutal acts of savagery can be undertaken to obtain or retain power, pleasure, or anything else. The objectification and dehumanization of others will quickly be embraced, as people will be used as instruments to achieve these ends. This nihilism has helped to shape what Pope

Francis has denounced as the “throw away culture” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §53). Workers are treated as objects, denied a living wage. The vulnerable are ignored or discarded. Politicians serve themselves, not the common good.

Another alternative is to live based on the construction of one’s own values. This is even more common in American society. There is a tendency to privatize beliefs and a reluctance to judge certain moral beliefs of others, particularly among millennials. But as Mounier rightly notes, these values will be arbitrary and one’s faithfulness to them will be precarious.⁵ Thus we see a significant portion of the population that believes that abortion is murder, yet thinks this form of murder should be legally permitted. We see tolerance exalted as the supreme value, but not seen as something that should apply to those who veer from a strict adherence to social libertarianism. We see people praise patriotism, while setting up accounts abroad to avoid paying the taxes they owe. When morality is constructed individually, it often develops in a way that suits its engineer and demands little in the way of sacrifice or even coherence.

If freedom and justice, as well as human flourishing and joy, are to gain ground, we must regain our commitment to virtue. The very word seems antiquated to contemporary ears, just as the word *duty* often elicits giggles rather than a sense of purpose. But perhaps Pope Francis can change this. His worldview is deeply rooted in personalism and a profound commitment to community and solidarity. In many ways, he lives what Mounier encouraged in his writing. Perhaps his model will inspire a new generation of Catholics and religious humanists to turn from lives and values infected by individualism toward a personalist commitment to virtue, solidarity, and the common good.



NOTES

1 Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 9.

2 Ibid., xvi.

3 Ibid., 18.

4 Ibid., 21.

5 Ibid., 85.



Robert G. Christian III is a Ph.D. candidate in Politics at Catholic University of America, a graduate fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, and editor of Millennial (millennialjournal.com).