

“The merciful quickly grasp the truth in their neighbors when their heart goes out to them with a love that unites them so closely that they feel the neighbors’ good and ill as if it were their own. With the weak they are weak, with the scandalized they are on fire. They ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom. 12:15). Their hearts are made more clear-sighted by love and they experience the delight of contemplating truth, not now in others but in itself, and for love of it they bear their neighbors’ sorrows.”

--St. Bernard of Clairvaux, The Steps of Humility and Pride.

Jérôme Lejeune became the youngest professor of medicine in France when, in 1964, at the age of 38, he assumed the country’s first professorship in fundamental genetics. His meteoric ascent was hastened by his discovery, in 1959, of the chromosomal basis for Down syndrome, ushering in the modern era of research into genetic disease, and abolishing the stigma of an illness that had previously been attributed to syphilis. Jérôme’s daughter, Clara Lejeune, paints a charming portrait of her father’s life in a biography called Life is a Blessing. She writes that his scientific genius was rooted in his habits “of contemplation and wonder,” and describes her father as a man of broad education and varied interests, whose “big blue eyes, a bit protruding, which sparkle with intelligence and humor, gaze at you with infinite tenderness. . . . Nevertheless they are demanding, too, because they love truth. They look, untiringly, for the why and how of what they see.”

Clara relates that her father was above all a merciful man, like those whom Bernard describes that “quickly grasp the truth in their neighbors when their heart goes out to them with a love that unites them so closely that they feel the neighbors’ good and ill as if it were their own.” Lejeune’s devotion to his family brought him home for three meals a day and evening prayer throughout his entire career. His love for his mentally and physically disabled patients inspired brilliant scientific research, but more importantly, it engendered an unwavering commitment to these “disinherited,” as he called them, “Disinherited because their genetic heritage was not perfect. Disinherited because they were the unloved members of this competitive, glamorous society.” When Lejeune became united with the disinherited, he found himself opposed to a society that valued perfection and convenience over the right of a person to live. Lejeune’s scientific discoveries had, along with the newfound ability to perform amniocentesis, allowed physicians to diagnose Down syndrome in fetuses, which, combined with recent legislation on abortion, paved the way for millions of fetuses to be selected and killed on the basis of their disability. In 1972, Jérôme Lejeune stood in opposition to this atrocity when on the floor of the United Nations he publicly elaborated, for one of the first times in history, the genetic principles that confirm the completeness and integrity of human life from the moment of conception. Clara writes, “He knew, and he had proved it many a time, that in the first cell, from the very first day, the genetic patrimony is written in its entirety. . . . Because every human being is unique, because he has an identity from the first day of his existence, because he is a member of our species, his life must be respected. The true physician does not have a choice.”

In the years following his affirmation of “a scientific truth from which a duty followed,” as Clara calls it, Lejeune was “banned from society, dropped by his friends, humiliated, crucified by the press, [and] prevented from working for lack of funding.”

He found solace, though, in a small league of sympathetic friends, and maintained his academic reputation and research support in the international community. He remained in his hostile homeland out of a devotion to his patients, both born and unborn, and campaigned tirelessly for their protection under the law and throughout society. Lejeune established houses of hospitality for otherwise unsupported mothers, named Tom Thumb Houses after the fetuses that he loved so well. In 1974, Pope John Paul II appointed Professor Lejeune to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and in 1994 made him the first president of the Pontifical Academy of Life, a position Lejeune held for only thirty-three days before succumbing to lung cancer on Easter morning.

On the day after his death, the Pope said of his personal friend, “He became one of the ardent defenders of life, especially of the life of preborn children,” and “a great Christian of the twentieth century, ...for whom the defense of life became an apostolate.” The Pope elaborated on the importance of Lejeune’s witness by saying, “Human tribunals and democratically elected parliaments usurp the right to determine who has the right to live and, conversely, who could find that this right has been denied him through no fault of his own. In different ways, our century has experimented with such an attitude, above all during the Second World War, yet also after the end of the war. Professor Jérôme Lejeune assumed the full responsibility that was his as a scientist, and he was ready to become a ‘sign of contradiction,’ regardless of the pressures exerted by a permissive society or of the ostracism that he underwent.”

The most striking aspect of Jérôme Lejeune’s life, to this author at least, is his unflinching love of truth, and the way in which that love was integrated so thoroughly in both mind and heart in the fashion that St. Bernard describes. When the winds of popular opinion shifted violently against Lejeune, he maintained his course without hesitation because he grasped the truth of his neighbor’s suffering as deeply as he contemplated the scientific truth of human genesis. And because he loved the truth, he pursued it without fear. Clara writes, “He was not afraid. What can someone do against a man who doesn’t want anything for himself?” Throughout his entire life, Lejeune fought tooth and nail, mind and heart, to alleviate the suffering of his patients, both as their physician and advocate. At the very end, in the clutches of death, he wrote to a friend, “Just when it is imperative to defend the embryos...I’m out of breath. For the moment, faithful to the Roman legionary’s motto, ‘*Et si fellitur de genu pugnatur*,’ I write, ‘And if he should fall, he fights on his knees.’” Jérôme Lejeune is a model of conscientious objection because he valiantly opposed a hostile society in pursuit of the truth, and “for love of it [he bore his] neighbors’ sorrows.”

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