

Pierre Ceresole *speaks*

For those who know of his life, Pierre Ceresole stands out among his contemporaries like the jagged, majestic Matterhorn of his native land. He was a seeker for Truth, a practicing Christian, an active pacifist, a convinced Quaker, a joyous worker, a keen thinker, a citizen of the world.

He was born in 1879 into a distinguished Swiss family and passed his student days in Lausanne, Goettingen and Zurich. In 1910 he resigned his post as a professor of mathematics to travel across the United States, earning his way as a day laborer. From there he journeyed to Hawaii and Japan, where he worked for two years as an engineer.

He returned to Switzerland with his horizon extended by travel, his sympathies deepened by contact with many kinds of people, and his thinking stimulated by the discovery of Emerson's writings. Renouncing militarism, he became a conscientious objector, refused to pay his military taxes and to serve in the Swiss army. He turned over his family inheritance to the government because he felt this was the right course for him. Frequent imprisonments were part of the price he paid for his convictions.

Contact with like-minded pacifists quickened his search for the "moral equivalent for war", resulting in his creation of "Service Civil" with its emphasis upon constructive, voluntary service for peace through international work camps in devastated and conflict areas. To this positive pacifist program he devoted most of his energy until his death in 1945.

Pierre Ceresole was a dreamer, but a dreamer with a shovel.

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ON TRUTH . . .

"The conscientious search for truth gives us a feeling of absolute peace."

"God is truth first of all, even before love, because in the long run love based on a lie, though it be a pious one, has to be paid for dearly by breakdown and disaster. Truth first—bitter pill, hard to swallow at times, but the only universal and infallible remedy."

"This man will not lie—he is dangerous!"

"Beware of pure logic. It is very dangerous to focus one's attention exclusively on what is geometrically evident. . . . Love truth passionately . . . the spirit of enquiry and objectivity . . . strive to clarify your judgments, but sacrifice nothing of what you feel instinctively to be essential. . . . Say to yourself again and again, 'With the best will in the world there are things which escape me completely', but go ahead, judge, act on what you do know, on what you love and truly understand. Do not be a snob, do not lie to yourself. Study yourself sincerely and without flattery."

ON GOD . . .

"O God, your name, your reality, is truth."

"God, the great mirror in which we must see ourselves quietly, as we are, with all our ugliness, but also with all our potentialities."

"The Eternal seeks for us, helps us, pursues us to help us, if we are at his service."

"God will be at your service, infallibly, if you are at his."

"God does not punish. He would never get to the end of it. He creates something new."

ON RELIGION . . .

"There is only one match for these enormous astronomical distances, these oceans of fire—the man who knows how to listen to the Eternal. Everything else is of absolute insignificance."

"Religion should first teach us to be honest with ourselves, as honest as in mathematics or physics. . . . I should be taught by religion to know what I really believe and to face it instead of deceiving myself."

"In all earnestness and humility, . . . revise,—revise everything, especially your religion. It is a matter of life or death."

"My conviction is that we need a religious community, consecrated to the utmost. We need to collect ourselves, to center down deeply, to pray."

ON JESUS . . .

"Where Jesus has passed, man goes on a pilgrimage, urged by the instinct to compensate in every possible and impossible way for the utter impossibility of taking the radical step, the necessary step, the only step he asks—to follow him. Man says: God, you are right, but you are so terrible. Look, we will do everything, everything—the impossible—if only you will excuse us from following you. Don't oblige us to deny ourselves and we will give you everything else."

"Jesus came to teach us to hear more honestly and understand more intelligently and deeply the voice of God within ourselves. Do not be too sure of yourself, pray truly, constantly. Do not distrust yourself, but ask for Strength, earnestly and constantly."

ON LIVING . . .

"Life remains beautiful. It is healthy that it should be hard. It remains utterly beautiful in spite of difficulties if one does not betray the Eternal. . . ."

"All this willed morality is atrocious. You do not have the right to be moral unless it is your joy, your highest artistic expression. One must struggle for a noble life exactly as the poet struggles to create beautiful verse,—in the same spirit—for the love of the thing itself."

"Never ask that circumstances become easier, but always that one's strength become greater, and joyfully accept rest and ease when they come along the way."

"I ask for one grace—not to be disloyal, and also that the fear of being disloyal not lead me into some new disloyalty."

"Pray the Eternal to grease your weathercock so that it turn well at the true wind of the Spirit and not remain caught by the rust of tradition in a position unrelated to truth."

ON FEAR . . .

"Fear, the principal enemy, especially fear of oneself; fear of not being adequate, of repeating the same mistakes indefinitely. The greatest danger is compromise with the enemy within oneself:

Fear of letting go of one's money,
Fear of stepping out of one's environment,
Fear of changing jobs,
Fear of seeing things as they are,
Fear of names, systems, words,
Fear of death."

ON COURAGE . . .

"There is but one salvation for man—to have the courage to go forward on truth's farthest pinnacle."

"There is no point in giving the slightest amount of time to any argument in favor of your truth as long as you have not courageously lived it. To act courageously—that is the only argument; otherwise it is too easy and it carries no weight. Christ hardly argued otherwise."

ON JOY AND BEAUTY . . .

"All these somberly moral people whose characteristic is renunciation, completely forget what is essential. It is not morality, however indispensable and respectable that is. . . . The essential is the joy, the splendor, the magnificance of each man, of all men. Virtue is only a means. The essential is life—splendid life. . . . There is no greater mistake than to imagine the Eternal looking with a pleased smile at these pale little virtues. What the Eternal loves is life,—beautiful, powerful, intense,—and everything which can strengthen it, make it last in the world, strong and active."

"Joy . . . joy . . . the oh so joyful cry of the swallows tracing the great curves of their flight, at top speed, in front of the prison windows. . . . Do you know anything more admirable, more expressive of freedom, courage, enthusiasm, the intoxication of energy, of the progress which does not come of itself but by the effort of the breast flinging itself against the air, in full flight, and of the muscles, securely tied to a bone built according to the calculations of the Eternal himself!"

"Unbelievable beauty of God and of the morning! Snow in bloom on the mountains above, and cherry trees in bloom down below!"

ON MONEY . . .

"The greatest luxury a Christian could afford would be to get rid of his money if this money were a barrier between himself and other men."

"To live on one's invested income is as debasing as to own slaves—in fact it is the same thing."

"I feel with piercing clarity the incompatibility of the Christian principle of brotherhood with this way of living on the workers' backs."

"I have the right to dissociate myself from the warring state if I do it when it sets out to defend my property."

"Eternal, I imagine I see all the dead groping around in the field where night enfolds them . . . (and) the principle for which they fought. And they find it is something cold, something round,—a piece of money."

"This absurdity (after he gave his inheritance to the state in 1914) has already had a result of considerable, of great importance. I am able to mingle with this crowd of ill-favored and degraded workers with a sense of inner peace."

ON HUMANITY . . .

"What do I want? I want that peace and joy which can be mine only if they belong at the same time to all men, and which otherwise I reject, consciously. National satisfaction and security for my country only while others are in misery—monstrous."

"Those most need to be loved who no longer know how to love—souls that wander outside Paradise in the dark and cold."

ON WAR . . .

"We cannot see that you believe in God; the sword you wear blocks our view."

"We have a law against the slaughter of cattle according to Jewish custom; we might have one against the slaughter of men according to Christian custom."

"Mr. X observes that the Church has given its sanction to this war. You think that sanctifies war? I feel it dishonors the Church."

ON VOLUNTARY SERVICE FOR PEACE . . .

"These masses of men and material! Can the principle of a spiritual order, sure, obstinate, steadfast unto death, stand up against them, be strong enough to resist them? Yes, yes, certainly; but be faithful in action, do not spill out in words."

"The position of the pacifist is unbearable if he does not undertake intense, practical action of his own. . . . We need the firm rock of well-directed action if we are to resist the terrible drift dragging us towards reactions of fear, hatred, and violence."

"What is impressive is that as word follows word the effect is weaker, while with each stroke of the pick the effect is stronger. One gets disgusted with words; one does not get disgusted with creative service."

"The joyful, happy, free collaboration of men working and living for each other—that is the true miracle which can bring about all other specific miracles."

"The learning of solidarity must begin 'way down', where man still sees his own interest easily and directly."

PRAYERS . . .

"Eternal God, take my life in your hands and lead me through these blind alleys with a heart free from meanness. I will be satisfied to furnish just a little mud for the Great Construction."

"Lord, deliver us from fanaticism, from the conviction that we alone have a message from Thee."

"Eternal, grant me the possibility of revising, understanding and weighing everything anew, truly and freely, without violence. Grant me not to be fossilized against your Spirit and your Call. . . ."

"Lise (his wife) frees the butterfly which flings itself desperately against my window. She helps it gently to find its way out and has the joy of seeing it fly away into the blue sky, so clear and beautiful and infinite. . . . Eternal, grant me the same grace. Enable me to find the right way again when I am entangled in contradictory evidence—service of one's country and Christian service. Take me delicately by the wing and grant me to find the right way in simple and true obedience, in prayer (contrary to, and against, and beyond all reason)."

Most of the quotations are translated from the book "Vivre sa Verite", published in 1950 by LA BACONNIERE, in Neuchatel, Switzerland.

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