LE CHAMBON

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THE DEED

Today, most visitors would call it a simple little village, much like other villages nestled amidst a quiet French countryside. However, Le Chambon was a French Huguenot enclave in Pétain’s Vichy France, when the country was under Nazi occupation. At the time it harboured three thousand refugees, mostly Jews, nearly doubling the normal population. What makes this village so unique, other than having accomplished the awesome feat of keeping these numbers so completely hidden to the ruthless forces around, is that no Chambonnais ever turned away a refugee, nor did any Chambonnais betray a refugee, nor each other. Decisions to offer refuge were usually made spontaneously by individuals and families over kitchen tables largely without consulting other villagers. The other villagers were often doing the same thing, so that a collective force was at work at a grass-roots level fighting a large battle amidst an even greater war against virulent Nazi demagoguery that had proclaimed certain races of people as sub-human.

When refugees knocked at the door, they were sheltered. If escape routes had to be planned, passes were issued, money found, and action was taken. And of course, there was André Trocmé, the village pastor, whose moral leadership contrasted and countered the unrelenting ravages with these single-minded and simple moral truths: cherish other lives, resist evil forces, practise non-violence, and have compassion towards those in need. Weighted against the possibility of devastating punishment and the onslaughts of subversive narratives, the personal motives of the Chambonnais must have drawn from some other reservoir far more stable and resilient – a reservoir which sustained their moral reality.
THE PRAXIS

It is this reservoir that interests me, for whatever was done in Le Chambon appears to have been done as if internal to some form of practice – a co-operative human activity of some sort, and a way of being that made the Chambonnais lost to themselves in goods and excellences all through these difficult years such that after the war when asked why they did it, they said they didn’t even know that they had been doing something noteworthy! This is a kind of practice I can learn from and be part of. Perhaps the name suitable for such a practice can be a ‘community of virtues’, or even a ‘community of praxis.’ Not to be confused with an institution, although institutions may be the social bearers from which such practices may arise, a practice is more of a relationship within a tradition of relationships sustained by a community of virtues. A practice extends the very conception of goods and excellences internal to itself, in spite of, or even because of corruptible influences and powers of modern institutions. A practice gives value to the virtues.

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THE POLIS

Ultimately, the question ‘what is an academic community?’ raises a moot point. Rather, how is this a human community of relationships within an institution, such as a university? How can my intellectual traits and qualities of character be translated into virtues and then be disposed within such a community, such that it becomes a practice, and in so doing extends the excellences and goods of my community and beyond?
THE ARGUMENT

What is this argument to be? First, what does it mean to be such a practice within a university institution? Next, if I am to sustain my moral reality as a modern agent and a scholar within a corruptible yet significant modern institution, I need those around me to reinforce my moral strengths and virtues. Third, if I am to translate abstract theoretical principles into a lived social morality, then I need the community around me to show me how to apply these principles in the world. Fourth, no exercise of the virtues in such a practice is possible without a resolute stance towards social and political concerns. Fifth, if I am to understand certain qualities as intellectual virtues, then it is only in my community that their true measure of worth will be conferred and honoured. And finally, how can a practice seek and sustain the virtues, such that it becomes a living tradition of argument, one not in search of conclusions, but of conversations and a quest for what it means to lead 'the good life?'

This then, in the tradition of argument will be my "Le Chambon!" – a reservoir and a stable and resilient resource from which I will draw the conceptions of human excellences, whilst all around me institutional demagoguery – academic or otherwise – may tell me quite another story.

The following works must be credited for the writing of this piece:
