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1935

Pascal for Our Time (1935)

The year of grace 1654

Monday, November 23, day of Saint Clement, pope and martyr,
and others in the martyrology.

Vigil of Saint Chrysogonus, martyr, and others.

From about ten-thirty in the evening to about half an hour after midnight.

Fire.

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants.

Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ. *Deum meum et Deum vestrum.*

"Thy God shall be my God."

Forgetting the world and everything, except God.

He is only found by the paths taught in the Gospel.

Grandeur of the human soul.

"Just Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you."

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I separated myself from him: *Dereliquerunt me lantern aquae vivae.*

"My God, will you abandon me?"

May I not be eternally separated from him.

"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ."

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I separated myself from him; I fled him, renounced him, crucified him.

May I never be separated from him!

He is only kept by the paths taught in the Gospel.

Total and sweet renunciation.

Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.

Eternally in joy for a day of trial on earth.

Non obliviscar sermones tuos. Amen.

This is an historical document in the strict sense of the word. It attests an event which separates a before and an after. Not an episodic feeling, a fugitive presentiment, an abstract insight devoid of obligation, which could have ensued at any moment, but rather a turning point and decision which stands in history. And which engenders history: the inner, Christian history of this man, in that it brings to its culmination everything experienced up to this point, and fixes a new beginning. It is the analogy in one man's life of the event which separated human history into an *ante-* and *post-Nativitatem Domini*.

The text thus begins with an exact dating. "1654, Monday, November 23..." But here it is a matter of the history of a Christian existence. The dating is thus sacred, one could say hieratic: "The year of grace 1654..." The day, however, is noted according to the ritual order of the liturgical calendar of saints, the martyrology: "day of Saint Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of Saint Chrysogonus, martyr, and others."

And even the hour is mentioned, with the care not only of the exact observer, but of one who knows the preciousness of such an inner experience and is anxious to preserve it: "From about ten-thirty in the evening to about half an hour after midnight."

Then comes a series of hastily written words, short sentences, fragments from Holy Scripture, all vibrating with the excitement of a prodigious experience.

The first line is formed by a single word which stands in the middle: "*Feu*" – "*Fire*."

Two lines below:

"Certitude; certitude; feeling, joy, peace."

And once again, several lines later:

"Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy."

Something colossal has happened here. Pascal has stood in fire. We may not take the word allegorically. If the elect of religious experience speak of inner "light," of inner "glow," they do not intend to use comparisons, but mean real beaming, real burning, coming, of course, from another source than physical nature or psychic consciousness. It is an experience of the spirit; more exactly, of the Holy Spirit, of the "*Pneuma*." There takes place therein an elucidation in certitude, a seizure by glory, a clarification of life, which place man on a new level of existence.

And we should also observe that in the *Memorial* there stands the phrase: "Grandeur of the human soul." At the heart of Christian experience, in the midst of the experience of the holy "fire," in which God's grandeur and the reality of sin become clear, the fact remains that man is marked by the sign of grandeur.

We have come to know the man who here writes in this manner: a first-class physicist, mathematician, engineer, psychologist, and philosopher of concrete humanity. What makes him stammer so?

"Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace." All this is thus new to him. He had longed for it, but without possessing it. He had thought about God with concepts, but without arriving at any reality. He had exerted himself, but had not gotten off the ground—now he stands before the reality of God.

This reality is luminous and burning. It engenders absolute certitude, abundant peace, and a joy which is independent of the conditions of one's existence.

Pascal, who demands for all knowledge experience—that confirmation which is only possible when one stands before the reality itself—, who has grasped the reality of nature in experiment and calculation, and the reality of man in observation and analysis—this same Pascal now stands before the reality of the living God. He will now be able to speak, also in the religious realm, with that authenticity deriving from the object itself, which he had as a physicist and psychologist. Not always, however—especially not when the demon of polemics lays hold of him—but certainly when he speaks purely of that which is.

Then—and here we come to the essential—the strange phrases:

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants... God of Jesus Christ."

What does that mean? One must have thrown oneself with all one's soul into the effort of understanding; one must have been unhappy when one did not understand a philosophical concept, and blissful, when it dawned on one, if one is to be able to judge the significance of these words, spoken by Pascal. It is generally customary these days to emphasize that God, the God of the Christian life, is different than that of philosophy. Since Søren Kierkegaard stated it with such enormous forcefulness; since this man, owing to the collapse of liberal theology and philosophy of religion, was brought into prominence and in a special sense became modern, many people have repeated this affirmation, but one is a little skeptical. It is too easily said. One must be qualified to say such a thing. He who pretends to the right to speak in this way must have exerted himself in honest philosophical labor. He must have worked to attain the clarity and depth of true intellectual understanding, the precision and defensibility of a concept, the pure necessity of real insight into laws and essences; to attain that which Anselm of Canterbury means when he says: to know is "to comprehend that something could not be otherwise than as it is grasped". He must have experienced the intolerance of the passion for knowledge, which admits as knowledge that of the absolute and eternal. In this disposition—now often rejected with very dubious credibility—lies a great tradition of Western thought. Yes, he must at least have understood how one could be of the belief that mathematics, with its strict necessity, is really the only true knowledge... Something of all this must be present for one to be able to judge the enormity of this Christian insight of a philosopher and mathematician: that God is not the God "of the philosophers and savants" but "the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob."

Once more, what does that mean? What would be, then, the "God of the philosophers"? It is what is meant by the notion of the absolute, as it can be obtained by reflecting on exterior reality, or by analyzing inner experience, or by elaborating the world of logic and values. Thus "the first Cause", "the supreme Being", "the absolute idea", "the eternal law", "the absolute Value", etc. The characteristic of this definition of God is that it attempts to grasp him in pure unconditionally, free from everything which could in any way mean limitation, finization, secularization, anthropomorphism. This God is more absolute than man can conceive him.

And what is now the staggering discovery of Pascal? What is it that makes him stammer with joy? Pascal knows how to appreciate the significance of the struggle for the pure comprehension of the concept of God. He is a stranger to the modern weak-nervedness which feels that the domain of "the religious" is menaced whenever one works with concepts. His religion is not a vague "religious experience" in the modern sense of the word. But how his own experience has shown him that God is "the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants"—that he is the "God of Jesus Christ". This means first of all that God is a person.

But let us be careful here. This word too, could be meant "philosophically". But this is not the case. It does not in any way mean that God is "the absolute Person", or "Personality", but rather that he is "He", who is so and not otherwise. Here we touch upon the essential.

When a man, hitherto accustomed to the absolute character of thought, declares: "God is This Person", something extraordinary has come about. That which he previously maintained under the protection of the most general concepts, preserved from all finiteness, deriving from the realm of the cosmological, the ontological, or the ideal—he now ventures its entry into the domain of those concepts which stem from finite human activity, from the distinctions of human persons, from the I-Thou relationship, from history.

Previously, he would have refused to do so. For it is precisely the scandal of the "philosopher" regarding religious thought, that it operates "anthropomorphically"! For this is why he rejects this way of thought, in the name of the purity of the concepts of the absolute. What has then come about, that Pascal experiences this shattering of the merely philosophical idea of God with such deeply stirring happiness? With the consciousness of staying for the first time before the essential, now that he has entered the realm of "anthropomorphic" concepts? There is only one answer which Pascal himself would acknowledge: he has encountered the living God. This God is precisely the being of whom one must say, if one wishes to speak of him truthfully: he comes, he acts, he speaks. God has confronted him as "This Person," and it is only possible to speak of such an encounter with the words found on every page of Holy Scripture.

God is This Person. "I am who I am," he said of himself at a most important moment (*Ex* 3:14). He is he who is sovereignly himself, whose living being can not be derived from anything, not even from a concept of the absolute. All concepts can only express something about him, they can never express him as he is himself. He himself surpasses every concept and only becomes a given when he gives himself. He can only be perceived if he comes towards man. One can only speak about him if one is addressed by him, and by drawing from the Word which he says about himself.

This movement of God towards man does not take place in a generally describable experience nor in an ascent of thought to be attained from within any human domains, but rather through historical revelation: messengers sent, word spoken, event providentially disposed. He is the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob"; of those men, therefore, who lived at a given time, in a given country, in a definitely localized attitude, in a specifiable historical context. But it is "scandal and folly" for the mind enclosed in its philosophy to be obliged to acquiesce in this apparently arbitrary binding of the absolute to historical contingency.

God is the "God of Jesus Christ." When Philip asks, "Lord, show us the Father," Jesus answers, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father" (*Jn* 14:9). Scandal anew for the mind concerned only with philosophy: instead of conceiving God from the indications of nature, from the necessities of logic, from the structure of the categories of consciousness, from the postulates of action, from the specific contents of religious value? experience, one must receive him from the being, the value, the action of a concrete historical figure, who lived at that time and not earlier or later; in that country and not elsewhere; so constituted and not otherwise. It is the scandal of the philosophical will to absoluteness placed before the irreducibility of the historic fact, which is to be of decisive importance for the definition of God.

The Christian God is the "God of Jesus Christ." He, whom Jesus means when he says, "My Father." He, by whom Jesus is sent. Through whom he lives, and towards whom he is turned. God is he who is "the God and Father of Jesus Christ." It is not possible to detach a "Christian conception of God," a "Christian truth," from the concrete Christ. What is Christian doctrine remains Christian only as long as it is heard as if from the mouth of Christ; as long as it is understood in a living way, drawing its life from him, from his existence and action. There is no "essence of Christianity" separable from him—we repeat, separable from him, and expressible in a free-floating, conceptual scheme. The essence of Christianity is Christ. What he is; whence he comes and towards what he goes; what lives in him and around him—heard living from his mouth, read from his countenance. A demand is here made of the philosophical mind, which is, in reality, a stumbling block for mere philosophy: that the definitive category of Christianity—and "category" means the inescapable condition for all assertions about a given subject matter—is the particular, unique reality of the concrete personality of Jesus of Nazareth.

And once again: the way to this God is not a general religious experience and endeavor, an ethical

exertion and penetrating rational interpretation—all of which, in other respects, retain their significance—but rather that way "which is taught in the Gospel." ". . . no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (*Mt* 11:27). "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." It is the way of faith. Faith is that act of personal adherence, of binding oneself in definitive fidelity, through which Jesus Christ becomes the beginning, out of which something new, a new existence in the fullest sense of the word, arises. The believer puts himself in the place of Jesus. In "rebirth" and "imitation" he sees through Jesus' eyes; he takes Jesus' norms, goals, and estimations as his own. For all merely natural perception, this is walking on the water. But therein begins, for the believer, the "kingdom of God."

Under the title of "Sur la conversion du pécheur", a little note has come down to us, which probably stems from the year 1655. It expresses with great power the experience of the newness of life, of the new order of existence attained, in the sense of fragment 793:

"The first thing that God inspires in the soul which he deigns to truly touch is a quite extraordinary knowledge and power of sight (*vue*) through which the soul considers things and itself in a completely new way.

"This new light causes it fear, and brings it an anxiety which traverses the repose which it used to find in the things which delighted it. It can no longer enjoy with tranquillity the things which used to charm it. A continual scruple combats it in this enjoyment... But it finds still more bitterness in the exercises of piety than in the vanities of the world. On the one hand, the presence of visible objects affects it more than the hope of invisible ones, and on the other, the solidity of the invisible ones affects it more than the vanity of the visible ones. And thus the presence of the ones and the solidity of the others excite its affection, and the vanity of the ones and the absence of the others excite its aversion, so that there arises within it a disorder and a confusion..."

What appears in the experience of the *Memorial* as a beginning is here already grasped in its development. The old and the new forms of consciousness and evaluation penetrate one another and struggle with one another.

This is also true for the life of understanding and thought. A new reality, a new level, a new power of vision are given. There now begins a difficult and wonderful labor. The general conceptions of God, the universal concepts of him which claimed to be so "pure," and were so in a certain sense, are thrown into this apparent humanization of God. The two worlds of experience and thought, which one could express with the formulas "God is the Absolute" and "God is he, who speaks through Jesus Christ," struggle with one another. There is a tension between them, and often an apparent contradiction, which pervades not only thought, but the whole manner in which the person apprehends himself and the world, in his whole living attitude—yet they are both addressed to the same reality: the Living God. Religious thought endeavors to learn the mode of thinking which corresponds to the living nature of God; it is that of Scripture and the saints. Reason reacts against this; it has the impression that it is losing its footing, but has at the same time the presentiment therein of new problems and new ways of dealing with them. Abstract thought injects its concepts into this concreteness. It cannot reject them, however, for they do indeed contain a truth. Thus it must win them anew—in such a way, that they hold their own in the face of that concreteness.

Everything which honest labor has brought to light as "philosophical knowledge of God" retains its value. Its value is great, despite those who scorn philosophy, in all times as in our own; for the coherence of being as well as the postulates of thought and the power of the mind, whence these concepts were ob-

tained, do not originate just anywhere at all, nor from evil, but from the same God who spoke in Christ. But creation is structured towards grace and can be truly seen only in relation to grace. The anti-philosophical vogue in the religious thinking of our time turns against the "paganism" of ancient philosophy, yet already bears its own paganism in its bosom... A thought thus awakens, with a vitality, a concentration, an inner richness, but of course also an exigency, which are not given to and imposed upon merely philosophical thinking. Only from this viewpoint can one understand what is at stake in the struggle of Pascal's *Pensees*.

And the whole world enters into this tension. The world is no longer only "the finite," which is understood in reference to "the absolute," as in mere philosophy; it is rather work of the Living God, object of his Providence, space into which he comes. It is the field and the fullness of the actions and events in which he encounters man.

How is one then to think of the world? If it is all that—and yet neither its scientific exactness, nor its historical objectivity, nor the philosophical categories with which it must be clearly thought, may be destroyed? How, for instance, can the Christian concept of Providence—that is, of the living action of God's love in history—be conceived in a genuine and Christian way? Conceived in such a way that it does not become a rationalistic ordering of the whole world or a system of human welfare, but rather that singular, energetic, unheard of action of God's love which Christ means—and that without abdicating the neatness and exactitude with which science and history have taught us to grasp reality? Thus, the Providence of the Father—not in a world of fantasy, or of children, or of the scope of the Church closed in upon itself, but in the real world, as it is?

Here lie the tasks at hand.

When Pascal lived through that experience, of which the *Memorial* informs us, he did not cease to be a mathematician, a physicist, an engineer, a psychologist, and a philosopher.

Just as before, he saw the reality corresponding to each of these powers of understanding, and just as before, he was resolved to do them justice. But in addition, a new reality had dawned on him, the Living God. A reality which he could not let be, nor isolate in a special sphere, following, for example, the idealistic method of twofold truth. Rather, this reality was such that it demanded the rethinking of all existence from its standpoint. If a physicist were first to see in the human body only the statics and dynamics of specific organic or energy structures, but one day it were to dawn on him, what life is—then he would not be able to make two separate compartments, one for the physical structure of man, the other for his living nature. He would much rather feel himself called upon to pose the problem of the "Physics of life"; a physics in which the physical phenomena would have to undergo a new classification based on the superior Phenomena of life. Once more, something analogous would take place were the existence of the intellectual, the personal domain to dawn on our physicist. So, too, it here goes higher—yet not only "higher," but really and definitively "high," before that event which "comes from heaven," "from above." For Pascal, the world remains the world, philosophy remains philosophy. But everything is called into a new coherence, and thought is challenged to a new effort through the discovery that God, grasped by the "philosopher" merely as "the absolute," is in truth the Living God, who enters into history in Jesus Christ; and that the relation of man to him, conceived by the philosophical theory of being as "relation to the absolute," is in truth the very life, oriented towards God, of him who is called by God.

The prodigious ruins which the following creative effort of Pascal has left behind for us, the *Pensées*, bear witness to his struggle to accomplish this task.

R. Guardini, *Pascal For Our Time* (1935) (New York: Herder, 1966), pp. 33-44.

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