DEVO TIONAL TREASURES FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF FRANCE

Prayer
Scripture: Romans 12:1-2
Hymn: 509 "The Lord My Shepherd Is"

The Golden Age of France—the Age of Louis XIV—the gilded age when the court of Versailles was the envy of all Europe, along with all the pomp and circumstance, the wars, the glorious literature and art, was also an age that produced a great wealth of devotional literature. There were earnest souls who turned from the vanities of the worldly court to a quest for the spiritual and the eternal. Instead of being conformed to this world they wanted to live by the will of God. The Jansenists, who are considered the Puritans of France, were accused by the court Jesuits of being infected with Protestant Calvinism and were brutally crushed. The burning of Port Royal, the Jansenist center, did not end the dissatisfaction with the hollowness of the court religion and the coldness and emptiness of contemporary church life. Two of the most important religious works to come out of the violent controversy between Jesuits and Jansenists were The Provincial Letters and the Pensées of Blaise Pascal.

BLAISE PASCAL (1623-1662)

Blaise Pascal, noted French mathematician, scientist, philosopher, man of letters, and theologian, was the son of Stephen (Étienne) Pascal, a magistrate of Clermont (President of the cour des aides—lawyer, tax collector; the father was a mathematician of ability and an independent thinker. Blaise was born on June 19, 1623. His mother (née Antoinette Bégon) died in 1626 when Blaise was only three. The father, feeling that the local school was inferior, devoted himself to the education of his three children: Giliberte (Blaise's older sister, born in 1620 and who later married a cousin, Florin Périer), Blaise, and the younger sister, Jacqueline (born 1625). At early ages the two youngest were recognized as child prodigies: Blaise in mathematics and Jacqueline in literature. In 1631 the father moved his family to Paris to further their education. In their home the children had an opportunity to meet the leading scientists, mathematicians, and literary figures of Paris. Occasionally the father took his son with him to meetings of the French Academy. The father was a very strict and exacting teacher but one who used games in his teaching; he purposefully held Blaise back until he showed great eagerness for a new subject. Blaise was most anxious to begin geometry but the father refused to let him begin the subject. Unknown to the father Blaise worked through Euclidian geometry on his own at the age of twelve. At sixteen (the age which the father had promised him he could begin geometry) he wrote an advanced Treatise on Conics (Essai pour les coniques) which was published in 1640 and which aroused the envy of Descartes.

In 1639 Stephen Pascal moved his family to Rouen where he had been appointed intendant. Blaise noticed the long hours his father had to spend laboring over tax and other financial records. Between
1640 and 1642 he constructed a calculating machine that made him famous. Blaise's experiments also led to the invention of the barometer.

The father used the Bible to teach his children moral principles. He was a strict Catholic but emphasized integrity, polite respectability, and decent social behavior more than inward religion. When Stephen Pascal broke a hip in an accident in 1645 he was treated by Jansenist physicians. These Jansenist physicians made a great impression on Blaise; under their care the father made a remarkable recovery. Blaise was introduced to the Jansenist writings. He read Cornelis Jansen's Discours sur la reformation de l'homme interieur, Antoine Arnauld's On Frequent Communion, and Saint-Cyran's Lettres spirituelles. This reading had a profound effect upon Blaise and was the beginning of his religious pilgrimage. It led to what he called "his first conversion." He shared the results of his reading with the family. The whole family went through a period of religious unrest and self-scrutiny. The younger sister was so moved that she wanted to join Port Royal. Her father strongly opposed and she waited. Blaise concentrated on religious reading—the Bible, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux and noted spiritual writers. Blaise communicated with Port Royal but was unwilling to accept all the Jansenist demands. When a Capuchin monk, Jacques Forton, published The Conduct of Natural Judgment, in which he asserted the complete concord of faith and reason and that reason could fathom all the mysteries of the faith, Blaise Pascal strongly disagreed. Blaise suffered a period of ill health, at least partially brought on by over-work. He found comfort and support by attending the sermons of M. Singlin, Abbot of Port Royal.

In 1648 the family left Rouen and returned to Paris. The father died in 1651. Against the will of her brother, Jacqueline used her share of the inheritance as a dowry and entered the convent at Port Royal. Blaise moved into what he would remember as his "worldly period" (1651-1654). He cooled to religion. Lonely and in despair, he met Antoine Gombaud, a friend of Balzac. Gombaud introduced him to Montaigne, a rationalist and critic of religion. Pascal plunged into scientific work. His experiments in atmospheric pressures and the general laws of the equilibrium of fluids enabled him to lay down the general laws of the equilibrium of fluids and the principles upon which the hydrostatic press is based and also the modern science of pneumatics. The law of pressure, known as Pascal's Law, established that the pressure applied to a confined fluid at any point is transmitted through the fluid in all directions undiminished. He returned to mathematics and published several notable treatises that established him as one of the world's foremost mathematicians before he was twenty-seven. He worked on the Arithmetical Triangle and laid the foundations for the calculus of probabilities.

In 1654 Pascal narrowly escaped death in a carriage wreck. He turned back to religion. On the night of November 23, 1654 he experienced what he called his second and definitive conversion in which he discovered "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and not of philosophers and men of science." In 1655 he retired to a strict retreat near Port-Royal-des-Champs, where he spent most of the remaining eight years of his life. He did not
become one of the Solitaires of Port Royal but he subjected himself to a strict discipline of fasting, vigils, and self-torture.

When the Jesuits bitterly attacked Antoine Arnauld who had become the leader of the Jansenists after the death of Jansen, and when the Sorbonne put Arnauld on trial to have his degrees cancelled, Pascal came to his defense in a series of eighteen letters published under the name of Louis de Montalte and addressed to a provincial. They were published as Lettres ecrites par Louis de Montalte a un provincial (Jan. 23, 1656-March 24, 1657) and came to be known as Les Provinciales. The letters were some of the most powerful attacks ever made on the Jesuits. They were filled with comic dramatization of the Jesuits, unmerciful raillery, bitter sarcasm, and biting satire. They created a sensation. They quickly spread over France, were translated into almost every language, and have continued to circulate for over three centuries. Arnauld was vindicated in the minds of the readers. The letters became a powerful force for independence of thought and the authority of conscience. The first three letters powerfully exposed the evils of the Jesuits. The fourth set forth the doctrine of grace and further exposed the position of the Jesuits. The fifth through the ninth, with great indignation attacked the casuistry of the Jesuit moral theology. The tenth dwelt on the love of God with great indignation against the Jesuits. The eleventh through the fourteenth attacked the Jesuits for the persecution of Port Royal. The last two letters returned to the doctrine of grace and proposed a conciliatory position that opened the way for Port Royal to subscribe to the Five Articles of 1663 and the Peace of the Church of 1668.

Pascal rejected the double standard of morality of the Jesuits with the distinction between counsel and precept. He declared there is no salvation apart from a heartfelt desire for the truth together with the love of God that destroys all self-love. Morality and spirituality cannot be separated.

In spite of their polemical nature Pascal's Les Provinciales has become a great devotional classic for cultivating the spiritual life among many who reject the Jesuit way. The Congregation of the Index condemned Les Provinciales in 1657. A copy was publicly burned by the hangman in Paris.

On March 24, 1656 Pascal's niece was healed in the "Miracle of the Thorn," at Port Royal. It moved him to meditations on miracles and other proofs of Christianity. He briefly resumed work on mathematics and science, publishing work on cycloid curves. He suffered a period of severe ill health in 1659. During this period he composed two famous prayers. One was his "Prayer Asking God for Good Use of his Illness." The other was the "Prayer for Conversion" that was highly regarded by the Wesleys.

His health showed some improvement and he began work in earnest on his Apology for the Christian Religion (Apologie de la Religion Chretienne). He had begun notes for this work in 1658. He intended the work to be a vindication of the truth of Christianity against the indifference of the "libertins". It would state the
case of Christianity against the rationalism of Descartes and the skepticism of Montaigne. He hoped to convince unbelievers by a presentation of the facts and fulfilment of prophecy but most especially by an appeal to the heart. He would not exclude reason from doing what it could to demonstrate the truth of faith, but reason could neither prove the existence of God nor the non-existence of God. Pascal believed it is the heart that experiences God and not reason. Faith is God felt by the heart, and not by reason.

He did not live to complete the work. He died on August 19, 1662, at the age of thirty-nine. The last rites were administered by a non-Jansenist parish priest who described Pascal as "most submissive to the Sovereign Pontiff and to the Church."

The Apology consisted only of fragments preserved in a manuscript at first known as Recueil original. Eight years after his death the notes were published in 1670 as Pensées de M. Pascal sur la Religion, et sur quelques autres sujets. This is considered his greatest work and one of the greatest of devotional classics. It is treasured for its deep insights into the nature of human existence. Although intended for the circle of his own acquaintances it has stood the test of time. Fragmentary as it is, it gives a powerful sketch of the universal search for God. Pascal appeals to the intellect by his passion for truth and his spiritual rectitude. His most powerful appeal is to the emotions by his description of the plight of man without God.

From the fragments it appears that he intended an apology in two parts. The first was to disturb man's complacency. He would undermine the agnostic and atheistic critics of Christianity. The second part would lead the disturbed man to God. Pascal aimed to awaken in man a recognition of man's wretchedness apart from God and of his deep need for God. There is a God who can be known by men. There is an element of corruption in men that renders them unworthy of God. To know God man must understand himself and to understand himself he must know God. Man cannot recognize God without recognizing his own wretchedness and he cannot recognize his own wretchedness without knowing God. Man's need for God becomes evident when he recognizes his misery apart from God. The tragedy of man's existence is his situation between greatness and misery. Man is a mixture of greatness and abjectness. He is incapable of truth or of reaching the supreme good to which his nature aspires. "Man is infinitely more than man." To escape his tragic situation man plunges into distractions. Science and reason are powerless to mitigate man's predicament. Only faith can free man. Man must make a decision for or against God. There is an element of risk in a life of faith. One of the most famous treasures of the Pensées is "Pascal's Wager." Here he shows the real use or purpose of reason. Reason cannot establish the existence or the non-existence of God. Man must gamble. If he bets that God exists and it should turn out that God does not exist, man has lost nothing, for neither he nor anyone else will ever know he lost the bet. But should man bet that God does not exist and it should turn out that God does exist, then he has lost everything because he refused to trust in God. Reason then should lead man to exercise faith and submit to God. Once a man has submitted to God the proofs of the Christian religion become important
for him. These proofs are the gospel's accurate assessment of man's nature which is capable of either baseness or greatness, the miracles and the fulfillment of prophecy. The simplicity of the gospel is the cure for reason's pride and nature's corruption.

Pascal's religion is Christ centered. Even nature teaches that God hides himself. Man can escape the darkness only through Jesus Christ. But man cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing God and man's own wretchedness. Only through Jesus Christ can man know God and self and only through the Scriptures can man know Jesus Christ. The reliability of the Scriptures is established by the fulfillment of prophecy and the suitableness of the Scriptures to the conditions of all men. The goal of Christianity is the recovery of man's wholeness. Pascal wrote: Not only do we know God through Jesus Christ alone, but we do not even know ourselves except through Jesus Christ. We understand life and death only through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we know not what is our life, or our death, or God, or what we ourselves are. (548)

Pascal built on his own personal experience and his intense study of Scripture. He appealed to the Biblical examples, especially Moses and Jesus. He also appealed to the picture of the primitive church and the persistence of the true religion. The church is the mystical body of Christ that demands the renunciation of self-love. He emphasizes the role of the human will in the taking of the risk of faith. The faith of the humble does not ask for proofs. One of his most famous lines is "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know." (277)

Pascal intended the Apology to be a treatise on spirituality. The end of making converts was that converts should become saints.