

## Lecture 21 – “The Path of Life”: Brother Lawrence & Blaise Pascal

“While I believed in party government and in party loyalty, I never attained to the happy partisan zeal of many of my friends, being painfully aware of my own and my party’s defects, and uneasily conscious of the merits of my opponents. Like Montaigne I could forgive ‘neither the commendable qualities of my adversaries nor the reproachful [qualities] of those I followed.’” John Buchan

“Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.” Psalm 16: 11

### Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 18

### Prayer

From Brother Lawrence

“O my God, since thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech Thee to grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence; and to this end do Thou prosper me with Thy assistance. Receive all my works, and possess all my affections. Amen.”

From Blaise Pascal

“O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life, except to spend them for you, with you, and in you. You alone know what is good for me; do, therefore, what seems best to you. Give to me, or take from me; conform my will to yours; and grant that, with humble and perfect submission, and in holy confidence, I may receive the orders of your eternal Providence; and may equally adore all that comes to me from you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

## “The Path of Life”: Brother Lawrence & Blaise Pascal

The 17th century was a time of flowering of Roman Catholic piety—Francis de Sales (1567-1622), *Introduction to the Devout Life*; Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), Madame Guiyon, and Brother Lawrence.

### I. Brother Lawrence (1610-1691)

#### A. Life of Brother Lawrence

1. Soldier
2. Monk

#### a. His “heavenly-mindedness” in the kitchen

- 1) One message—“You will tell me that I am always saying the same thing: it is true”—practicing the presence of God
- 2) 10th Letter—“Do not...forget [God], but think on Him often, adore Him continually, live and die with Him; this is the glorious employment of a Christian. In a word, this is our profession; if we do not know it, we must learn it.”

#### b. *The Practice of the Presence of God*

### B. View on grace?

1. Brother Lawrence a simple man—Pascal: “Do not be surprised at the sight of simple people who believe without argument. God makes them love him....He inclines their hearts to believe.”

“Brother Lawrence did nothing more sensational than to walk with God about a monastery kitchen for nearly forty years. Yet the story of his example there and a few pages of his conversations with a friend have helped others through three hundred years” (*Great Christian Books*, 57).

## II. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

### A. Life

1. Scientific genius (“The adding machine produces effects closer to thought than anything done by the animals, but it does nothing to justify the assertion that it has a will like the animals” [340].)
2. “Worldly period”
 

The 17th century was also the time of Descartes and the growth of skepticism.
3. Jansenist (Cornelius Jansen [1585-1638])
 

\*“It is debated whether Pascal ever considered himself a Jansenist. He was certainly a friend to many leading Jansenists, and one of his sisters entered a Jansenist order. Involved as he was with them, and with their defense, he learned many fine points of theology and began to develop a new sense of the importance of the Christian faith for a meaningful human existence” (Morris, *Making Sense of it All*, 9).

\*“Pascal always thought of himself as an Augustinian. When he became ill, he gave away all his books...and kept only two to be his sole nourishment until he died, two he could not part with: the Bible and the Confessions [of St. Augustine]. “‘A wise choice,’ comments Muggeridge. A wise comment” (Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 17).

\*Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “Personally, I would not hesitate to describe the Jansenists, including the great Blaise Pascal, as Calvinistic Methodists before their time” (*The Puritans*, 205).
4. “The Night of Fire” (November 23, 1654)
 

“...From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past midnight. **Fire.** The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and intellectuals.  
Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.  
The God of Jesus Christ...  
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy....  
This is life eternal, that they know you the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.  
Jesus Christ.  
Jesus Christ....”
5. Lifetime of sickness (“Prayer Asking God to Use Illness to a Good End”); death at age 39
 

“In 1662 God in His infinite mercy struck Pascal dead at the tender age of thirty-nine, before he could complete the greatest book of Christian apologetics ever written” (Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 9-10).

### B. Works

1. *Provincial Letters*
2. *Pensees*
  - a. Pascal’s audience—“modern pagans” (Michel de Montaigne [1533-92])
  - b. Pascal’s message
    - 1) The problem—we are unhappy; we are mortal
 

\*“Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition” (434).

\*“Man’s condition. Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety” (24).

\*“The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live,

and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so" (172).

## 2) The common solution

### a) Diversion

"It needs only one thing to go wrong to make [us] unhappy....That is why men cannot be too much occupied and distracted, and that is why, when they have been given so many things to do, if they have some time off they are advised to spend it on diversion and sport, and always to keep themselves occupied" (139).

### (b) Indifference

"Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things" (133).

## 3) Passionate truth-seeking

"There are only two classes of persons who can be called reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him" (427). "Truth is so obscured nowadays and lies so well established that unless we love the truth we shall never recognize it" (739).

### (a) Reason

\*"For a religion to be true it must have known our nature; it must have known its greatness and smallness, and the reason for both. What other religion but Christianity has known this?" (215)

\*"Hints" of the truth of Christianity—*fulfilled prophecies* ("The prophecies, even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a kind that they can be said to be absolutely convincing, but they are at the same time such that it cannot be said to be unreasonable to believe in them" [835]); *uniqueness of the Jewish people* ("...in one corner of the world a peculiar people" [454]); *nature of Jesus' teaching* ("Jesus said great things so simply that He seems not to have thought about them, and yet so clearly that it is obvious what He thought about them" [309]); *the witness of the apostles* ("The apostles were either deceived or deceivers. Either supposition is difficult" [322]); *the New Testament church* ("I only believe histories whose witnesses are ready to be put to death" [822]); *our own experience* ("Not only do we know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ" [417])

\*"Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it" (188). "Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason" (183).

\*The "wager" in a nutshell: "I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true" (387).

### (b) Heart

“We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them” (110). “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing” (277).

#### 4) The hiddenness of God

\*“What can be seen on earth indicates neither the total absence, nor the manifest presence of divinity, but the presence of a hidden God. Everything bears this stamp” (449).

\*“God being thus hidden, any religion that does not say that God is hidden is not true, and any religion which does not explain why does not instruct” (242).

\*“God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will” (581).

#### 5) The grace of God

“Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God.... This is the faith that God himself puts in our hearts, often using proof as the instrument” (248). “There is enough evidence to condemn and not enough to convince, so that it should be apparent that those who follow it are prompted to do so by grace and not by reason, and those who evade it are prompted by concupiscence and not by reason” (835). “We shall never believe, with an effective belief and faith, unless God inclines our hearts, and we shall believe as soon as He does so” (380).

#### 6) The Christian Life

\*“To make a man a saint, grace is certainly needed, and anyone who doubts this does not know what a saint, or a man, really is” (508).

\*“Do small things as if they were great, because of the majesty of Christ, who does them in us and lives our life, and great things as if they were small and easy, because of His almighty power” (553).

### Questions from Class

Did the Jansenists come to Scripture or just stick with Augustine?

What were the grounds of heresy against Jansenists?

What was behind the skepticism?

### For Further Study

A. Read “The First and Second Conversations” from *The Practice of the Presence of God: The Best Rule of a Holy Life* by Brother Lawrence. Nicholas Herman of Lorraine (1610-91), later known as Brother Lawrence, was a soldier, and then a rather clumsy footman (who broke things, he tells us) before entering the Carmelite Order as a lay brother when he was forty years old. He was put to work in the kitchen, where, despite his dislike for the work, he performed his tasks cheerfully and well.

Brother Lawrence’s one sustaining thought was “the practice of the presence of God.” He believed that he equally in the presence of God in the kitchen as he was at his prayers. And so he consecrated his pots and pans to God’s service and left us an example of how to live for God in the kitchen, the office, the schoolroom, and the factory.

\*Four conversations (recorded by a clerical visitor), sixteen letters, and a little book of spiritual maxims are the sum of Brother Lawrence’s writings. Read the first two conversations.

\*Notice the struggle concerning his own salvation on page 16, but trace the notes of grace that come

through on page 17 and in the following pages.

\*How can you better “practice the presence of God” in the present circumstances of your life? (Do you have any dishes to wash today?)

B. For Pascal’s life, see *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (1997) by Marvin R. O’Connell. For the English text of the *Pensées*, use *Pensées* (1966), tr. A. J. Krailsheimer. Three helpful commentaries on the *Pensées* are:

\**Three Outsiders* by Diogenes Allen

Allen develops Pascal’s “strategy” from fragment 12—“Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is to show that [1] religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. [2] next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, [3] and then show that it is. Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature. Attractive because it promises true good.”

\**Making Sense of it All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* by Thomas V. Morris

The titles of the chapters of this book are: 1. The Folly of Indifference; 2. The Danger of Diversion; 3. The Meaning of Life; 4. Skepticism, Proof, and the Good Life; 5. The Hidden God; 6. Wagering a Life; 7. The Human Enigma; 8. Marks of the Truth; 9. Faith and the Heart; and 10. Love, Life, and God.

\**Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensées Edited, Outlined & Explained* by Peter Kreeft

Kreeft’s outline for Pascal’s *Pensees* moves from the bad news to the good news, from problem to solution, from diagnosis to cure. (Except for an occasional swipe at Calvinism, Kreeft’s commentary on Pascal is an excellent modern apologetic.)

1. Problems: Wretchedness, vanity, injustice, irrationality, alienation, death, sin, selfishness
2. Two popular pseudo-solutions: Diversion and indifference
3. The way to a real solution: The way of the “heart”
4. Clues along the way
5. The decision: The “wager”
6. The end, the point: Christ himself

C. Read two of the most famous of Pascal’s *Pensées* from *Christianity for Modern Pagans* by Peter Kreeft (Ignatius, 1993), 65-72 and 293-306. Pascal’s words are in the bold type, and Kreeft’s comments in the lighter type. The letters in the Pascal text connect his words with Kreeft’s comments below.

\*Number 149 concerns the paradox of man’s greatness and wretchedness. If you did not already know it, could you identify Pascal’s ecclesiastical connection from what he writes here?

\*Number 418 is the famous “wager.” After reading Pascal’s argument and Kreeft’s comments, what do you think of the wager?