

# FAITH AND REASON

**The Grandeur and Misery of Man:** In a new Apostolic Letter, 'Sublimitas et miseria hominis' (The Grandeur and Misery of Man), released on Monday, 19 June, the day Blaise Pascal would have turned 400, Pope Francis praises the "brilliant and inquisitive mind" of the French thinker. Blaise Pascal "was a little genius. But he did not live outside of reality. He was not a 'nerd', as we would say today. He was a restless youth who was well aware of the material needs of the society in which he lived", said Christiane Murray, Vice-director of the Holy See Press Office, as she introduced the press conference for the presentation of Pope Francis' new Apostolic Letter, Sublimitas et miseria hominis, dedicated to the French philosopher. During the press conference, co-presided by Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, and François-Xavier Adam, Director of the Institut Français — Centre Saint Louis in Rome, some of Pascal's works that belong to the Vatican Library were displayed for the occasion. Believers and non-believers alike were fascinated by Pascal, said Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça: "Charles Péguy wrote that he was 'le plus grand génie que la terre ait jamais porté' [the greatest genius that the world has ever produced]; Friedrich Nietzsche considered him the most profound man in modern times. Pascal's influence was undoubtedly enormous: from Giacomo Leopardi to Arthur Schopenhauer, from Alessandro Manzoni to Martin Heidegger. There were very few thinkers and philosophers from the 17th century onwards, who did not engage with his anthropology".

The Cardinal suggested an interpretation that highlights some lesser-known aspects of the philosopher, such as charity towards the poor and the sick. "This behavior of his, which he did not tout, was certainly affected by his own experience of suffering and sickness suffice it to think about his 1659 prayer for 'the proper use of sicknesses and his search to find a way to concretely express his gratitude for the Divine Grace that had undeservedly entered into what he considered to be his smallness as a human being. This demonstrates that Pascal never separated faith in God from concrete gestures towards his brothers and sisters", said the Cardinal. According to Pascal, philosophy, even in its more admirable expressions, was useful, but not capable of providing an adequate explanation for the tragedy of man. Stoicism tended towards pride, skepticism led to desperation, dogmatism to isolation, and even the most sublime expressions of philosophy, at most led to a reasonable, albeit vague, deism. He was convinced that one could never overlook the human being and the tragedy of humanity: "Nothing is so important to man as his own state; nothing is so formidable to him as eternity", Pascal wrote. Indeed, for him nothing was more dangerous than disembodied thought: "whoever wants to act the angel, acts the beast".

In this sense Pascal was a true realist, and a forerunner of existentialism, who knew how to face the contradictions of the human being, the Cardinal continued, adding that this honesty is what makes Pascal, still today, a reference point for facing the complexities of modern man, split between scientific and theological truth, who finds in the essence of his nature, enlightened by faith, that certainty that he ardently defended in Pensées: "You would not seek me if you had not found me".

To celebrate 400 years since the birth of the philosopher, scientist and mystic (on 19 June) the Institut Français — Centre Saint Louis in Rome organized a round table discussion with the title "La grandeur de l'âme humaine" [the greatness of the human soul], moderated by journalist Loup Besmond de Senneville, vaticanist for the French weekly newspaper "La Croix". "The theme is the greatness of the human soul", said Adam, adding that it is not by chance "that the place where the encounter is taking place is the Centre founded by Jacques Maritain, the man of integral humanism. Pascal's objective is to bring man back to what he is when he is alone, when he is himself, helping him not to divert his gaze from the fleeting duration of what he desires", from the more pressing and uncomfortable thoughts, such as the prospect of eternity. The answer to the wretchedness of man but also to man's thirst for greatness, had to be found in an individual revelation of a personal God.

There is a personal account of that night on 23 November 1654, in a letter entitled "Memorial," which was discovered after his death, sown inside the lining of his coat. It was an experience that transformed his life and spurred him to dedicate himself to prayer with renewed trust, making his Christian faith the absolute center of his life and dedicating all his efforts to philosophical and theological reflection on man and God.

For non-believers too, Blaise Pascal continues to be a point of reference. In the scientific world, he is known above all for his contribution to mathematics, both in the field of projective geometry — the branch of geometry that paved the way from the analytical geometry of Descartes to the algebraic geometry of the 20th century — and in probability calculus, which he developed in collaboration with Pierre de Fermat, laying down the basis for the theory of probability.

Pascal is also known for his contributions in the field of applied and theoretical sciences. He built the first mechanical calculator, the Pascaline, a precursor to modern calculators, he devised the first public transportation system, he invented the syringe, he explained the concept of the void and atmospheric pressure, inspired by the work of Evangelista Torricelli, and he influenced the establishment of the modern scientific method... **Silvia Guidi**

**Faith** strips the mask from the world and reveals God in everything. It makes nothing impossible and renders meaningless such words as anxiety, danger, and fear, so that the believer goes through life calmly and peacefully, with profound joy - like a child, hand in hand with his mother... **St. Charles de Foucauld**

**Devotion:** If, then, we establish solid devotion to our Blessed Lady, it is only to establish more perfectly devotion to Jesus Christ, and to provide an easy and secure means for finding Jesus Christ. If devotion to Our Lady removed us from Jesus Christ, we should have to reject it as an illusion of the devil; but so far from this being the case, devotion to Our Lady is, on the contrary, necessary for us as a means of finding Jesus Christ perfectly, of loving Him tenderly, of serving Him faithfully.

**I believe that it is dangerous** for a young person simply to go from achieving goal after goal, generally being praised along the way. So it is good for a young person to experience his limits, occasionally to be dealt with critically, to suffer his way through a period of negativity, to recognize his own limits himself, not simply to win victory after victory. A human being needs to endure something in order to learn to assess himself correctly, and not least to learn to think with others. Then he will not simply judge others hastily and stay aloof, but rather accept them positively, in his labors and his weaknesses... **Pope Benedict XVI**

#### **A Thought For the Day**

**Sunday** The way of love has a name; it is Sacrifice.

**Monday** Every genuine human love is a reflection of the love that is God himself.

**Tuesday** The way we order our time is dependent on the way we order our Sunday.

**Wednesday** Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

**Thursday** Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.

**Friday** Life becomes easier and more beautiful when we can see the good in other people.

**Saturday** Well, perhaps the path appears straight when we look back at it. On the way, we often feel lost.

**Don't Just:** Don't just learn, experience. Don't just read, absorb. Don't just change, transform. Don't just relate, advocate. Don't just promise, prove. Don't just criticize, encourage. Don't just think, ponder. Don't just take, give. Don't just see, feel. Don't just dream, do. Don't just hear, listen. Don't just talk, act. Don't just tell, show. Don't just exist, live.

**Be a Light:** Jesus wants us to give of ourselves every moment. You have been taught by those who have given their whole lives to Christ. By their teaching and personal example, they have kindled the light of Christ in your lives. The time has come for you to likewise kindle the same light of Christ in the lives of those around you. Never has the world had such a greater need for love than in our day. People are hungry for love. We do not have time to stop and smile at each other. We are all in such a hurry! Pray, ask for the necessary grace. Pray to be able to understand how much Jesus loved us, so that we can love others... **St Teresa of Calcutta**

**Consecration of America:** Immaculate Mary, most Holy Mother of God and of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we the people of the United States of America at this historic moment stand before you in a humbled condition of love, loyalty, affection, and thankfulness. To your Immaculate Heart we recommit and dedicate ourselves throughout the entire American nation. To your Son Jesus Christ we pledge to serve His teaching, His church, and to work for His kingdom on earth. O Mary, to you do we flee for protection. Surround the American family with your maternal care; enfold us in your arms. Give to this American land, built on the blood and tears of so many faithful forebears, a peaceful and praiseworthy existence in truth, love, justice, and freedom. O Mary, we submit to you as the Patroness of our beloved country. O Mary, Help of Christians, enfold the Holy Father and the Catholic Church within your protective cloak; be our shield in the days ahead. Give the Church true holiness and freedom. Obtain for our leader's holy zeal, the ability to face the truth, and the courage to correct all abuses. Stop the flood of atheism, greed, heresy, impurity, lukewarmness, materialism, and selfishness that threaten our nation. Show to those who have strayed from the Church the way to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Mother of God, accept our personal consecration to you and, through you, bind us forever to the Holy Trinity. Gather us all into your Immaculate Heart and unite us forever with Jesus. O Mary, we love you... **Amen.**

**In His Will is Our Peace**

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