

*This selection is from Etienne Gilson's essay,
"The Intelligence in the Service of Christ the King,"
in his Christianity and Philosophy,
translated by R. M. McDonald, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939).*

Of this prodigious transformation of nature by the Incarnation we have an interpretation of incomparable profundity in Pascal, for that is what gives his work the plenitude of its meaning. That we know God only through the person of Christ, Who was God Himself living, speaking and acting among us, God showing Himself as man to men in order to be known by them, is too evident; but the great discovery, or rediscovery of Pascal is to have understood that the Incarnation, by profoundly changing the nature of man, has become the only means that there is for us to understand man. Such a truth gives a new meaning to our nature, to our birth, to our end. "Not only," wrote Pascal, "do we understand God only through Jesus Christ, but we understand ourselves only through Jesus Christ. We understand life and death only through Jesus Christ. Outside Jesus Christ we do not know what life is, nor death, nor God, nor ourselves."

Let us apply these principles to the exercise of our intelligence; we shall immediately see that the intelligence of the Christian, as opposed to one which knows not Jesus Christ, knows itself to be fallen and restored, incapable consequently of yielding its full return without grace, and, in this sense, just as the royalty of Christ dominates the order of nature and the order of society, so also it dominates the order of the intelligence. Perhaps we Catholics have forgotten it too much; perhaps we have never even truly understood it, and if ever there was a time that needed to understand it, it is indeed our own.

What in fact does this mystery teach us in regard to the ends and the nature of the intelligence?

Like the nature which it crowns, the intelligence is good; but it is only so if, by it and in it, the whole nature turns toward its end, which is to conform itself to God. But by taking itself as its own end, the intelligence has turned away from God, turning nature with it, and grace alone can aid both of them in returning to what is really their end, since it is their origin. The "world" is just this refusal to participate in grace which separates nature from God, and the intelligence itself is of the world in so far as it joins with it in rejecting grace. The intelligence which accepts grace is that of the Christian. And it is in the abandonment of precisely this Christian state of the intelligence that the world, because of its hate for it, ever urges us to accompany it.

That is what constitutes the real danger for us. We have no doubts concerning the truth of Christianity; we are firmly resolved to think as Christians; but do we know what must be done in order to accomplish that? Do we even know exactly in what Christianity consists? The first Christians knew it, because Christianity then was very near its beginnings, and the adversary against which it fought could not be unknown or misconceived by anyone; it was paganism, that is to say, ignorance at once of sin which damns and the grace of Jesus Christ which saves. That is why the Church, not only then, but throughout the ages, has especially recalled to men the corruption of nature by sin, the weakness of reason without Revelation, the impotence of the will to do good when it is not aided by grace. When St. Augustine battled against Pelagius, who called himself Christian and thought himself Christian, it was against an attempt of paganism to restore the ancient naturalism and introduce it into the very heart of Christianity that the great doctor fought. The naturalism of the Renaissance was another attempt of the same kind and we are still, today, in a world which believes itself naturally healthy, just and good, because, having forgotten sin and grace, it takes corruption for the rule of nature itself...

...Hence the errors, the looseness of thought, and the compromises against which, at all times, the zeal of certain reformers has rebelled. The restoration of Christianity to the purity of its essence was in fact the first intention of Luther and Calvin; such is still today that of the illustrious Calvinist theologian,

Karl Barth, who employs all his powers of purify liberal Protestantism from naturalism, and to restore the Reform itself to the unconditional respect of the word of God. We all know how energetically he pursues that aim. God speaks, says K. Barth; man listens and repeats what God has said. Unfortunately, as is inevitable from the moment that a man sets himself up as His interpreter, God speaks, the Barthian listens and repeats what Barth has said. That is why, if we believe this new gospel of his, God would be reputed as having said that, ever since the first sin, nature is so totally corrupted that nothing of it remains but its very corruption, a mass of perdition which grace can indeed still pardon, but which nothing henceforth could ever heal. Thus, then in order the better to fight against paganism and Pelagianism, this doctrine invites us to despair of nature, to renounce all effort to save reason and rechristianize it.

It is these two perils which ceaselessly plague us, and which, lest our thought be free from all attack, sometimes reduce us to a state of uncertainty as to what is or is not Christian. We forget the golden rule which decides all issues and dissipates every confusion, and one which we ought to have ever present to thought, the light which no obscurity can resist. It is that Catholicism teaches before everything the restoration of wounded nature by the grace of Jesus Christ. The restoration of nature: so there must be a nature, and of what value, since it is the work of a God who created it and recreated it by repurchasing it at the price of His own blood! Thus grace presupposes nature, and the excellence of nature which it comes to heal and transfigure.

As opposed to Calvinism and Lutheranism, the Church refuses to despair of nature, as if sin had totally corrupted it, but she tenderly bends over it, to heal its sores and save it. The God of our Church is not a judge who pardons. He is a judge who can pardon only because he is first a doctor who heals. But if she doesn't despair of nature, neither does the Church hope that it can heal itself. Just as she opposes the despair of Calvinism, so she opposes the foolish hope of naturalism, which seeks in the malady itself the principle of its cure. The truth of Catholicism is not a mean between two errors, which would participate in both the one and the other, but a real truth, that is to say a peak, from which it is possible to discover both what the errors are and what makes them to be so.

For the Calvinist, a Catholic is so respectful of nature that he is in nothing distinguished from a pagan, save by an additional blindness which makes him degrade even Christianity itself into Paganism. But the Catholic well knows that there is nothing in that, and that it is the Calvinist who, confounding nature with the world, can no longer love nature under the world which clothes it, that is to say, love the work of God while hating sin which deforms it.

For the pagan, the Christian saint is an enemy of nature, who rushed furiously in a foolish rage to torture it and even mutilate it; but the Catholic knows well that he chastises nature only out of love for it; the evil which he fights against has entered too deeply into it to be able to be plucked out of it without making it suffer. Just as Calvinism despairs of nature while believing to despair only of its corruption, so naturalism puts its hope only in corruption when it thinks it is putting it in nature. Catholicism alone knows exactly what is nature, and what is the world, and what is grace, but it knows it only because it keeps its eyes fixed on the concrete union of nature and of grace in the Redeemer of nature, the person of Jesus Christ.

To imitate the Church ought to be our rule, if we wish to put our intelligence at the service of Christ, the King. For, to serve Him, is to unite our efforts to His; to make ourselves, according to the word of St. Paul, his cooperators, that is to say, work with Him, or permit Him to work in us and through us for the salvation of the intelligence blinded by sin. But to work thus, it will be necessary for us to follow the example He Himself gives us: to free the nature which the world hides from us, to make that use of the intelligence to which God destined it when creating it.

It is here, it seems to me that we have to make a return on ourselves, to ask ourselves if we are doing our duty and especially if we are doing it well. We have all met, either in history or indeed round about us, Christians who believe they are rendering homage to God by affecting in regard to science, philosophy and art, an indifference which sometimes approaches contempt. But this contempt may express either supreme greatness or supreme littleness. I like to be told that all the philosophy is not worth an hour of trouble, when he who tells me so is called Pascal, that is to say a man who is at once one of the greatest philosophers, one of the greatest scientists, and one of the greatest artists of all time. A person always has the right to disdain what he surpasses, especially if what he disdains is not so much the thing loved as the excessive attachment which enslaves us to it. Pascal despised neither science nor philosophy, but he never pardoned them for having once hidden from him the most profound mystery of charity. Let us be careful, therefore, we who are not Pascal, of despising what perhaps surpasses us, for science is one of the highest praises of God, the understanding of what God has made.

That is not all. No matter how high science may be, it is only too clear that Jesus Christ did not come to save men by science or philosophy; he came to save all men, even scientists and philosophers, and though these human activities are not indispensable to salvation, yet even they have need of being saved as does this whole order of nature which grace has come to repurchase. But it is necessary to be careful not to save them by an indiscreet zeal, which, under the pretense of purifying them more completely, would only result in corrupting their essences. There is reason to fear that this fault is committed quite often, and with the best intentions in the world, in view of what certain defenders of the faith call the apologetic use of science. An excellent formula, no doubt, yet only when one knows not only what science is, but also what apologetics is.

To be an efficacious apologist, it is necessary first to be a theologian; I will even say, an excellent theologian. that is rarer than we might think, which will be a scandal to those who speak of theology only by hearsay, or are content with reciting its formulae without having taken time to plumb their significance. But if one wishes to make an apologetic from science, it is not even sufficient that he be an excellent theologian; he must also be an excellent savant. I say savant advisedly, and not merely an intelligent and cultivated man more or less anointed by science. If one wishes to practice science for God, the first condition is to practice science for itself, or as if one practiced it for itself, since that is the only way of acquiring it.

The same holds for philosophy. It is self-delusion to think to serve God by taking a certain number of formulas which bespeak what one knows ought to be said, without understanding why what they say is true. It is not even serving Him to denounce errors, however false they may be, while showing that one does not even understand in what they are false. At least we can say that it is not serving Him as a savant or as a philosopher, which is all we are for the moment concerned in showing. And I will add that the same thing holds for art, for it is necessary to possess it before pretending to put it at the service of God. We are told that it is faith which constructed the cathedrals of the middle ages. Without doubt, but faith would have constructed nothing at all if there had not also been architects; and if it is true that the facade of Notre Dame of Paris is a yearning of the soul toward God, that does not prevent its being also a geometrical work. It is necessary to know geometry in order to construct a facade which may be an act of love.

Catholics confess the eminent value of nature because it is a work of God; let us therefore show our respect for it by positing as the first rule of our action, that piety never dispenses with technique. For technique is that without which even the most lively piety is incapable of using nature for God. No one, nor anything, obliges the Christian to busy himself with science, art or philosophy, for other ways of serving God are not wanting; but if that is the way of serving God that he has chosen, the end itself, which he proposes for himself in studying them, binds him to excellence. He is bound, by the very intention which guides him, to become a good savant, a good philosopher, or a good artist. That for him is the only way of becoming a good servant...