

Praise for *Pascal's Prayers*

"This little gem of a book you're holding now is about just two prayers of Pascal, one fairly long (about ten ordinary pages) and one short (one page). But those two prayers are like a biopsy—narrow like a needle but diving deep into invisible but living cells—or like a sharp, powerful probe deep into the earth or into Arctic or Antarctic ice. They move us from our comfortable surface illusions down into the depths of reality, and if Pascal is eventually canonized, they may well be the primary data for it. Reader, beware of this book. Read it only if you, too, are, or even passionately want to be, a realist—that is, open to all reality, to the end and the edge of it. For the earth is not round spiritually; it has an edge, and we all fall off that edge, either into nothingness or into everlasting arms."

—**Peter Kreeft**, author of *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's "Pensées" Edited, Outlined, and Explained*, from the foreword

"Pascal's prayers are extraordinary. They are deeply personal, filled with intimacy, immediacy, and honesty, and touch on things that matter to all of us—sickness, the search for happiness, and finding God. Pascal was a man who wrestled with God throughout his life, and these prayers give a glimpse into his own spiritual life and hard-won wisdom. This volume presents his celebrated prayers, offers a rich and detailed commentary on them, and combines them with the Jesuit Pope Francis's generous appreciation of this great Christian—who was no friend to the Jesuits in his time—who still speaks powerfully to us today of the transforming grace of God."

—**Graham Tomlin**, author of *Blaise Pascal: The Man Who Made the Modern World*

“We struggling moderns need the thoughts and especially prayers of Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century polymath who helped usher in this technological world while exemplifying the spiritual commitment required for living in it. In *Pascal's Prayers*, William Hackett gives us two precious texts with austere power: Pascal's ‘Prayer Asking God for the Good Use of Illness’ and his ‘Memorial.’ Hackett has set these two spiritual gems in the gold of historical and religious commentary, allowing the man who prayed them to shine alongside the prayers themselves. Pascal and his prayers provide aid and comfort for those seeking to find God amid the harshness of reality and the seemingly eternal silence of infinite space.”

—**Father Bonaventure Chapman, OP**, cohost of *Godsplaining*

PASCAL'S PRAYERS

WITH

“The Grandeur and Misery of Man” by Pope Francis

WILLIAM C. HACKETT

FOREWORD by PETER KREEFT

WORD  on FIRE.

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In Memoriam

Charles S. MacKenzie

1924–2017

author of *Pascal's Anguish and Joy* (1973)

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Foreword

Peter Kreeft

In all my college and university philosophy courses, at Calvin, Yale, Fordham, and Penn, I never heard the name of Pascal mentioned, except in very short and sarcastic references to his famous “wager.”

Yet, when I taught the two-semester introduction to the history of philosophy at Boston College, to a great variety of freshmen (religious, nonreligious, and ex-religious), whenever I took polls at the end of the course, the philosopher the students said impressed them the most, or changed their life the most, was not Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Marcus Aurelius, the Sophists, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Abelard, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Newman, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, Marcel, Ayer, Russell, Wittgenstein, Wojtyła, or even Dylan or Jagger, but Pascal.

Henri de Lubac, Romano Guardini, Leszek Kołakowski, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and other theologians and philosophers have written perspicaciously on Pascal, but no one, as far as I know, has ever abridged and arranged his scattered notes (which is what we know as his *Pensées*) into the order he planned for the finished work,

which was to be a kind of narrative logic or spiritual journey, something like Augustine's *Confessions* (which was always my students' second choice). Only nine or ten of the nearly one thousand fragments that make up the *Pensées* were semicomplete chapters of at least four pages. My attempt to do that, with short commentaries in footnotes, in *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, was my modest contribution to Pascal reading, and I think it was my best book yet, since it allowed my students to be "wowed" by the power of Pascal's faith and reason, which were a single thing rather than a synthesis.

This little gem of a book you're holding now is about just two prayers of Pascal, one fairly long (about ten ordinary pages) and one short (one page). But those two prayers are like a biopsy—narrow like a needle but diving deep into invisible but living cells—or like a sharp, powerful probe deep into the earth or into Arctic or Antarctic ice. They move us from our comfortable surface illusions down into the depths of reality, and if Pascal is eventually canonized, they may well be the primary data for it.

This book also includes an apostolic letter by Pope Francis (one of his last before his death), which is a very full, clear, and accurate summary of Pascal's religious achievements in the *Pensées*. This letter put to death forever my suspicion that Francis had a soft head as well as a soft heart. There is also a balanced and accurate assessment of Pascal's complex relationship to Jansenism, as an appendix. If the reader has never read Pascal, he or she should read Francis's summary first, then the rest of this book.

Dostoevsky (who is a spiritual brother to Pascal) once described himself simply as a "realist." I know of nothing as realistic as Pascal's "Prayer Asking God for the Good Use of Illness," unless it is the *Diary of Saint Faustina*. Pascal's prayers are one with his philosophy,

his faith one with his reason, his grandeur and triumph one with his misery and wretchedness, and his joy one with his sufferings. What unites the two faces of each of these paradoxes is life and experience, not logical reasoning. Pascal's thought is full of paradoxes because Pascal's Christianity (like Christ's!) is not a philosophical or theological system but an "I-Thou relationship" and a "realism." The author of this severely beautiful little book chose perhaps the two very best words to describe Pascal: "severe beauty."

William Hackett was wise to include in this book Pascal's death mask. It is haunting in the same way as the face on the Shroud of Turin. Like *The Passion of the Christ*, it is a "severe beauty." Although they are closed, "his eyes look upon you from above the din of the world, from the other side of death. If, through these prayers, you were to dare, from this side of the mortal frame, to raise your eyes to meet his, what might happen to you?"

That is the author's warning. What might happen to you, indeed? I knew an agnostic who was genuinely afraid of receiving Holy Communion, because "if it's true, then there's no limit to *the stuff he'll do to you* once he gets in there." (Those italics were in his voice.)

Reader, beware of this book. Read it only if you, too, are, or even passionately want to be, a realist—that is, open to all reality, to the end and the edge of it. For the earth is not round spiritually; it has an edge, and we all fall off that edge, either into nothingness or into everlasting arms. Pascal, like the saints, can teach you how sickness, suffering, and the process of dying can be your preparation and practice for that event, when everything will fall away and what remains is only yourself and the one and only Holy One, the one and only Almighty One, the one and only Immortal One, whose severe mercy is our only hope.

Introduction

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) was a French mathematician, inventor, scientist, writer, philosopher, and theologian. He was a child savant who, as a young man, made important contributions to all the fields of inquiry just listed. He invented one of the earliest working calculators and the first public transport system in Paris. These, as well as his public scientific experiments, made him famous in his own day. Among his books is the classic *Pensées* (“Thoughts”), an unfinished masterpiece of Christian apologetics found mainly in loose-leaf piles scattered around his living quarters. His acerbic *Provincial Letters* is considered a supreme work of French literary style. He was also a mystic—or at least he had a life-defining mystical experience of the risen Christ that resonates, to my mind, with that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. In 1662, he died after four years of suffering a painful and debilitating illness. He was only thirty-nine years old.

It was during this time of intense suffering and equally intense spiritual growth that he wrote the “*Prière pour demander à Dieu le bon usage des maladies*” (“Prayer Asking God for the Good Use of Illness”). This prayer was composed by a man pressed to the

very “edge of the world” by his illness (III). It is extreme, as was his suffering. It could only have been written by someone who had reached the rare state of terrible clarity brought forth by profound pain. His words, for all their difficulty, possess the reader with a most severe beauty. To take them as your own words to God is to enter, and even to embrace, the deepest truth of the human condition.

To approach God and illness in this way requires equal parts courage and humility. It is the best way to approach God when ill; in fact, I would say that it names *the* Christian way to approach God at all.

* * *

After Pascal’s death, a folded piece of parchment was found sewn into the breast of his *pourpoint*, a close-fitting inner garment. It held a faded paper that contained excited handwriting—a prayer recounting Pascal’s “night of fire,” the mystical experience mentioned a moment ago. In the second part of this book, I provide a translation and extended commentary on it. One of its lines reads “Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.” We know from this document (often called Pascal’s “Memorial”) that the event occurred on Monday, November 23, 1654, for about two hours, beginning at 10:30 p.m. Pascal’s greatest writings—including, I think, the prayer on illness—should be read in light of this strange scrap of text.

* * *

Pope Francis’s apostolic letter on Pascal, *Sublimitas et Miseria Hominis* (*The Grandeur and Misery of Man*), is also included in this volume. Published four hundred years to the day after Pascal’s birth