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Press Conference entitled “*Sublimitas et miseria hominis – the Grandeur and misery of man*”

At 11.00 this morning, a press conference entitled “*Sublimitas et miseria hominis – the Grandeur and misery of man*” was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office, Saint Pius X Hall, Via dell’Ospedale 1, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the birth of the philosopher, mathematician and scientist Blaise Pascal, who was born on 19 June 1623 in Clermond-Ferrand and died in Paris on 19 August 1662.

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, and Dr. François-Xavier Adam, director of the *Institut Français – Centre Saint Louis*.

The following is the intervention by His Eminence Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça

Dear friends, today, 19 June, is the anniversary of the fourth centenary of the birth, in 1623 in Clermond-Ferrand, of the mathematician, scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who died in Paris on 19 August 1662, at just 39 years of age.

Pascal is known for his contribution to mathematics: both in the field of projective geometry, the branch of geometry that allowed the transition from Descartes’ analytic geometry to the algebraic geometry of the 20th century; and in probabilistic calculus, which he developed in collaboration with Pierre Fermat, laying the foundations of probability theory from random calculus.

Pascal is also known for his contributions in the field of applied and theoretical sciences. An *enfant prodige*, he built the first mechanical calculator - the Pascaline, the ancestor of modern calculators - devised the first public transport system - the *carrosses à cinq sols* - invented the hydraulic syringe, clarified the concept of vacuum and atmospheric pressure - inspired by the work of Evangelista Torricelli - and influenced the birth and establishment of modern scientific method.

On 23 November 1654, he had a mystic experience known as the *nuît de feu* – of which we have an historic personal testimony in a letter entitled *memorial*, found after his death, sewn into the lining of his coat – which transformed his life and drove him to dedicate himself with renewed devotion to prayer, making his Christian faith the absolute centre of his existence and devoting all his energy to profound philosophical and theological reflections on man and on God.

Believers and non-believers alike were fascinated by him: Charles Péguy wrote that he was “le plus grand génie que la terre ait jamais porté”; Friedrich Nietzsche considered him “the most profound man of modern times”. Pascal’s influence was unquestionably immense: from Giacomo Leopardi to Arthur Schopenhauer, from Alessandro Manzoni to Martin Heidegger... few thinkers and philosophers from the 17th century onwards have not confronted his anthropology.

His best-known work, “Les pensées” – a collection of unfinished fragments published in 1670 – is certainly one of the great masterpieces of western thought. The analogies he used in them, such as that of the *roseau pensant* – “Man is but a reed, the weakest of nature, but he is a thinking reed” - and the insights he succinctly and almost cryptically annotated – “The heart has reasons that reason does not know” - have been commented on so much that they have entered the imagination and common language.

In the face of such stature, the Holy Father, a lifelong devotee of the *Pensées* - he knows and quotes several of them by heart - and a profound admirer of Pascal - who it must be said, in truth, was attacked by a branch of the Society of Jesus in bitter debates - has decided to honour his figure with an Apostolic Letter with the captivating title *Sublimitas et miseria hominis* - that is, the Grandeur and the Misery of Man - which will be made public in a few minutes and will be the subject of an in-depth debate, which the Dicastery for Culture and Education will hold with the *Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français* this afternoon.

Dr. François-Xavier Adam, director of the *Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français*, will provide the details of this exceptional event, which will involve the participation of experts on seventeenth-century literature: Professor Gheeraert of the University of Rouen, Professor Papisogli of the *Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta*, Professor Plazenet, director of the *Centre International Blaise Pascal* in Clermont-Ferrand, and Professor Jean de Saint-Cheron of the *Institut Catholique de Paris*.

Above all, I would like to point out how in the text of the Pontifical Letter, Pope Francis emphasized some, perhaps lesser known, aspects of the great philosopher. First and foremost, his exquisite charity towards the poor and the sick. Pascal’s life was peppered with practical gestures of charity and love towards the weakest and towards the sick and suffering.

This behaviour of his, which he did not make public, was certainly coloured by his own experience of pain and sickness – think of his prayer “for the good use of sickness” in 1659 – but it was also a search, in tangible things, of a way to express his gratitude for the divine Grace that had undeservedly entered into what he considered to be his human smallness. This demonstrates that Pascal never separated faith in God from concrete works in favour of his brothers, and helps us to understand the complexity of his relationship with Jansenist theories, which he came to know from reading Jansen’s *Augustinus* and frequenting the *Port-Royal* circle.

Pascal was profoundly influenced by Saint Augustine of Hippo, but he was never a partisan - he confessed of himself: “I am alone... I am not of *Port-Royal*” - and had his own interpretation of Jansenism when he wanted to respond to the Molinist current, considering the tendency to resort to casuistry a sort of emanation of the Pelagianism that the great Doctor of the Church had so ardently fought.

It is in this light that the *Provinciales* letters – the eighteen passages that the Jansenists asked him to write in defence of their positions, aware of his ability to convince with his powerful and incisive rhetoric – should be interpreted, and it is also in this light that his pseudo-predestinist positions, inspired by the last writings of Saint Augustine himself, should be considered.

The awareness and acknowledgement of the primacy of divine Grace was for Pascal, first and foremost of a

personal, inner order – one might say, intimist and mystical. Philosophy, even in its most admirable expressions, was in his opinion useful but did not provide an answer to the plight of man. Stoicism tended towards pride, scepticism led to despair, dogmatism led to isolation – even the loftiest expressions of philosophy led, at most, to a reasonable, if vague and inconclusive, deism. It was from the human and the plight of the human that one had to start: “Nothing is more important to man than his state [of finitude]: nothing is more fearful for him than eternity”. Nothing for Pascal, in fact, was more dangerous than disembodied thinking: “He who wants to be an angel, ends up a beast”, he decreed.

In this sense, Pascal was a true realist who was able to confront the misery and grandeur of humanity. The answers to man’s real misery and this thirst for grandeur should be found in an individual revelation of a personal God.

Before the *nuit de feu*, Pascal already believed in God, but that night he had the enlightenment of recognizing in sin the symbol of the lack of desire for God. From that mystical experience came his concepts of pride and humility and, above all, the category of the 'heart' that was so dear to him. Pope Francis would say that on that night, he became aware of his “narrowness and self-absorption” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 8).

Therefore, today, we are all grateful to the Holy Father for this important document he wanted to write to celebrate a man of unquestionable significance and extreme topicality.

What Pope Francis wanted to celebrate is first and foremost the honesty of Blaise Pascal, who liked the phrase “one must be sincere, true”. The motto he had chosen for himself “*Scio cui credidi*” (2 *Tim* 1:12) he had understood it not in the arrogant sense of those who place absolute certainty in their positions, but in the confidence that allows “the order of the heart”, through faith, to open up to divine consolation.

This honesty is what makes Pascal, even today, a model of reference to face the complexities of modern man, torn between scientific and theological truths, who finds in the essence of his own nature, enlightened by faith, that certainty that Pascal ardently defended in his *Pensées*: “You would not seek me if you had not already found me”.
