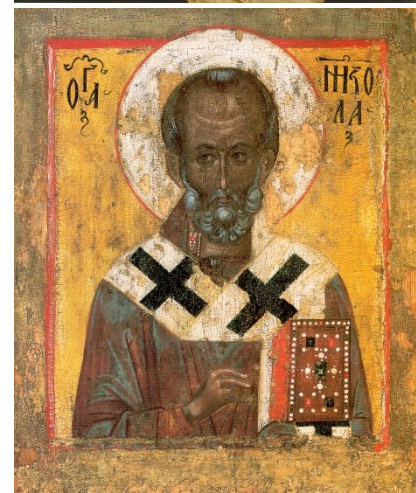


## Blaise Pascal on Augustine, Aquinas, and the evidence of the Senses

*This excerpt from a 1657 letter of the noted French scientist and mathematician Blaise Pascal to Fr. François Annat, S.J.<sup>1</sup> features Pascal discussing of the ideas of Sts. Augustine and Aquinas applied to matters of fact—including scientific matters. Pascal touches on two particular cases in science, that of the question of the sizes of stars, and that of the question of Earth's motion.*

**H**ow then are we to attain to certainty as to matters of fact? It is the sense—the eye, which herein is the proper judge; in the same way that reason is the judge of things intellectual, and faith [the judge] of such as are supernatural and revealed. For (since you oblige me to continue the discussion) I must tell you that according to the views of two of the greatest authorities of the Church—St. Augustine and St. Thomas—those three sources of our intelligence, sense, reason, and faith, have each their separate objects, and their assigned limits. And, as God has seen fit to use the medium of the senses for the entrance of faith—‘fides ex auditu’—just as faith would destroy the certitude of the senses, so faith would itself be destroyed by bringing into doubt the faithful testimony of sense. On this account, St. Thomas remarks that God has seen fit that the sensible accidents should subsist in the Eucharist, in order that the senses, which can judge only of these accidents, may not be deceived—‘ut sensus à deceptione redderentur immunes.’

We ought hence to conclude that, whatever be the proposition presented for our examination, we should first satisfy ourselves as to its nature, in order to ascertain to which of these three principles it should be referred. If it relate to any thing supernatural, it should be weighed, not by sense or



<sup>1</sup> Pascal to Rev. Fr. Annat, S.J. (March 24, 1657), [The Provincial Letters of Pascal](#) (London: Seeley, Burnside & Seeley, 1847, pages 391-396).

reason, but by Scripture and the decisions of the Church. If it be not matter of revelation, but within the limit of human reason, then reason may lawfully be its judge. And, lastly, if it be a question of fact, then sense, within whose province it lies, will be its most competent arbiter.

This rule is so general, that according to St. Augustine and St. Thomas, whenever Holy Writ presents to us a passage whose primary and literal meaning appears opposed to what sense or reason recognize, *with certainty*, we must not endeavour to disavow this contradiction, in order to subject it to the authority of this apparent sense of Scripture; but, in our interpretation of Scripture, we must seek for another meaning which shall be in agreement with the *sensible* truth; because, the Word of God being infallible even as to facts, and the evidence of the senses and of reason being in its full extent positive also, these two species of truth must ever harmonize. Then, as Scripture admits of different modes of interpretation, while, on the other hand, the evidence of the senses is uniform, we ought, upon such points, to receive as the true interpretation of Scripture that which is in accordance with the faithful testimony of the senses. “We must,” says St. Thomas, 1st Part, g. 68, a. 1, “according to St. Augustine, observe two things; the one, that Scripture has ever a true meaning; the other that, as it admits of more than one interpretation, when any interpretation is assigned to it which reason clearly ascertains to be untrue, we ought not to persist in maintaining such to be the natural meaning, but seek for another which shall be in accordance with it.”

This he illustrates by the instance of that passage in Genesis, in which it is said, “God created two great lights, the sun and the moon, the stars also.” Herein Scripture would seem to imply that the moon is greater than the stars; but, as it is certain by indubitable proofs that the fact is otherwise, we ought not,” says this great writer, “obstinately to defend this literal interpretation, but seek for another in conformity with the fact of the matter,” such as “that the term ‘great light’ denotes only the magnitude of the moon’s lustre in its appearance to our eyes, and not the *positive* magnitude of its orb.” If this method were not pursued, the effect would be, not to enhance men’s reverence for the Holy Scriptures, but rather to lay them open to the cavils of the infidel; “for,” as St. Augustine remarks, ‘de Gen. ad. Lit. 1, C. 19,’ “when he perceives that we receive, on the authority of Scripture, facts which he knows to be untrue, he smiles at our credulity in regard to other questions of a more recondite nature, such as the Resurrection of the dead, and everlasting Life.” “Thus,” adds St. Thomas, “we should render our religion contemptible in the eyes of the prejudiced, and increase their aversion to its truths.”

In the same way, Sir, you would shut the door against heretics, and render the authority of the Papacy despicable in their esteem, were you to refuse to regard as catholic those who will not admit certain passages to be in a publication, which they themselves are unable to find in it, merely because a Pope has been surprised into a declaration that they are to be found there. It is only the personal examination of the book that can produce conviction upon such a point. Questions of fact are only to be determined by the senses. If what you assert be true, prove it to be so; if it be not, you labour in vain to induce belief. All the authority in the world cannot

enforce or alter belief as to facts; nothing can possibly have power to cause that not to be which actually is.

It was in vain, for example, that certain monks of Ratisbon [Regensburg] obtained from Pope St. Léo IX. a solemn decree, by which he declared that the body of St. Denis, who was commonly believed to be an Areopagite, had been removed from France, and transported to the church of their monastery. This had no effect in invalidating the fact, that the body of the Saint remained, and is to this day, in the celebrated abbey which bears his name; although the Pope states that he had investigated the circumstance with all the diligence possible—‘diligentissimè,’ and assisted by the advice of many bishops and prelates of the church; for which reason he strictly enjoins all Frenchmen—‘districte præcipientes’—to acknowledge that we no longer possess these holy relics.” Notwithstanding which, the French, who well know the contrary of all this by the evidence of their own eyes, and, having had the shrine opened, found (according to the testimony of all the chronicles of the day) the relics in entire preservation, believed then, and continue to do so to the present day, the direct reverse of what his Holiness enjoined upon them; knowing well that saints and prophets are, like other men, liable to surprisals into error.

On the same principles, it was in vain that you succeeded in procuring from Rome a decree against Galileo, condemning his theory of the earth’s motion. This has been of no avail in proving that she is stationary; and if our own observations have convinced us that it is she that revolves in the system, all the men in the world will not prevent her from so revolving, or prevent them from revolving with her. Can you imagine, also, that the letters of excommunication of Pope Zachary against St. Virgile for maintaining the existence of our *Antipodes*, have had the effect of annihilating this new World; and that although this opinion was thus declared to be a dangerous error, the Spanish monarch would not have preferred taking the word of Christopher Columbus for its existence (who had returned from it,) rather than the opinion of the Pope who had not been there; while the Church derived incalculable advantages from the discovery, in conveying the knowledge of the Gospel to multitudes, who would otherwise have perished in their infidelity!

You see then, in these instances, what is the nature of testimony from facts, and the principles by which they are to be judged.