

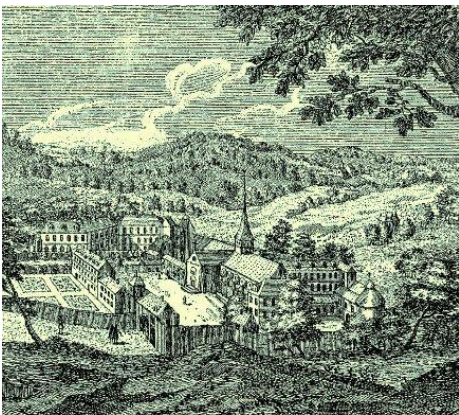
Philippe de Champaigne and Jansenism

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Until August 2007, the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lille is hosting a rare exhibition of paintings by Philippe de Champaigne, the French 17th Century master associated with the Abbey of Port-Royal, the Cistercian convent outside Paris and the centre of an Augustinian revival that was dubbed ‘Jansenism’ by its clerical opponents. Its Abbess was Mère Angélique Arnauld (*left*) (surely the first and best Mother Angelica) who, advised by Francis de Sales, reformed the convent, imposed the rule, introduced an Augustinian spiritual director and transformed it into a centre of Eucharistic adoration. Its adherents saw themselves as simply taking the Church seriously when it said that its authority on matters of grace was St Augustine; they referred religious practice back to the early Church and aimed to restore to the French Church a purity of teaching and life that was being eroded by Jesuit compromises on pastoral guidance and morals.

Blaise Pascal received spiritual direction there – his sister Jacqueline, a fine spiritual poet, was one of the community – and he gave conferences to the ‘Solitaires’, the Parisian intellectuals who lived a quasi-Carthusian life in the woods of the Abbey. In the Abbey school was the young Jean Racine whose later austere dramas suggest that reason and the human will are helpless without the intervention of God’s grace, a theme dear to Augustinian Christianity. Port-Royal attracted strong women, religious and intellectual giants, philosophers, academics and people dedicated to living a devout life in the midst of a troubled century. Look no further for a 17th Century ‘new religious movement’: Bible-centred, lay-led, Eucharistic, orthodox, devout and intellectually tough. No wonder church and secular authorities were worried and took action to crush it, eventually razing it to the ground and sprinkling salt on its earth.



Champaigne’s relation to the Abbey was both personal and spiritual: when his daughter Catherine took vows there, he presented the Abbey with paintings of Mary Magdalene and the Baptist and his love for her shines through in the wonderful painting he did of the moment when she is miraculously healed of a paralysis. Does he exhibit the spiritual influence of Port-Royal? Can he be described as a ‘Jansenist’ painter? Not in any serious doctrinal sense. There is, of course, an aesthetic associated with Port-Royal, characteristically restrained, sober and cautious: Mère Agnes Arnauld’s ascetic and aesthetic advice, ‘the more one takes away from the senses, the more one gives to the spirit,’ promotes a chill minimalism not found in Champaigne. His paintings of the Last Supper, Ecce

Homo, the Good Shepherd, the Samaritan woman, etc. decorated the chapel and chapter house of the Abbey as they might have enriched any religious house of the period.

Nevertheless his art is expressive of how religion was experienced in Port-Royal. One of the challenges facing 17th Century artists was how to give visual representation to mystical and spiritual experience. How does silent visual art convey deep contact with God? Bernard Dorival invents a new word to describe how Champaigne addresses it, suggesting that we think of his art as concerned with *instase* ('being taken into the depths of oneself'). This contrasts with the Baroque art of *extase* (ecstasy or 'being taken out of oneself' in an abundance of movement, drama and fusion of heavenly and earthly realities).

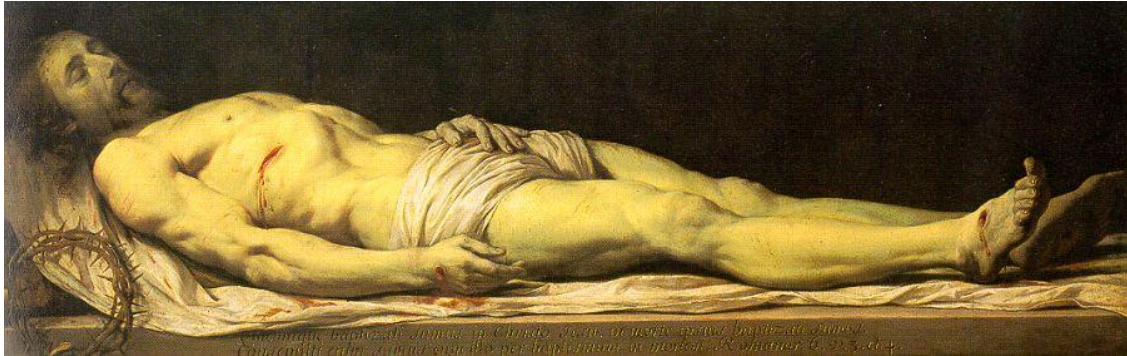


Bernini's sculpture of Teresa in ecstasy (*left*), for example, uses her swirling Carmelite habit no less than her expression to suggest this clearly erotic rapture on a weightless cloud is what it is like to be 'in God'. Although he can do angels and swirls with the best of them, Champaigne in his Port-Royal work portrays the effects of grace as silent and inwardly transformative. While Jesuit art favours the raptures of *extase* and the self caught up in mystical transport, Port-Royal prefers *instase*, a silent attentiveness exhibiting a confidence in the supreme power of grace over nature, the interior openness by which we prepare ourselves for the coming of God in grace and the transforming radiance of divinely generated goodness. Champaigne's portraits of the Solitaires, for example, glow with a grace-filled lightness of eye and skin: these, we feel, are wonderful men whom God is progressively simplifying with his love. They know who they are and they are full of spiritual ease.



Champaigne, like Pascal, was in no doubt that the holiness of Port-Royal was divinely attested through two miracles, the second of which involved his daughter Catherine and is the subject of the wonderful *Ex-Voto* (*left*) which he painted in thanksgiving for her miraculous recovery from

a paralysis. No angelic trumpets sound: trusting that the miracle will happen, Mère Agnès kneels by Catherine's wooden chair while Catherine herself looks upwards in anticipation, her hands joined and, on her lap, a reliquary. Divine light representing grace, begins to come down. All the nuns can do is wait; neither is perturbed by what has happened or will happen. Their habits are not swirling like that of Teresa because when God acts, we are not taken out of the ordinary; the proper response to the divine, Champaigne suggests, is expectant attentiveness and faith. The miracle is evoked only in its inward dimension. Significantly, there is no figure on the cross behind Catherine, only nails in the wood because in her pained body Catherine is 'filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church' (Col 1.24).



No less remarkable is his painting of the dead body of Christ stretched on a stone slab in the sepulchre (*above*). It is a body that no one actually saw in this state, a body hidden from human eyes. The body has just begun to display the effects of *rigor mortis*: a blue tint has already started in the feet and hands and is spreading to the centre, but the rest of the body still has warmth in it. From the wound in his side, to which the eye is drawn, there are still beads of water and blood, signs of sacramental life flowing to the Church. On the slab are incised the words ‘..all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. We were buried with him by baptism into death’ (Rom 6.3). This body is where we are if we are baptised.



How different this is from the classic image created in the previous century by Holbein, (*above*) where the hands and feet of an emaciated body are rigid in their death agony, the mouth and eyes remain open and the putrefaction of a three day corpse is evident. Holbein gives us an image that appals: a body now outside the human continuum to which only God can relate in a future drama of resurrection. ¹ Champaigne, by contrast, offers us a body to be contemplated in faith and in which we already participate sacramentally.

Did Champaigne know Pascal's profound meditation on the holy sepulchre, the centre of Christ's work, into which only saints enter? Surely this painting is not far from Pascal's words:

Jesus was dead but seen on the cross. He was dead and hidden in the sepulchre. Jesus was buried only by saints. Jesus performed no miracles in the sepulchre. Only saints went into it. It was there that Jesus took on a new life, not on the cross. This is the supreme mystery of the Passion and Redemption. ²

We know that Port-Royal fostered a devout contemplation of the Biblical theme of 'the hidden God', thinking of its culmination in the hiddenness of the body of Christ in the Eucharist where only true believers touch him. Champaigne's painting of the dead Christ in the Sepulchre gives us, as it were, a last look at the sacred body that will become the locus of the world's expiation and the source of salvation to those sinners who are called to be in him. As a religious painter, Champaigne is pre-eminent in an age of hyper-ventilated religion and that is why he might speak silently to us.

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¹ On Holbein, see Michael Prodger, *The Spectator* 19 April 2003 at [/www.lewrockwell.com/spectator/spec59.html](http://www.lewrockwell.com/spectator/spec59.html)

² Pascal, *Pensées* L560; S467