

only a witness to what she knows. That under the mercy of God our perplexities, our failures, our betrayals, our limitations, can open into new freedoms, if we follow the way of Jesus. A century and a half ago Coleridge wrote:

Christianity is not a theory, or a speculation, but a Life;  
not a Philosophy of life, but a Life, and a living Process...Try it.

I don't know how to better that advice; like Coleridge I have found life in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, like millions of others in every age, like the psalmist before us:

I love the Lord, for he has heard  
the cry of my appeal.  
For he turned his ear to me  
in the day when I called him.

They surrounded me, the snares of death,  
with the anguish of the tomb:  
They caught me, sorrow and distress:  
I called on the Lord's name.

Turn back, my soul, to your rest  
for the Lord has been good.  
He has kept my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
and my feet from stumbling.  
I will walk in the presence of the Lord,  
in the land of the living.

- 1 The talk "Encountering God: when belief fails" in the teach-in for members of Cambridge University *Encounters : Exploring Christian Faith*, to be published by Dartons, Longman and Todd, London.
- 2 See *The Sea of Faith* by Don Cupitt, published by BBC Publications, London, 1984.

## Pohier's Apologia

### Fergus Kerr OP

Finding myself at Le Saulchoir, the French Dominican study-house near Paris, towards the end of September 1962, was a daunting and exciting experience. My first meal, in the meticulous asceticism of that lofty gymnasium-like refectory, consisted of half an artichoke, a lump of cheese, and as much thin beer as one wanted. A month later, as

complaining letters home would confirm, I felt hungry, cold, lonely, alien, and profoundly depressed by the oppressive weight of lectures. The liturgy, with its drilled schola, ran with praetorian precision. When my week came to preside at the conventual mass I was told that my performance was 'détriqué' and 'relâché'—and these were not complimentary epithets. At the end of the academic year I was told that my dissertation was too 'literary'—that I needed to be more 'scientific'. With the two laid-back Brazilians and the three irrepressible Dutchmen, I constituted the handful, in this pagoda of exact ceremonial and dedicated celebration, who knew that other Dominican ways were possible.

On the other hand, with sermons and lectures by Chenu, Congar, and so many others of that character, in the inaugural year of the Council, how could I not delight at being in a great theological power-station at such a time? The lectures were often dreary—but I remain grateful to have had that experience of good old-fashioned Thomist scholasticism. I shall not forget my excitement at Claude Geffré's exposition of Thomas Aquinas on the Passion of Christ, or the recreation of his treatise on the Virtue of Charity by Jacques Pohier ...

Jacques Pohier, born on 23 August 1926, joined the Dominican Order in 1949. He came of a profoundly Catholic background, he had experienced the great outburst of Catholic energy at the Liberation, and he underwent the deep transformation of personality that a traditional novitiate was designed to provoke. For many years, after studying psychology in Canada, he taught moral theology at Le Saulchoir. In 1974, with his public support for legalised abortion, he found certain avenues of activity closed to him. *Quand je dis Dieu*, the book which he published in 1977, drew severe criticism in French theological circles. He was asked by the Holy Office in Rome to retract certain theses in the book—in particular, that Christ gave no redemptive or sacrificial significance to his death, that he was not raised from the dead, and that nobody is going to be raised from the dead. In 1979, after unsuccessful negotiations between himself and the Roman dicastery, he was forbidden by the Master of the Order to preach, to preside at the eucharist, or to teach theology. His new book, *Dieu fractures*, started in July 1981 and completed in April 1984, records his decision to leave the Dominican Order.

From the start, of course, the book wrong-foots a Dominican reader, at least if he or she is able to recognize some of the writer's feelings. For me, at least, it helps to explain why I felt so alien at Le Saulchoir twenty years ago. It will prove relevant to note, however, that, with grandparents whose religious stance went from Victorian-rationalist to lapsed Catholic and nominal Episcopalian, my own Christian inheritance is shaky, not to say shallow. It is equally relevant to note, moreover, that, largely as a result of reading Ezra Pound,

D.H. Lawrence, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, I became a Catholic in 1954, aged twenty three.

It took almost two years for his being thwarted in his vocation to force its way into Jacques Pohier's writing. His frustration—to the point of weeping—at being forbidden to preach was in itself hardly surprising. But the character of his resentment began to suggest questions about how much of himself he had invested in his right to preach. In a similar way, his anger at being excluded from presiding at the eucharist (he was allowed to join the presbyteral row at 'concelebrations') prompted even more deeply disturbing questions. Why—for someone who completely accepted the theology according to which the true 'celebrant' of the eucharist must be the *church*—should he feel so aggrieved at not being free to 'preside'?

He felt that he would die—he certainly felt that he was *rotting*—because he was thwarted in his desire to perform the functions for which he had been ordained. He was decaying because he was not free to exercise his priestly authority—and yet, by his own best theological lights, he should have been able to relax into the deep equality of the baptismal community. He began to fathom just how profoundly his very being was identified with a form of the ministry which he had intellectually already rejected. A certain picture held him captive: his very identity had been so shaped, from the novitiate onwards, that the picture lay in the depths of his own being. His resentment at being silenced made him reflect on the *character* of the power over him that his Dominican ideals exerted so inexorably. He began to be surprised that it was so much 'second nature' to him. Even before his difficulties with the Holy Office, he had begun to want preaching, liturgy, and theology, to become 'more modest, more restrained, more fragmentary'—for them to cease being 'the grandiose theological, liturgical, or oratorical syntheses which showed no sign of doubt whether they could do justice to the whole mystery of God' (page 60). He had already felt the need for his preaching to become 'less natural, less immediate, less matter of course'.

Like all Catholics of his generation, as he says, Jacques Pohier had been brought up as a fundamentalist. His theological formation had been completed years before modern exegesis took effect. Nevertheless, like many another, he found his way slowly and painfully out of the habit of supposing that the gospels were stenographic transcripts that gave immediate access to the historical figure therein described. Thus he lost a certain 'direct and immediate grip on him' (Christ) that fundamentalist Catholics supposed themselves to have. In a complete retraction of one of his earlier theses Pohier notes that his objection was only to the idea that the resurrection of Christ must be regarded as 'an empirical fact, itself establishing an absolute empirical immediacy'—'It all happens as if

the resurrection of Christ mattered because it gave us an immediate and total grip on God—thus as if it tipped (basculer) the Risen One into our world, instead of tipping him into the transcendence of God' (page 73). He now sees that, since the resurrection of Christ need not mean *that*, it is possible for him to say that he is 'raised from the dead' and 'seated at the right hand of the Father'.

He also had to free himself from a certain picture of Christ as the Perfect Man who contains in himself, at least virtually, every conceivable human quality and experience. He had to learn that Jesus was 'only a prophet and not the father of a family or a peasant or an intellectual or a politician or an artist or a monk or a bishop' (page 77). This must sound banal, and even incredible, but Pohier insists that this picture of Christ has held Catholics captive for many generations. (I have certainly met something very like it, at a conference last year, although it was a Protestant minister who seemed to subscribe to it.)

Above all, however, at Easter 1981, Jacques Pohier discovered that his experience of being a Dominican depended on a certain conception of *God*. He began to realize that he had to give up the God 'on whom I believed I had a grasp, about whom I believed I could speak, whom I believed I celebrated, to whom I had consecrated myself' (page 94). The central chapters of *Dieu fractures* set out to break the traditional links between God and death, between God and sexuality, and finally between God and guilt.

The ceiling fell on him when he expressed his doubts about the resurrection of the dead in *Quand je dis Dieu*. The angry remonstrances he received from so many different quarters displayed 'the fear that death inspires in certain Christians and the way they use their faith in the resurrection to deny death and to tame the fear that it provokes' (page 106). His critics were not placated when he recovered his faith in *Christ's* resurrection; he suddenly realized that what mattered supremely was his doubts about *our* resurrection. It did not matter what he believed about God or about Christ—all that mattered, in the end, was what he believed about *our deaths!* Galileo had been forbidden, in 1616, 'to hold, teach, or defend' the Copernican theory of the solar system, because it dislodged mankind from the centre of the universe. Now, however, it turned out that 'You can believe in God and in Jesus Christ as much as you like—but if you have the least doubt about the resurrection of *man*, it is all for nothing'.

'But for our resurrection from the dead our lives have no meaning'. This reaction, which many Catholics would no doubt have, displays such a deep pessimism about the intrinsic beauty and truth in human life on this planet (even, and perhaps especially, in adversity) that it secretes a crypto-Manichean failure to believe in the goodness of creation.

'But for our resurrection from the dead our faith in God is pointless'. This equally 'natural' reaction, by many of his dearest friends, clearly leaves Jacques Pohier totally baffled. In one marvellous paragraph he protests that 'the joy and the pleasure and the wonder that God is as Jesus Christ has shown us, rather than like the gods fabricated by our social, psychological and religious mechanisms' are simply *there*—quite independently of any belief about the future resurrection from the dead of us human beings (page 123). A fellow Dominican, who works with people in distress, accused him of caring nothing for the people who suffer so much injustice in the world that God's righteousness simply has to be demonstrated at their resurrection: 'Your God is a God for the rich and the happy: I'd be ashamed to offer him to people who suffer and are desperate'. As he sat by the bedside of a lovely girl who was dying of cancer she told him that she could not understand how anyone who spoke so beautifully of God did not believe in the resurrection—'but I don't care, I know you're not wrong about God, and it's with your God that I am going to die' (page 124).

In the end we are invited to 'put faith in the resurrection of the dead into parentheses' (page 139)—'in order to resurrect among the living the delight that can be had from God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit, and the life that they make possible among human beings'. What Jacques Potier means comes out clearly in the following passage (page 132): 'Jesus of Nazareth, who obviously believed in this resurrection of the dead, did not make life in another world either the centre or even an essential consequence of his teachings, of his actions, or of his own life. The good news that he proclaimed was not: the Kingdom is near because you are soon going to pass over into another world, but: the Kingdom of God (i.e. God) is here because God is coming into this world. The Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, are not a charter for life in some other world, but the charter for a different life in this world'. God's memory is, like God himself, eternal, and so Pohier says (page 162): 'The memory that he will have of me—as of every living being, as of every work of his hands—will never die. I see in that no form of survival for me; but what I see in that is a form of God's fidelity to himself and to the human creatures he has made in his own image and whom he wants to know'.

As a moral theologian, Jacques Pohier naturally had to think a great deal about sex. Indeed, delation of an article on clerical celibacy that he published in 1962 was the first item in his file at the Holy Office. In 1968, the papal condemnation of certain contraceptive methods scandalized many Catholics: significantly, as Pohier observes, it was the one issue that Pope Paul VI sought to settle on his own. As we have already noted, the campaign to legalize abortion in France isolated Pohier in 1974. As he notes, with Pope John Paul II

sexuality has become ever more verbosely a papal preserve. (Mischievously, Pohier reminds us of the well-known statistic that Poland has an appallingly high rate of abortions—far higher than any other Catholic country.)

His training in psychology was to complete it, but his liberation from the (apparently rather Jansenistic) Catholic tradition in which he was reared began when he discovered St Thomas Aquinas. It was already a surprise to learn that, for St. Thomas, the goal of human life, and of the moral life, was *happiness*. But the greatest shock was to find that, for St Thomas, virtue did not reside in the will's subduing the passions. On the contrary, 'the moral virtues concerned with the passions are *in* the irascible and concupiscible powers themselves' (Ia IIae, 56, 4). The latter, where (according to Pohier) sexual desire is to be located, is amenable to reason, but not dominated by it. A fortiori, the passion is not supposed to disappear in favour of will and reason. Rather, the 'object' of this passion is that physical good which is pleasure (23, 1). Continence, according to St Thomas, is not much of a virtue (IIa IIae, 155, 1). Even more remarkably, Aquinas argues, against a powerful tradition represented by St Gregory of Nyssa, that it is a mistake to suppose that there would have been no sexual intercourse in Paradise (Ia, 98, 2). Indeed, contrary to his Franciscan contemporaries St Bonaventure and Alexander of Hales, he claims that, in the state of innocence, the pleasurable sensation would have been all the more intense, given the lovers' greater purity of nature and greater physical sensitivity. In most of this, as Pohier insists, St Thomas differed quite significantly from mainstream Catholicism then and since. It was, at any rate, in 1952, as he studied these thirteenth-century texts, that Jacques Pohier first began to reflect on the negative picture of sexuality and of pleasure which his Catholic formation had bequeathed to him.

In the pages that follow he argues, in pitiless detail, that this negative attitude to sexuality still holds many Catholics captive. All the same things are changing. Devout Catholics acclaim the roving pope wherever he goes—but most of them have rejected his teaching on these matters (page 229). Men and women of deep faith, who are often pillars of the local church, 'are discovering that affective monolithicism is not necessarily the ideal condition for the vitality of their marriage' (page 234). Many venerable clergymen 'think that they have no sexual life because they have the sexual life of an eight-year-old boy—that is to say, they work hard and think of Mummy every day'; but a 'growing number' of priests and nuns 'under the age of sixty-five' no longer see any incompatibility between their vocation and an active sexual life (page 236). There has always been concubinage, but this is 'something new'. Of homosexuality Pohier is unable to speak: 'It is only very recently that there has emerged a little

the unconscious resistance that prevented any understanding of homosexuality and inspired me with a certain fear of homosexuals, whether men or women' (page 238). (This admirable candour does not extend to undermining his confidence in the counsel that he found himself in a privileged position to give to celibate men in difficulties for over twenty years.)

Next comes the question of guilt. There is no denying that sin exists; but, since Nietzsche and Freud, our understanding of culpability has changed so much that we need to reform Catholic practices as well as break certain theological images (page 257). Jacques Pohier relates the story of a Holy Week liturgy which he led in an ordinary parish in Brittany, in 1973, when he first felt uncomfortable with the conception of guilt, and thus of God, that the ceremonies contained. On Maundy Thursday, as he started the Mass of the Lord's Supper, he was suddenly appalled that he had to ask the congregation to prepare for the celebration by admitting their sinfulness (page 261): 'Why, when God invites us to his table, do we find it appropriate to begin by telling him that we are unworthy guests'? Shouldn't the eucharist start with an exultant 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' and only at some later point reach the 'Confiteor'? What are we saying about God when our initial response to his invitation is not to thank him but to proclaim our unworthiness? On Good Friday, during a liturgy which he had always loved very deeply, Jacques Pohier suddenly became aware of how incongruous the Reproaches were: the great set of reproofs addressed by the Crucified Saviour to his ungrateful people (which dates apparently from the eleventh century). What has this 'whining' by Christ in order to produce shame and consternation in the congregation got to do with the Jesus who is never presented in the gospels as saying 'Why are you doing this to me, after all I have done for you ... Should you not be ashamed of yourselves'? Finally, on Holy Saturday, after hearing confessions for hours, Pohier suddenly felt the irrelevance of all this 'noise' filling our churches on *that* particular day, as Easter is about to dawn.

At no point does he ever deny that we do wrong and that this needs to be admitted. His point is simply to question whether the place that culpability traditionally occupies in Catholic consciousness does not reinforce an unbelievably infantile conception of God. The picture is as follows. What it all comes back to, so Jacques Pohier insists, is the offended God whose anger has to be placated with a sacrifice so that his mercy may be released from the demands of his just rights. The function of the Son is to humiliate himself before the Father, to the point of self-extinction—and then he will be rewarded by the Father's allowing him to sit by his side. We human beings, who have been redeemed from our wholly offensive condition by all this drama, are not freed from culpability because every sin until our last breath

(and how are we not to sin?) exposes us once again to the righteous wrath of the Father—but now, of course, it is all much worse because we offend against the Son who has done so much for us. Is *that* how sin comes into it? Is *that* how God is to be envisaged? Is *that* how we are to picture ourselves?

Our need to thrust our culpability to the fore seems inextricable from a hatred of ourselves which is also a form of self-love, and from a professed love of God which is a masked hatred. There are other ways of being Christian, as Jacques Pohier acknowledges (page 313); but the character of the Catholicism from which he is breaking out must have emerged by now, even without the rich and vivid detail of these chapters. The break is, of course, a breaking of a certain image of God as well as a breakdown of Pohier's image of himself as a Dominican.

In the third and final section of the book Jacques Pohier analyses how his life as a Dominican had always been 'ordered' by a certain theological presupposition: namely, that God is *all*. Once again he returns to Thomas Aquinas, to explain one of his most significant theological options (IIa IIae, 25, 1): 'does the love which is charity focus solely on God or does it also include our neighbour?' The handful of brilliant pages in which Jacques Pohier deals with this question strike me as the heart of the whole story, but that may be only because they bring back memories of that bleak winter of 1962–63, when the delight and lucidity with which he took us through these same texts were among my few joys.

Everybody knows, of course, that we have to love our neighbour just as we have to love God. For Aquinas, however, the question is whether the love which is ('supernatural') charity has any other 'object' except God. His contemporaries, and an exalted 'mystical' tradition behind them, assumed that when we love our neighbour it is really *God* whom we love—not the mere human being opposite us. According to Pohier (page 340), his Catholic background, and then his Dominican formation, taught him to regard God alone as the object of love—to such a degree, and in such a way, that all other realities were devalued and marginalised. The apostolic zeal to be invested wholly in God involved radical detachment from loving anything or anybody else. (Although never mentioning it, he is presumably alluding to the great controversy in late seventeenth-century French Catholicism about 'disinterested' love, etc., involving Bossuet against Fénelon and Madame Guyon—and locating himself as a descendant of the latter.) For Aquinas, on the other hand, we have to love ourselves, out of charity (23,4). Even more remarkably (25,5), a man should love his own body, out of charity, otherwise we should be succumbing to Manicheanism. (Pohier makes the point that St Thomas weighed over 100 kilos—15 stone or thereabouts.) For all



their Thomist studies, however, neither Pohier nor his Dominican colleagues ever allowed Thomas's theological option to sink deeply into their lives—or so he says. Indeed, in their religious life, they liked to play with the notion that the 'evangelical life' is an 'angelic life' (page 347)—a notion that would only have raised a ribald laugh in an English Dominican novitiate.

That these 'Manichean' and 'Jansenist' currents run strongly in mainstream Catholicism surely cannot be denied. These are, of course, merely labels—the point of Jacques Pohier's book is to record his own painful and reluctant confrontation with this inheritance—this incubus—but he presents himself as a typical figure and paradigm. As my opening autobiographical remarks were intended to suggest, it is hard for me as an English Dominican, to feel the power of the syndrome. Nevertheless, in the past twenty years, perhaps particularly in conversation with women religious, I have met the same kind of self-denigrating for the supposed greater glory of God. In fact, there is nothing particularly Roman Catholic about it—consider Barbara Pym's Anglo-Catholic presbyteries, certain manifestations of Lutheranism, or many other forms of 'puritahism'. It flourishes quite independently of either Roman authoritarianism or religious life—indeed, it flourishes where both of these are reviled.

Two comments may be allowed. That Christianity, and certainly Catholicism, depends on and disseminates certain deep structural perversions has surely become clear in the past twenty years. Jacques Pohier, at great cost to himself, and to his friends, has drawn attention to one image of God that has to be broken. To limit myself only to embarrassments that occur in the liturgy, what disturbs *me* most in Holy Week is the hostility to 'the Jews' inscribed in the Passion narratives—and what disconcerts me nearly every day is the exclusively *male* image of God. Neither of those perversions preoccupies Pohier.

But *Dieu fractures* is an enormously powerful book. To speak of it as his 'apologia', is, of course, to compare it with the book that Newman wrote with such passion and eloquence in 1864. That too was the work of a man so deeply hurt by what he felt as calumnious accusations that his only defence was to tell his own story. Autobiography is necessarily partial—in both senses. No doubt, the Catholicism from which Jacques Pohier frees himself during the course of writing this book is much less systematic and coherent than he (with those inescapable years at le Saulchoir) is bound to make it out to be. As the writing nears its end, in 1984, he keeps telling us that he is fifty-seven. It is a brave age to start a new career. One can but wish him well—and remind him that, after all, in 1864, Newman was already sixty-three.

• *Dieu fractures*, by Jacques Pohier. Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1985. Pp 403. 110F.