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# Guillaume Pouget and the Theological Renewal at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

by Erminio Antonello, C.M.

*Province of Turin*

Rarely in a thinker do his biographical reality and his thought coincide as tightly as they do for Guillaume Pouget (1847-1933). One can write his biography in a few lines; his theological reflection requires more space. Having become blind a little after becoming 50, and having been deprived of his teaching position in Church History and Old Testament in the Scholasticate of the Vincentians in Paris because of the Modernist crisis, he would have been buried in the obscurity of his later years had he not met in a rather casual way some young people of the Normal School who took away his isolation.

These young students — among them J. Chevalier, J. Guitton, and E. Mounier — giving him their free time from university studies, interrogated him about the problems that modern thought posed to traditional faith. They wrote down his thoughts and reflections or, “making themselves the hand and eye” of their teacher, they worked out with him systematic reflections on the questions debated at the time.<sup>2</sup> It is through this rather underground path that this patient reflection on the foundations of Christianity has come to us, a

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<sup>1</sup> In this article the theological and spiritual thought of Fr. Pouget is summarized in a broad outline in the context of the theology between the two centuries. It was written to recall the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fr. Pouget's birth. For that occasion, Fr. Pouget's niece, Mrs. Paule Houdaille, desiring to make her uncle known in his birthplace (Haute Auvergne), supported the writing of this article, which we are presenting to you and which appeared in the magazine *Revue de la Haute Auvergne*, January-March 1997, N° 59.

<sup>2</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Père Pouget. Logia. Propos et enseignements*, Paris 1955; J. GUITTON, *Portrait de Monsieur Pouget*, Paris-Gallimard 1941; *Dialogues avec Monsieur Pouget sur la pluralité des mondes, le Christ des Evangiles, l'avenir de notre espèce*, Paris-Grasset 1954; E. ANTONELLO, *G. Pouget, testimone del rinnovamento teologico all'inizio del XX secolo*, Milano-Glossa 1995, 272-280 (it is from this monograph, that Fr. Antonello composed the present article).

reflection that he transfused in these students who chose him as teacher in a rather original form of dialogical teaching and intellectual alliance.

Thinking about faith — for Pouget — was neither a diversion nor the result of academic activity. His interior meditation had been, instead, a substitute for the active life. Because of this, it was a work that wore him out, keeping him company in the solitude of his blindness:

*There are those who think I am like those nice old people who spend their time mumbling some prayer. I think, and that is exhausting.*<sup>3</sup>

*I am not necessarily impressed by my being blind, because that would make me sad; I cannot see my hand today, but I can still count my fingers. I would much rather think about the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit than about something that does not matter, except to souls that follow that path.*<sup>4</sup>

He came in contact with the burning questions of the time from a distance and in a sporadic way according to the questions that those who came to see him in his room posed to him. From this point of view G. Pouget was more a witness than a player in the rather delicate history of the transformation of the way to do theology in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 1. Between Modernism and Vatican II

The problematic at the heart of the theological debate at the beginning of the century turned on the question of whether or not it was possible to use the historical-critical method in theology, and, if the answer were positive, under what conditions. The cultural pressure from a historical-critical viewpoint made problematic the “speculative theology” then in use, leading to the introduction along with it of “positive theology” willing to research the historical evolution of doctrine. This operation was not without difficulty, because it would have to be preceded, in a way that would rule out superstitions, by a clarification about the *gnoseologia teologica*, that is, on the criteria for knowing revealed data, once one was able to be sure of its historical dimension. The question had hardly been raised at the beginning of the century, when it in fact became the question put aside with the emergence of the Modernist crisis.

The introduction of history and of historical criticism in the exegetical/theological arena raised the objection — and, in fact,

<sup>3</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *op. cit.*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> J. GUITTON, *Dialogues, op. cit.*, 204.

around this question was constituted a so-called “conservative wing” of scholars who were firmly opposed to its unconditional use — that it seemed to dissolve the “sacred text” of the Word of God into a simple historical-literary repertoire. On the other side, the “progressive” one — we use an inappropriate word, but one that indicates a tendency opposed to the other group indicated — were those theologians and exegetes who, in the name of progress in historical-positive science, supported the need to introduce these methods into the study of Scripture. In truth, this way of putting things does not show the range of thinking in the complexity of the debate; in fact, however, the historiography of Modernism flattened itself out on this polarization of extremes, tending to have them come together in one or the other intermediate positions, discredited as simple “positions of compromise.”

This misunderstanding has also permitted the facile establishment of a “direct sonship/derivation” between Modernism and Vatican II. In reality, to these intermediate positions — still not sufficiently studied — one may attribute an originality all their own and a precious function: that of having assured a link between old and new, as if it were a connecting fabric, thanks to which, once the polemics had calmed, one could slowly work out the rethinking of the theological method that has made the renewal of theology possible. It is in this middle position that the theological reflection of G. Pouget falls, with the clarification that he has not produced a theology in the sense of a “theological system,” but rather that he has explained a *need for theology*: that of taking on the historicity of revelation in a theological context, leading to and anticipating the period in which theology will enter the path of making of revelation its proper intrinsic regulatory principle. Thus, he, with other exegetes and theologians, indicated a theological way that, put forward as a seed in the Modernist period, will flower in the theology of Vatican II.

As confirmation of this thesis there is a rather singular episode one can cite. According to the witness of Loris Capovilla, his personal secretary, Pope John XXIII took from his reading of *Portrait de Monsieur Pouget*<sup>5</sup> the hermeneutical criterion for distinguishing the “deposit of the truths of the Faith” from “the language in which they are expressed,” enunciated in the opening address of the Second Vatican Council. In this distinction historiography recognizes the “salient point of the spirit of the Council in signaling the passage of the Church to a new historical epoch.”<sup>6</sup> Had Fr. Pouget been able to

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. GUITTON, *Un siècle, une vie*, Laffont-Paris 1988, 180-181.

<sup>6</sup> COLLECTION, *Storia dei Concilii ecumenici*, Brescia-Queriniana 1990, 406-407. In that address (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 11 October 1962), we read: “The deposit of faith, that is, the truths which our revered doctrines contain,

know this, he might have, as he did on another occasion, taken a deep breath of relief and observed, "All in all, I did not get around too badly."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Biblical Question and the Introduction of the Historical-Critical Method in Exegesis and in Theology

The principal interest of Pouget was Sacred Scripture and History. His point of departure for beginning his approach to the Bible was the traditional position of Biblical concordance.

*When I came to Paris, I lived on my past. I was a conservative, and none more so. I was forceful. I was for the agreement of theology and the Biblical text. History is stories. One should be satisfied with reading the Holy Scriptures devoutly.*<sup>8</sup>

Having come across the question of the plurality of sources in the Pentateuch in his classes, and as he followed the free courses of Church History on the "Acts of the Apostles" of L. Duchesne at the Sorbonne, his historical-critical understanding of Sacred Scripture matured.<sup>9</sup>

As he distanced himself from the traditionalist concordance position that established a relationship of identity between Scripture and Revelation — from which derived the *absolute* inerrancy of Scripture and the eventual difference among scientific positions and Scripture were just resolved in favor of Scripture through "discoveries" that were at times curious if not to say pure fantasy — Pouget clarified the inadequacy between Scripture and Revelation and, consistently, between dogmatic formula and dogma.

Assuming the *distinction* between Scripture and its revealed content, Pouget was able to accept the historical-critical method without having to renounce the transcendence and, thus, the impossibility of deducing faith from reason. At the same time, while maintaining the distinction in the terms of *inadequacy*, he was able to avoid falling into the position of the biblical Modernism of Loisy, who had opted for autonomy and incommunicability between the

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is one thing; another thing is the way it is expressed, while maintaining the same sense and meaning." The critical text of the discourse, established by successive editing at the hand of the Pope, has been set forth by G. ALBERIGO - A. MELLONI, *Fede Tradizione Profezia. Studi su Giovanni XXIII e sul Vaticano II*, Brescia 1984, 185-283.

<sup>7</sup> J. GUITTON, *Portrait, op. cit.*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> G. POUGET, *La mosaicité du Pentateuque d'après les données de l'histoire et les enseignements de l'Église*, Paris 1897.

two realities. This was an autonomy that, if first the Sacred Scripture and then the dogmatic data took shelter from the uncertainty of criticism — as Loisy intended —, would, at the same time, relegate revelation to what was unverifiable, and thus the theology that would result from this approach would not have any plausible foundation for the historical sciences, that is, ultimately without any justification or intelligibility.

More precisely, because the pre-critical position concerning Scripture could no longer be maintained when compared to criticism, Pouget intuited the principle that permitted scriptural studies in historical-critical terms without eliminating the transcendence of revelation. Such a hermeneutical principle — brought to light by the Magisterium in [the encyclical of Leo XIII] *Providentissimus Deus* (18 November 1893) — consisted of differentiating revealed truth from the “appearances” of a scientific and historical type, between *revealed content and historical-literary vehicle*. On this basis Pouget hoped for a *non-dissociated* way of understanding the relationship between faith and history, and, consequently, a method that would safeguard, at the same time, the exigencies of faith and those of the historical-critical method.

In fact, the taking up of the principle of *inadequate distinction* between Scripture as Word-of-faith and Scripture as an historical-literary vehicle, without, however, radicalizing it in *separation*, as did Loisy, permitted Pouget to sustain the introduction of the historical-critical method into biblical exegesis and, as a consequence, into the theological fabric, obtaining the gain of not having to remove theology from the exigencies of the critical method, and, thus, of not isolating it from a scientific context.

### 3. The Relationship Nature-Supernatural and Faith-Reason

The taking up of this double dimension, historical and divine, of the Scripture put in evidence — in G. Pouget — a more profound dialectic about how Christian revelation happened, or rather the relationship between nature, and the supernatural, and thus between faith and reason. Compared with the unambiguous exaltation of one or other extreme in this dialectical polarity, that had given rise to nationalistic or totally uncritical positions in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pouget chose a balance between the two. He held that reason and faith, nature and the supernatural, were not far apart in their dynamisms, but reconcilable. The balanced solution of this irreducible tension constituted the “principle” on which Pouget weaved his apologetic of the Christian event, which, in light of his way of thinking, realized the highest hypothesis of the dynamic of reason, that is, to stretch forward in awaiting an eventual revelation from God.

Pouget loved reason in the highest degree and held that only Catholicism could defend it to the full, because it safeguarded reason's metaphysical capacity to receive the Absolute:

*The highest authority for me is reason; and I should say "my" reason, because I will be judged according to my own thinking. That is why one must always refine it and keep it alert.*<sup>10</sup>

*Denying the absolute is the great sickness of our day. It fouls the air. No one doubts physics, but they do morals! Only we Catholics are truly sensible. We do not walk away from reasoning — for that is what decides the existence of revelation and its limits.*<sup>11</sup>

*We cannot reject the little light which God has given us to know him and to love Christ.*<sup>12</sup>

Reason is not corrupt — he held — it does, however, need discipline; it must, that is, be educated to love the truth more than itself.

*I keep telling myself — keep a grip on reason. But there is something above reason. It is the truth. Truth alone counts.*<sup>13</sup>

*Intelligence attaches itself to truth, but it must be formed for what is true.*<sup>14</sup>

Reason, in fact, does not work in man in pure terms, according to the restriction of rationalism, but inheres in a historical subject, made of sensibility and of free will, and, precisely because of this, can be conditioned by its surroundings. All of this can obscure the "rightness" of reason in opening itself to what is true.<sup>15</sup> If reason, then, is not prejudicially limited to the phenomenal aspects of reality and is educated in its "natural" desire for the supernatural — signaled by the dynamic of going beyond itself that distinguishes it — it finds itself open to the phenomenon of revelation. Revelation, in the act of revealing itself, even though it cannot be deduced by reason, not only does not obscure human intelligence, but fills it with more luminosity that helps it to be aware of the original dynamism to tending toward the Absolute:

<sup>10</sup> J. GUITTON, *Dialogues*, *op. cit.*, 216.

<sup>11</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> G. POUGET, *La méthode dans les études*, Published by Eure, Evreux, August, 1882 and recently reprinted in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, n. 77, December 1989, 4-14.

*We have higher tendencies in us: one cannot say that they require the perfect realization of that which they aspire to be. But if God grants their fulfillment, that is better.<sup>16</sup> Revelation... surpasses reason; but it enlightens it, rather than imprisoning it.<sup>17</sup>*

Thus, faith and reason are considered — by Pouget — in a fertile virtuous circle. The reasons, with which intelligence questions faith, make the responses of faith support the interests of man. Otherwise, “faith would have nothing to say if reason had not asked for something.”<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Distancing himself from the Biblical Modernism of A. Loisy

The tension between faith and reason, maintained dialectically in balance, is the background to the solution of the “exegetical question,” that came up with the publication of the *little red books* of A. Loisy. The thinking of Pouget concerning Loisy was positive at first, although with prudence, and critical on some points.<sup>19</sup> Later on, however, especially with the examination of his commentary *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, he became aware of the insufficiency of the biblical exegesis of Loisy. In a short time, with the help of J. Chevalier, G. Pouget published a vigorous criticism of it.<sup>20</sup> He revealed the structure of Loisy’s methodology, showing that an exegesis that wished to proceed in a “separate” way from faith does not succeed — notwithstanding the intention of wanting to protect faith from the uncertainty of the critical method — at remaining neutral or objective. Furthermore, he accuses Loisy of having substituted for the pre-comprehension of faith the vision of rationalism, and thus of not having stayed in that neutrality that his critical method, founded on the *adequate* separation between faith and history, should have — as he claimed — maintained.

*M. Loisy can interpret well when he bears witness to the Gospel. But he should never oppose his interpretation to that of the Church, as one would oppose science to legend. He should not pretend to have followed “in everything a purely scientific method” (I, 268). His commentary is full of hypotheses which he spins, gradually, into affirmations or quasi-affirmations, without being able to commend anything but a small number of*

<sup>16</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 285.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>18</sup> J. GUITTON, *Dialogues*, *op. cit.*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> E. ANTONELLO, *G. Pouget, testimone*, *op. cit.*, 36-37, 73-75.

<sup>20</sup> G. POUGET - J. CHEVALIER, “Les Évangiles Synoptiques de M. Loisy,” in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, 1 (1909), 337-366.



*“a priori” statements, either philosophical or undisclosed critiques. We do not blame Loisy for having a bias: history, moral science, can never do without a bias of some sort. The Church has one, and she knows it; M. Loisy has one also, but we would like to hold a grievance against him because he does not seem to recognize it. Furthermore, we should add that the Church’s bias seems to us, historically, much more solid and much closer to the facts, than that of M. Loisy: for the criticism itself, we prefer St. Paul to Strauss, even amended.<sup>21</sup>*

In other terms, Pouget chides Loisy for having ignored the fact that history is “a moral science,” which is to say that its understanding is determined by “a mentality” that conditions it; and that thus its “historical” data is *in agreement* with the interpretation of the meaning borne by the tradition that transmits it; because of which — in the final analysis — Loisy shows himself *lacking in the sense of tradition*.

*Loisy takes the texts like neatly severed slices which he submits to analysis. But, in reality, they are connected to an uninterrupted flow of life within a society, the Church, which has its own psychological laws, to understand by tradition. Loisy lacks the sense of tradition.<sup>22</sup>*

Now, the sense of tradition, of which the biblical texts are the written reflection, is the sense of the faith given by the Church and her Magisterium: thus, it is not possible to understand in a correct manner the sense of the texts of Scripture outside the sense of the tradition of faith. And consequently, the *coordination of criticism with faith*, in such a way that faith constitutes the pre-understanding of the sense of the texts of Scripture is not something arbitrary, but is an intrinsic necessity to the nature of the inspired texts.

In this reflection, G. Pouget finds himself in objective harmony with the theses of *Histoire et Dogme* of Maurice Blondel and with those found in *La méthode historique* of M.-J. Lagrange, even if at a historiographical level one cannot document any links among them. Evidently, it is through the path of culture that these same ways of thinking show themselves. They converge in showing both the inevitability of the historical consideration of dogma as well as the conditions necessary so that one does not fall into rationalism.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>22</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 21.

## 5. Singularity of Revelation

The reflection of Pouget, which has as its purpose the defense of the historicity of revelation, discovered the danger of the reduction of the Christian faith according to the categories of world religions, in which Christianity loses its specificity inside the general religious aspirations of humanity. It is precisely in arguing with the *New Theology*,<sup>23</sup> that Pouget defends the singular nature of the Christian event.<sup>24</sup> In this vein he denounces rationalism colored with vague religiosity, in which Christian revelation with its dogmas is reduced to a form of *religion of the spirit*.

If the result of this theological current is the misrepresentation of revelation, then — argues Pouget — it is necessary to introduce the historical dimension of revelation to avoid such a dissolution. This is so because the Catholic faith does not base itself on the ideologies that from time to time the human spirit raises up on the stage of history; it rests, instead, on the “singular” historical event of Jesus Christ’s giving himself to God, which has been given over and conserved in the tradition of the Church.

*The Catholic faith is that which lives in the midst of a changing world, under successive expressions: it is a message of authority. It is concentrated in the sure revelation on the nature of God that was made in Jesus Christ and on the meaning of his Person: the Trinity and the Incarnation... In the Catholic faith Jesus Christ is not at all the supreme realization of our race; the term of human development must not coincide with the Incarnation. The Incarnation of Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, risen from the dead on the third day, designates something absolutely unique... Catholic doctrine is, above all, a tradition: it is not a matter of inventing a meaning for it, but to assure the meaning it has always had.*<sup>25</sup>

From this we see the preoccupation of Pouget not to close in rigidly the tradition of faith and dogma in “expressive formulas” that

<sup>23</sup> *New Theology* was a renewal project of the consideration of the Church’s dogmas in terms of the development of religious consciousness. It had developed in England in the work of the Congregationalist minister J. Campbell. Cf. E. ANTONELLO, *G. Pouget, testimone, op. cit.*, 104-107.

<sup>24</sup> “Théologie Nouvelle,” in *Revue Catholique des Églises*, 4 (1907) 193-214; “Théologie nouvelle et la doctrine catholique,” in *Revue Catholique des Églises*, 5 (1907) 257-274. Both articles came from the collaboration of J. Chevalier with G. Pouget, cf. J. CHEVALIER, *Cadences*, Paris-Plon 1939, 129, note. The first bears the name of Chevalier himself, while the second has the pseudonym of G. Pouget: G.P. BESSE (cf. E. POULAT, *Storia dogma e critica nella crisi modernista*, Brescia 1967, 675).

<sup>25</sup> “Théologie Nouvelle,” in *Revue Catholique des Églises*, 4 (1907) 202-204.

are changeable; and, consequently, we see his discreet suggestion that the theological task apply itself to *freeing* revelation from the philosophical systems with which it tends to be overburdened within every epoch, so as to rediscover the proper sense of revelation that lives in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church.

*Even Catholics at times make the serious mistake of linking dogma to the philosophical expressions of an epoch. But, in Catholicism, there are not just Catholics, there is the Church; and the Church never abandons dogma, never limits it to the philosophy of one period... rather than the necessity of building a dogmatic construction..., we have to demolish; we must above all get rid of that which is obsolete in the old constructions, and highlight the true sense of dogmatic expressions.*<sup>26</sup>

Within this polemic, then, G. Pouget finds the need for theology to put itself into listening to revelation's "giving of itself" in the development of history. In this same period, he introduced himself to this orientation with a very brief, but original, unedited study called "La connaissance du singulier" [Knowledge of the individual thing] in which he expressed the need for theological knowledge to conform itself to the singular and historical datum of revelation.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Revelation as the Pedagogy of the Communication of God

On this *methodological base* of his theological journey, Pouget was able to trace the underlining of revelation as *pedagogy* used by God to communicate himself. This concept of the pedagogy of God in revealing himself emerges particularly in the general framework of his treatise, *Origine divine ou surnaturelle de l'Église catholique* [the Divine or Supernatural Origin of the Catholic Church], centered on the revelation in Jesus Christ, center and decisive pivot of history. He is the revelation prepared for by God through the history of the Old Testament, seen in the ascending line of prophetic messianism, actuated with the historical event of Jesus Christ, and "radiating itself" in the history of the Church.<sup>28</sup> The subtitle of the work

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 201, 203.

<sup>27</sup> G. POUGET, "La connaissance du singulier," mimeographed paper of ten pages, 21 cm by 28 cm, in personal Archives of J. Chevalier, Cérilly, Lot-Pouget, n. 16. The text has no date; we can date it approximately between 1905-1907.

<sup>28</sup> G. POUGET, *Origine surnaturelle ou divine de l'Église catholique d'après les données de l'histoire*, Lyon 1923. The origin of this book of 569 pages is described thus by J. Chevalier: *This book came from the work that J. Chevalier, at first alone, then with Maurice Legendre and some of his students of the time,*

significantly carried the citation from Hebrews 13:8: *Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

This work is the densest of Pouget's, in which he has left us, even if in an apologetic manner, the significant data that interprets his thought. In it he intended to demonstrate that the inaccessible God, to whom every human religious set of beliefs tries to draw near, does not manifest himself from the depths of the human spirit as natural religion proposes, nor through the dialectical development of human thought as idealistic rationalism presumes, nor from the effort of moral aspiration, as autonomous ethics thinks. God, instead, gives himself to us in the reality of the unique event of human history of Jesus of Nazareth. And this event is embedded in human history through the slow pedagogy with which God prepared for himself, first a people truly his own, and then, through a group of disciples capable of listening, of following, and of going forth, he created the Church, a unique super-ethnic reality that would reach the people of every time and place to put redemption in action.

A particularly effective demonstration of the underlining of revelation as "pedagogy" is his article "*La fede nella divinità di Cristo durante l'età apostolica*" [Faith in the Divinity of Christ during the Apostolic Period],<sup>29</sup> where Pouget shows the method by which Jesus manifested his own mysterious identity as Son of God. It is a pedagogy that, through the signs of miracles and of his word, lets filter into the human consciousness of the apostles the mystery hidden in his person: signs that prepared their freedom to make, through the gift of the Spirit, the act of faith in Jesus of Nazareth as God.

It is thus through the taking up of the *notion of pedagogy* that Pouget was able to recuperate revelation in its historical nature, insofar as, though supernatural, it would be portioned out according to the receptive capacity of the hearer, which is always conditioned by history. From this it follows that the concept of revelation, until that time identified reductively with its sources, begins to become problematic: on the one hand, the idea of revelation considered in objective and intellectual terms as the sum of "revealed truths" begins to crumble; on the other hand, it begins to open itself to its

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Roger Jourdain, André Bridoux, Pierre Bailly, had undertaken in 1905 under the direction of Fr. Pouget, whose notes he assiduously edited. Taken up again many times, and considerably enlarged, this great work was finished during Advent 1922 and was printed in Lyon in 1923, for private use, through the good offices of Victor Carlhian. Cf. G. POUGET, *Mélanges*, Paris-Plon, 1957, Preface, III.

<sup>29</sup> "La fede nella divinità di Cristo durante l'età apostolica," in *Revista Storico-Critica delle Scienze Teologiche*, 11 (1906) 813-831; 1 (1907) 1-12; 2 (1907) 81-90; 4 (1907) 249-282. This long article of 72 pages was published with the pseudonym GUTOPE, an anagram of Pouget.

own “subjective” side, as the dialogue of the free communication of God with his people.

Objectively, we are only at the beginning of a process that will find pure expression in *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II. However, in similar attempts at a balanced presentation of the historical dimension in the examination of Sacred Scripture one already glimpses the placing in evidence of the *subjective/personalistic aspect* of revelation. History in fact shows that the action with which God revealed himself is intertwined with the development of the history of a people, and thus revelation can be considered not only objectively as a complex of revealed truths, but also as the *revealing act of God who met man/a people who are put into the attitude of listening*.

## 7. Outline of “Positive Theology”

On the consideration of the historical dimension of revelation, in Pouget, the need arises to develop a “positive theology” in an apologetic key that can demonstrate in the light of critical history the homogeneity of the development of dogma from its beginning point that is, from the revealing act of Christ accepted by the apostolic community. This is the intent of some small works of Pouget on the principal dogmas of faith: *Le sacrifice dans l'Église du Christ* [Sacrifice in the Church of Christ], *La vie de Dieu en nous* [The Life of God in Us], and *Le surnaturel dans la Bible* [The Supernatural in the Bible],<sup>30</sup> in which he shows the derivation of some fundamental truths of faith, such as grace and the Eucharistic sacrifice, from the very intentions of Christ, that one can see revealed in the texts of Scripture. From these “experiments” we extract the methodology that Pouget suggests for dogmatic investigation: that the investigation of the faith be grounded in Scripture read at the same time in the light of both history and tradition. This methodology of investigation, Pouget held to be not only appropriate, but necessary in a cultural context in which the science of history had become paramount. Because of this he held to the necessity of the use of “positive theology,” and he used it critically when examining “speculative theology”: critical, not in the sense of refuting it, but rather in the sense that he foresaw the need for the “speculative” to calibrate and coordinate itself on the basis of historical research.

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<sup>30</sup> G. POUGET, “Le sacrifice dans l'Église du Christ,” in G. POUGET, *Mélanges, op. cit.*, 115-152; it was composed in May 1916. “La vie de Dieu en nous,” in *ibid.*, 52-68. This small work was sent at the beginning of October 1916 to J. Bouvier and J. Chervalier, who were at the war front. “Le surnaturel d'après la Bible,” in *ibid.*, 69-114. This was found in the manuscripts of Pouget after his death; it is not dated, but, given its affinity with the previous writing, it presumably comes from the same period. Cf. *ibid.*, Préface, VIII.

According to Pouget, in fact, speculative theology was functional in one place, the medieval era, in which faith was given as something that made peace; but because the modern era with the historical-scientific problematic placed in discussion the historical foundations of the faith, it is necessary that theology use a methodology of justification of its foundations. Therefore, speculative theology — in his thinking — was not placed aside, but was to be questioned, because its methodology, which seemed inadequate both for the historicity of revelation and for the methodology of the modern way of knowing, needed to be integrated.

In this criticism of the speculative imprint of the “theology of the schoolmen,” one notes a similarity, external as it may be, with the thesis of É. Le Roy, expressed in his article, “Qu’est-ce qu’un dogme?”<sup>31</sup> This author, formed in the mathematical sciences, in his desire to make up for the non-scientific character with which dogmatic assertions appeared in the eyes of his contemporaries, had tried to give dogmas an interpretation as simple “practical norms.” Similarly, taking a critical position with scholastic intellectualism, G. Pouget held that the truths of faith cannot be reduced to simple theoretical figures through speculation, but are given in the order of salvation to help the realization of human morality.

*... our knowledge of the objects of faith... without engaging in long developments, is more than enough for us to draw practical determinations in view of our religious conduct, and it is exactly for this end that the revealed truths have been conceded to us.*<sup>32</sup>

However, if the anti-intellectual vein of Pouget is undeniable, this tendency is not understood in the sense of an anti-truth reduction of dogma. Dogma appears in the writings of Pouget as the hermeneutic of the Church which confesses the *fact* of revelation in the order of the salvation of man. And theology, in prolonging this

<sup>31</sup> É. Le Roy conceives dogma as a proposition that does not have the possibility of presenting its own intrinsic evidence. “A dogma is a *proposition that presents itself as being neither proved nor is provable. Even those who affirm it true declare impossible that one can ever arrive at seizing the intrinsic reasons for its truth.* Now, modern thought... distrusts the alleged immediate evidence that one multiplied so easily in the past. It discovers there quite often simple postulates adopted for the purpose of practical utility more or less consciously perceived” (*Dogme et critique*, 6-7). Dogma in this way of thinking then does not have a theoretic value, but a practical one, as a rule of action or “*an attitude to take or a direction to follow.*” Cf. É. LE ROY, “Qu’est-ce qu’un dogme?,” in *La Quinzaine*, 16 April 1905, taken up again and broadened in É. LE ROY, “Qu’est-ce qu’un dogme?,” in *Dogme et critique*, Paris-Bloud, 1907.

<sup>32</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 30.

perspective, establishes itself on the research of the foundation and the reasons, and thus tends to align itself as *positive theology*.

### 8. The Primacy of Christ the Redeemer in the “Moral World”

These last investigations of Pouget lead him to put his attention on the center toward which he had already directed all the preceding reflection: the primacy of Christ in the moral world.<sup>33</sup>

Reflection is introduced through the medieval question of the predestination of the Incarnate Word, and following the Scotist direction, that is putting oneself in the perspective of the intention of God rather than in the chronological view of their historical realization, he found that the “order of creation” is *oriented* to the “order of the Incarnation.” And thus, in the eternal design of God, the Incarnation of the Son is prior to creation: this signifies that man was created *in* the Son. As a consequence, Christ is at the center of the moral world, since through the assumption of a human nature in the person of the Word, all men find themselves *ontologically*, and not just by example, linked to him. And thus, Christ, as “head” of the moral world, carries it into the bond of Trinitarian communion, through his life obedient unto death and unto resurrection.

On this premise Pouget faces in succession two problems: the condition of sin of the human person with the interpretation of original sin, and the link between the Incarnation of the Word and the sin of man in the work of redemption.

The decadence of the moral world is an effect of human freedom, because man is not *necessarily* linked to the law that rules him. Therefore, that which is a surprise is not the presence of evil in the human world, but its wide diffusion. Revelation explains that original sin exists from the origins of the world, because of which every person is born affected by a sin that he did not commit. This fact — observed Pouget — creates difficulty for reason: how can one be responsible for a sin that someone else committed through his own actions? Stated thus, the doctrine of the Church seems to be an obstacle for a thinking mind. How does one resolve the problem? One needs — for Pouget — to clarify the limits of the content of faith, freeing the content from the excess baggage of interpretations due to cultural conditioning. In this regard, Pouget shows the weight exerted by Augustinianism, and, by contrast, the exactness with

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<sup>33</sup> G. POUGET, *L'origine du mal moral et la chute primitive*, Lyon 1930, edited by Victor Carlhian, 94 pages; *Le Christ et le monde moral*, Lyon 1931, edited by Victor Carlhian, 87 pages; *La Rédemption du monde moral par le Christ*, Lyon, January 1933, edited by Victor Carlhian, 48 pages: of this booklet, which appeared in print one month before his death, Pouget said that he composed it “with a true spiritual joy.”

which the documents of the Church present the origin of original sin as a *privation of grace* and not as a *fault*. As a consequence, the concept of the “origin of original sin” is interpreted in *analogous* terms in respect to the idea of sin personally committed.

It was his opinion that Adam, the first man, was created *for* the supernatural state, but not *in* the supernatural state, and thus that God had created Adam in a state of justice and of natural integrity, and that only in a second moment, when he had used his own liberty in obedience to its design, would he have been elevated to the state of grace. He founded this interpretation on the fact that the Council of Trent had preferred the saying that Adam “*was constituted in grace*,” leaving aside the other expression that was then prevalent as the opinion of various theologians, that said that Adam was “*created in grace*.” This for three reasons: first, because it seemed more faithful to the details of Scripture which recognized a “natural state” in the first man; second, because it seemed to him more consonant with the free nature of man; and third, because it avoided considering God as a clumsy Creator, who had to resort to repairs after the disobedience of man. And here the second question arises.

God does not then substitute for the first plan of creation, which had gone awry, the plan of redemption. But *the redemptive plan* of the elevation to grace of fallen man was already part of the project of creation: man was *created in* Christ, that is already made one in creation with him who heals him by uniting him in his obedience to the Father.

For this reason Pouget opposed the logic of the thought of St. Anselm on the reason for the Incarnation. We have to free — he observed — the motivation of the Incarnation from every form of dependence on the condition of sin of the creature. In the design of God, the Incarnation is not a function of sin, but of the unity of the moral world to Christ-the-Head: and only as a consequence, since the plan of God finds man as a sinner, does he prolong the Incarnation in the redemptive act that saves the world from sin. The reason for this opinion is that, were the Incarnation determined by sin, sin would have some sort of primacy over Christ. The originality of Christianity thus lies in the reunification of the whole moral world around its center: Christ.

*Christ is the center of the moral world. It could fall. It fell among us... One fell down a rung, and it is difficult to climb up again... But this moral world had what was needed to find a remedy: the redemption, where Christ by his obedience as man to God gave more honor to the majesty than the faults of others could be an insult to him.*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 191.



## 9. From Christ to the Church

*“Redemption is the whole of Christianity.”*<sup>35</sup> The announcement of the supernatural event pervades history and makes God closer to man than man is to himself, realizing the fullness of human nature once again placed in the orientation to Christ in which it had been created. The lasting nature of the event of salvation in time is the Church. The Church is not, in the interpretation of Pouget, a purely spiritual or liturgical fact, but an event of a new fraternity: gathering people of every age and entering into symbiosis with the culture gives origin to a civilization characterized by the order of love. At the same time, it is not a simple social reality, but rather the Body of Christ:

*St. John puts it down for us very well that we are all one in the Father and the Son; that which includes the presence of the Holy Spirit and that, by means of the Son (Jn 17:21-23). If we are all a single living body, and the Body of Christ is eminently alive, being animated by this superior reality which Scripture calls “**pneuma**” and which is attributed as a term of God Himself (Jn 4:24), it is impossible that the members of this body not have a “**reciprocal action**” on one another, as St. Paul clearly notes (1 Cor 12:12-30). This idea that the Church is the Body of Christ, an idea familiar to St. Paul (cf. Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 6:15; Eph 4:4; Col 1:24; 2:19-20), is the basis of what we call the Communion of Saints, that is to say, members truly belonging to the soul of the Church, living a same superior life, which is grace, a type of divine life (cf. 2 Pt 1:4), by which they are made children of God (Rom 8:14-15).<sup>36</sup>*

Because of this, in Pouget’s thought, Christ and the Church become inseparable. *“The great advantage of the Church is to be in the hand of Christ.”*<sup>37</sup> In the Church is a supernatural reserve that has no fear when faced with difficulties. Pouget thus has no fear of the human sins of the Church, which must be seen in the light of its being the “Church of Christ”:

*The Church is a two thousand year-old person: what is happening to her today is a little like a headache in the life of a person.<sup>38</sup> We need to see behind the small human aspects of the Church the immortal Christ, and around him all the saints who already reign in heaven, and all those who, here below, without*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Unedited letter of G. Pouget to J. Chevalier, 15 November 1915, in personal Archives of J. Chevalier, Cérilly, cat. 0503.

<sup>37</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 206.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

*being clothed in crimson nor decorated in ribbons, follow with all their strength in humility and patience the divine Crucified One, with whom they will one day reign in heaven.*<sup>39</sup>

## 10. The Spiritual Identity of Pouget

The passion for the Church, understood as the concrete face of Christ in time, puts into the light a double dimension of the interior identity of Pouget that we would like, in conclusion, to outline.

The first is his concrete love for the spread of the Church throughout the world, and thus his missionary fervor. He was animated by the hope that the event of salvation carried by Christ would expand and that the Church could fill the whole of humanity with her proclamation. The task of forming in theology the young who were placed in his school was driven by his desire to form witnesses in the society.

*Be apostles, convince: "Non armis, sed argumentis," as St. Bernard says — he said to those who came to his room —. Piety is not enough. What is important is **witness**.<sup>40</sup> The twelve were only a handful in a world much more wicked than ours, and they worked, and their work was not fruitless. It is their work we need to continue, and it is the same force, the eternal Christ, who sustains us. We must whisper this into the ears of youth who, lacking experience, could be, at the beginning of their active life, troubled and discouraged. They should think that evil arrives of itself, and all alone, one only needs to let it drop, whereas good requires a continual effort.*<sup>41</sup>

He was suspicious of overly pious and devout forms of prayer. He feared that they would become a psychological refuge and would resemble a false mysticism that shuts souls in their own spiritual comfort.

*Piety is easier than criticism. I believe that to launch oneself into heaven, you must have a solid base on earth. Read St. John, and you will see how Christ insists on his works and, yet, it is the most mystical Gospel. If the Apostles... had not left the Cenacle, the world would still need conversion.*<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, in regard to Christian faith, Pouget highlighted more its relationship with life than with sentiment or with intellect. Faith

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<sup>39</sup> Letter of Pouget, 12 August 1922, cited in *ibid.*, 129.

<sup>40</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 174.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>42</sup> J. GUITTON, *Portrait*, *op. cit.*, 411.

is given to be a help to realize the design of God in our life; for this reason faith was necessary, as he interpreted it, in charity and in moral life.

*There is something better than writing books: it is to beget souls into eternal life.<sup>43</sup> Christianity is not about having nice thoughts, it is about doing them, to come to the help of others.<sup>44</sup>*

The second line of the spiritual identity of Pouget, which is worthy of note, is the ever more passionate assimilation to Christ.

*Only Christ is important... He alone is necessary, transcendent: others do not count next to him (1 Tm 2:5).<sup>45</sup>*

We could say that a mystical union with Christ grew in him through his patient meditation on the Christian event. Because of this he outlined a saint in Pauline terms of a personal self-awareness so involved in Christ that he has been assimilated in him: "*Not him, but Christ in him and by him.*"<sup>46</sup> And he still lived this tension with Christ as an event which is continually renewed, sin notwithstanding.

*I forget the past. Whether it was good or bad, I forget it. We cannot do anything about the past. I have not taken hold of Christ as he has taken hold of me. I say with Paul: I strive for that. The best penance is not useless regret, but to try to become perfect. Look at Paul: he does not keep still. He reaches out toward the future: the things of above are before him, he can reach out to them.<sup>47</sup>*

And a few days before his death, while he was feeling the parting from persons whom he had loved, he was able to say:

*It is sweet for me to go toward Christ, and it is hard for me, hard, because one leaves those one has loved. But we will not be separated. In Christ, union is good.<sup>48</sup>*

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)\*

<sup>43</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> J. GUITTON, *Dialogues*, *op. cit.*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, *op. cit.*, 297-299.

\* The instigator of the preceding article, Mme Paule Houdaille, grandniece of Fr. Pouget (11, rue Cuillerier; 94140 Alfortville; France) can procure a mimeographed collection of 130 pages of Fr. Pouget's unpublished or out-of-print texts. Write to her at the above address for more information.