Jansenism: An Early Ressourcement Movement?

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Jansenism and Ressourcement

The primary purpose of the ressourcement movement of twentieth-century France was a theological and spiritual renewal based on a return to the original sources of Christian tradition, namely scripture, the Fathers, and liturgy. Proponents of the so-called 'new' theology (a title they vigorously opposed) included within this renewal a concern for a dialogue between faith and the major issues of their day, and for a renewed ecclesiology which gave due place to the role of the laity and to a conciliar concept of governance. Ressourcement is often seen as the harbinger of the Second Vatican Council, which modernized the Catholic Church and swept away much of what was considered 'traditional', so it may appear perverse to link it with another French phenomenon generally blamed for all that is considered rigid and obscurantist in Catholicism. Nevertheless, a closer look at seventeenth-century Jansenism reveals a remarkable similarity to key aspects of the later ressourcement. Had the reforms envisaged by the Jansenists not been so comprehensively crushed by church and state, it could be argued that the reforms spearheaded by de Lubicz, Congar, Daniélou and their companions might have come about considerably earlier.

Like the word 'Puritan', 'Jansenist' has become detached from its historical moorings to serve as a catch-all phrase for rigidity, sanctimoniousness, and oppressive religious austerity, used, as in Patrick Kavanagh's Lough Derg, to describe the 'foul legend' of a certain type of French or Irish Catholicism, brutally pessimistic in its concentration on sin and allegedly responsible for everything from endemic sexual repression to mental illness. It fares little better in film and literature, Tag Gallagher describing Rossellini's film Blaise Pascal as a horror movie, in which 'everything is drenched in suffering, torture, fear, superstitious dread; everyone is writhing in desperate faith, self-mutilation and pain [...] everything seem[s] drenched in blood and penance'. He sees the film as a portrayal of the 'appalling heroism', with which, through 'endless misery and dogged persistence', the Jansenists struggle with 'absurdity systematised into terror'.

In their own day the Jansenists of seventeenth-century France were similarly demonized by their enemies, and with as little care for truth or accuracy. While undoubtedly there were tragic distortions in Jansenist views on grace and the sacraments, early Jansenism can nevertheless be seen as one of the foremost contributors to the development of modern consciousness in advocating the rights of the individual conscience. In espousing the rights of the lower clergy, the emancipation of slaves, and the restoration of civil status to Jews and Protestants, later Jansenism stands at the forefront of social, political, and philosophical radicalism. In terms of ecclesiology, Jansenism fostered stronger roles for the laity and especially women in the church. The outstanding scriptural scholarship of Port-Royal and its efforts to promote a vernacular missal were aimed at the fuller lay participation in liturgy promoted by the Second Vatican Council. In a close parallel to the ressourcement movement, the Jansenist recourse to the past was a radical response to the questions posed by a society in transit and a church in disarray after long periods of conflict and stagnation. Yet the positive dynamic within Jansenism burned itself out in an ideological quarrel that ultimately thwarted the very reform at which it was aimed.

Jansenism: A Movement for Church Reform in Seventeenth-Century France

In the first half of the seventeenth century the convent of Port-Royal, outside Paris, became the centre of a reform movement which attracted many of the


most brilliant social, political, and intellectual figures of the day. Led by Mère Angélique Arnauld, the community extended to the solitaires or Messieurs, laymen or priests who were famed as much for their erudition as for their austerity of life. Like the proponents of la nouvelle théologie, the Port-Royal circle rejected the name given to them by their critics, preferring ‘Friends of the Truth’ or ‘Disciples of St Augustine’ to ‘Jansenists’. Foremost in its spiritual leadership were the Abbé de Saint-Cyran and Antoine, brother of Angélique, ‘Le Grand Arnauld’, and their nephew Louis-Isaac Lemaistre de Sacy, the biblical translator.

The Jansenists drew inspiration from the condemned radical Augustinianism of Michel Batus, Professor of Scripture at Louvain. Similarly inspired, the monumental Augustinus of Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585–1638), Bishop of Ypres and friend of Saint-Cyran, was published posthumously in 1640. In 1653 Innocent X condemned as heretical five propositions allegedly found in it. The bitter fait and droit controversy that ensued over whether or not the propositions were in the book set individual conscience over ecclesial authority. This controversy led to the eventual condemnation of the Jansenists not only by the church but also by Louis XIV, who saw in Jansenist insistence on conscience an emerging resistance to his increasing absolutism.

In his book on the Reformation, Diarmaid MacCulloch observes: ‘The issues of authority which Jansenism raised are still those that threaten to blow apart the modern Roman Catholic Church. That is reflected in the call back to a vision of papal monarchy, away from the conciliarism of the Second Vatican Council, sounded by Pope John Paul II from 1978.’ The way that theology relates to history and the understanding and interpretation of Christian sources lay at the heart of the question over the extent to which Augustine’s teaching should be considered as doctrinally normative. The relation of theology to history and original context was also to become a crucial issue in the twentieth century with the nouvelle théologie.

In the search for a clear understanding of Augustine’s doctrine of grace, Port-Royal made a major contribution to the study of patristics and to scholarly research into original texts. In this stress on historical sources, there is a strong parallel with the re-appropriation of Christian sources by twentieth-century French theologians, though there is a major difference of focus between the reessoucements of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. It was largely the lack of contextualization and the tendency towards a narrow, primitivist interpretation that gave birth to the distortions for which Jansenism was condemned. If their radical Augustinian zeal betrayed the Jansenists into error, Owen Chadwick gives a comprehensive and impressive list of their achievements by the nineteenth century: stronger parish life, better education of priests, better work in schools, a more congregational liturgy, a love of early Christianity and of the Bible, and ‘the renewal of a quest for the authentic and innermost meaning of Catholicism’. This might well sum up those achievements of the Second Vatican Council spearheaded by the nouvelle théologie.

In 1643 Antoine Arnauld’s De la fréquente Communion argued for a return to the more rigorous sacramental practice of the patristic era. Arnauld held that the ecclesial body founded by Christ ‘is the same today as it has been for sixteen hundred years and […] will be the same at the end of the world’. Notions of necessary changes in legislation, culled from the structure of secular society, could have no place in the church of God. He and his opponents took as their champion Vincent de Lérins, whose Commonitorium offers as the criteria for orthodoxy ‘what has been believed everywhere, always and by all’. What was left open was the question as to who might provide an authoritative interpretation of the Fathers, whose works were even more open to multiple understandings than scripture itself.

While Port-Royal played a major part in the revival of patristic and biblical scholarship, the indiscriminate Jansenist passion for Augustine came to be seen as an indirect threat to Roman authority since it pitted the Fathers and ancient councils against the Pope. The final years of the seventeenth century saw a concerted effort between papacy and throne to outlaw Jansenism and crush Port-Royal. The convent was closed, the nuns and Messieurs imprisoned or evicted and finally the house razed to the ground. This only drove its supporters and their work underground. Pasquier Quesnel’s Réflexions morales on Sacy’s 1665 translation of the New Testament precipitated the Bull Unigenitus in 1713 and with it the appellant crisis, where bishops, religious, and clergy who appealed against Unigenitus and called for a general council of the church to arbitrate the matter found themselves unwilling heretics overnight. The definitive break between Rome and the Jansenist remnant came about in 1871 in the aftermath of the First Vatican Council and its pronouncement of the dogma of papal infallibility.

The present-day Gallican Catholic Church of France, founded in 1883, is a far cry from Port-Royal. Arnauld and Saint-Cyran would certainly be bemused by the monthly Mass for animals where retired television stars and pretenders to the throne of France are joined in church by an assortment of llamas, dogs, cats, and guinea pigs.

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9 Antoine Arnauld, La tradition de l’Eglise sur le sujet de la pérennité et de la communion (Paris: Antoine Vitré, 1644), 52.
12 Quantin, Catholicisme, 17, 97–8.
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The Jansenist reformers have been described as looking to recover the earthly paradise of the past as a means of arriving at the heavenly paradise of the future, while their twentieth-century counterparts are seen as looking to the past in order to learn how to construct the future. For the Jansenists, the translation of the scriptures and the reform of the liturgy were key parts in promoting full participation in church of the laity whose baptism required it of them as a duty. Within their passion for 'the truth' lay also the notion of the theologian's freedom to exercise reason and conscience, submitting not to authority for authority's sake, but to truth, and authority insofar as it proves to be its guardian. Not only theologians but bishops were eager to follow Arnauld and claim their authority and autonomy directly from God rather than Rome.

Jansenist Ressourcement in Conflict with Rome

If Jansenist ressourcement brought Port-Royal into conflict with Rome over the authority of Augustine, their reference to the tradition of the church with regard to the Bible and Tridentine liturgical reforms would prove equally contentious. They developed a particularly high theology of the laity. Their enthusiasm for the use of the scriptures and even, with the exception of the prayers of consecration, the celebration of Mass in the vernacular, the promotion of lay participation in the liturgy, including praying the breviary, and the reading of the Canon of the Mass aloud, put clear water between Trent and the Augustinian reformers.

The rules which preceded the Index of forbidden books stressed that those reading the Bible should have the capacity to interpret it according to Catholic tradition, and that this capacity should have been verified by a qualified cleric. Arnauld, echoing Chrysostom, argued that the simple faith should have a voice in the church and have as much access as possible to the sources of Christian doctrine and holiness: 'I am [...] struck by the wrong that is done to the church and to faith by those who try to prevent the children of God from reading what the Holy Spirit has caused to be written for them.'

He criticized the papal ban on vernacular translations of the breviary, in a critique that was a comprehensive rejection of the Index and the very notion of forbidding books.

The Spanish Index, more rigorous than the Roman one, issued an all-out ban, valid in all Spanish territories, on translations of the scriptures into the vernacular. This set up tensions between those of Ultramontanist tendencies and members of the theology faculties of Louvain (in the Spanish Netherlands) and the Sorbonne, whose close acquaintance with Protestantism and nationalistic pride led them to favour translations into French.

The years between 1660 and 1708 marked the golden era of biblical translation at Port-Royal. As Professor of Scripture at Louvain, Jansen himself had published several studies of the New Testament and the Pentateuch, and Saint-Cyran, whose spiritual doctrine was largely based on the New Testament, persuaded Antoine Le Maistre to translate the Gospels. This translation would be continued and edited after his death by his brother, Le Maistre de Sacy, in what would become known as the Nouveau Testament de Mons.

Despite his own struggles with the language, Saint-Cyran promoted the learning of Hebrew at Port-Royal and further inspired Le Maistre to translate the Psalms.

Saint-Cyran himself never wrote a word of commentary on scripture without first verifying that it was in line with the patristic tradition.

In addition the Messieurs produced erudite, patristically-inspired biblical commentaries, concordances, and histories. The translations included commentaries and prefaces emphasizing Augustine's pre-eminence as an interpreter of scripture.

In the face of Trent's support for the Latin Vulgate as the sole authentic version of the Bible, these laymen translated directly from the Greek and Hebrew. Such gestures challenged the clerical hegemony of Trent to an extent that unnerved even the Gallicans among French bishops and theologians.

20 Letters to Du Vaucel, 5 and 12 October 1691, quoted in Arnauld, Œuvres, iii.388-90.
21 See Chézeloù, 'Grandes étapes', 343-6; and La Bible et la liturgie en français, 186-9, 195.
22 See Jean Lesaunière, 'Les hérésiarnents de Port-Royal', Chroniques de Port-Royal, 53 (2004), 29-45.
25 Chézeloù, 'Préfaces de la Bible de Port-Royal', Chroniques de Port-Royal, 53 (2004), 47-66. (50-1).
26 Chézeloù, 'Grandes étapes', 349-50; and Jean Lesaunière, 'Les hérésiarnents de Port-Royal', 35-41.
Arnauld’s insistence on making the Bible available to all was vindicated in 1757 by a brief of Benedict XIV liberalizing the ban on biblical translation. By then Port-Royal’s dominance in biblical translation had been firmly established. But if Benedict’s brief vindicated Port-Royal’s insistence on access to scripture, with the Fathers as its primary interpreters, it did so by insisting on clerical regulation of who had permission to read the Bible. Port-Royal’s attempt to make Bible reading obligatory for all Catholics not only failed but would be condemned after the Synod of Pistoia.  

Jansenism and Reform of the Liturgy

Zeal for the reform of the liturgy predates Port-Royal, French delegates to the Council of Trent urging liturgical and sacramental reforms, experimenting with vernacular liturgies and conducting baptisms in French. 28 But in the following centuries the liturgy became the battleground in a struggle for local autonomy against Roman centralization. 29 Concerns to preserve the Gallican heritage by returning to the practices of the ancient church provoked major liturgical revisions at local and diocesan levels in the eighteenth century. 30 By the mid-nineteenth century, a sustained counter-surge of Romanization took place in order to avoid Jansenist and Gallican ‘errors’. The chief culprit in Ultramontanist eyes was the *Heures de Port-Royal*, a translation of the breviary aimed at giving the laity access, like the clergy, to the prayer of the church. 31 Both in its preference for the Hebrew text of the Psalms and its encouragement of laity to participate in a prayer generally reserved to priests and religious, it raised a storm of protest. 32

The scholars of Port-Royal culled the legendary content of saints’ lives within the breviary, replacing them with patristic texts of undisputed provenance. 33 Jansenist polemic against ‘indiscreet’ Marian devotions in favour of scripture and the Fathers was inspired by a purist preference for historical realities and the simplicity of the primitive church. 34 In 1660 Joseph Voisin produced a hugely successful four-volume bilingual missal. 35 Intended to promote greater understanding of and participation in the Mass by the laity, it was perceived in Rome as a challenge to the authority of Trent and condemned by papal decree. The missal remained on the Index until 1897, the pope threatening to excommunicate automatically all those involved in producing or using it. Voisin’s translations were included in Le Tourneux’s *L’Année Chrétienne*, a highly popular series of commentaries on the feasts and seasons of the liturgical year, together with a translation of the Canon of the Mass, which the French bishops thought reflected Jansenist tendencies, and had put on the Index in 1691. 36 Arnauld wrote several defences of the translation of scriptures, patristic, and liturgical texts, arguing repeatedly, among other points, that it enabled women to have access to these cornerstones of Christian life. 37

Jansenism and Vatican II

It has been suggested that the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council did little more than take up where the Jansenists left off. 38 Filled with partisan invective and conspiracy theories about Jansenism, the famed liturgist Dom Prosper Guéranger of Solesmes rejected the austere Gallican passion for scriptural and historical accuracy. 39 He accused Jansenist liturgical translators of promoting anarchic theological autonomy among the faithful, let loose on the scriptures and prayers in French. Others defended the recovery of ancient liturgical rites and texts by the likes of Jubé of Asnières, despite his reputation for consecrating asparagus during Mass. 40

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30 By the eighteenth century, 90 out of 139 dioceses in France had created local liturgies; c.f. Hans Bernhard Meyer (ed.), *Escharistie. Geschichte, Theologie, Pastoral*, Gottesdienst der Kirche, 4 vols (Regensburg: Pustet, 1989), iv,270.  
33 Quantin, *Catholicisme*, 249–58.  
Jansenist emphasis on the Eucharist as prayer of all the faithful, rather than an exclusively priestly sacrifice, prompted moves for greater lay participation in corporate acts of worship, including from women and the uneducated, and an assertion of local rites and customs which implied resistance to monarchical papal governance. In the eighteenth century, similar attempts were made to combine reform of the liturgy and greater local autonomy in ecclesial matters. The 1786 Synod of Pistoia in Italy called for liturgical reforms of distinctly Jansenist flavour: maximum involvement of the laity, introduction of vernacular worship, elimination of unnecessary private Masses, proclamation aloud of the Eucharistic Prayer, consecration and distribution of communion at one and the same Mass, and serious preparation for reception of the sacraments. The people and clergy were ill-prepared for such a reforming synod, and the presiding bishop was deposed in 1790. Not until the Second Vatican Council would these reforms, underpinned by the ressourcement movement, become part of the familiar Catholic liturgical landscape.

While the beginnings of the modern notion of a ‘hierarchical church’ were emerging from the Tridentine reforms, the Jansenists were busy espousing patristic authority in the name of Catholic orthodoxy. Pushing to obtain the condemnation of Jansenism in Rome, its enemies tried to imply that papal pronouncements carried the obligation to obedience of dogmatic truths. Arnauld resisted vigorously: ‘The church would be running a risk beyond any daring if popes were permitted to claim to act as prophets, and to sit in judgment on all matters with an infallibility born of religious enthusiasm.’ Implicit in Port-Royal’s exaltation of the primitive Christian past and its push towards ressourcement was the question of the relationship between tradition and the magisterium. In the Augustinus, Jansen effectively subordinates the authority of the church to that of Augustine by claiming that his doctrine is that of the church. As the congregations in Rome met over the Five Propositions and an all-concerning insistent: ‘either all the Holy Fathers, the

41 Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, 23; and Quantin, Catholicisme, 532–53.
46 Arnauld, Letter to an., January 1664 in Œuvres, i.462.

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Councils, the Scholastics and even the Holy Spirit, who is Lord of Scripture, are heretical, or the doctrine of Jansen is. The Jansenist party held that papal pretensions to divinely-inspired doctrinal authority stood in direct contradiction to the patristic tradition. In Arnauld’s judgement, support for the infallibility of the pope that overrode the consent of the universal church or council was a denial of the unbroken tradition of the church: ‘To take him as the arbiter of the truth is to put a man in the place of God.’

The Four Gallican Articles of 1682 confronted papal claims to ultimate authority with a ‘tradition of the church’ firmly established by historical criticism and the example of the African church under Cyprian and Augustine, in which bishops and councils decided on matters of faith, on an equal footing with Rome. The notion of episcopal collegiality and a high regard for councils, so foundational to the concept of church put forward by the Second Vatican Council, was at the heart of Arnauld’s ecclesiology.

Congar offers a detailed analysis of what was at stake in the censure of the Five Propositions. For Arnauld, whoever opposes Jansen opposes Augustine and whoever opposes Augustine denies God’s revelation of divine truth to the church. Sacy put the matter succinctly in rhyme:

Whoever follows Augustine follows the church:
Whoever rejects him despises her:
Since she alone has brought him to
This height of authority.

THE JANSENIST CRISIS AND AUTHORITY

What the Jansenist crisis brings into sharp relief is the question of authority, whether that of internal conviction, based on a person or group’s interpretation of dogma and history, or that of the formal, external criteria of papal governance that the post-Tridentine church sought to establish and reinforce. Against a papacy modelling itself on the patterns and structures of a civil authority, which itself was becoming increasingly absolutist, stood the

49 Letter to M. d’Angers, January 1664, quoted in Arnauld, Œuvres, 1462.
50 Letter to Singlin 1 September 1663, quoted in Œuvres, 1410. See also letter to du Vaucel, 9 October 1686, Œuvres, ii.722–30.
sacrosanct authority of scripture and its interpretation by Augustine and the early Fathers. The Jansenists saw their doctrine and practice as the touchstone for a faith that simultaneously stood against the transient fashions of 'the world' while providing answers to its challenges.\(^{55}\) For Port-Royal, Augustine's work stood as what Gadamer terms a 'classic', something that continues down the generations to occupy a central place in thought and 'conversation' between the historical context of a text and the contemporary context of its interpreter, working out the dialectic between tradition and understanding in a 'fusion of horizons'.\(^{56}\) Modern theologians like David Tracy have developed and sometimes challenged Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, suggesting that if texts are to claim this 'classical' status, there can be no definitive interpretation that would effectively close their history.\(^{57}\) No such theory operated in the seventeenth century, so the drama for the 'Disciples of Saint-Augustine' and their allies in the University of Paris lay in being confronted with two apparently incompatible claims to absolute authority, those of tradition and of the papacy.\(^{58}\) The voice of the French university theologians would not be heard so loudly in the church again until Vatican II.\(^{59}\)

Outside the specialist world of Jansenist studies, little has been done, except in the field of liturgical studies, to relate the movement to the development of the modern church.\(^{60}\) The major aspects of the Jansenist theological position received focused consideration from the 'new' theologians of twentieth-century France. Like the Jansenists themselves, they were seen as dangerous innovators and suffered censure by the church, though unlike the Jansenists they were subsequently rehabilitated to play a pivotal role in conciliar reforms.\(^{61}\) Congar was aware of the futility of 'archaeoaltray' and denied that twentieth-century ressourcement was a scholarly reconstruction or 'repetition'. Repeating Pius XII's criticism of the Synod of Pistoia's 'exaggerated and senseless antiquarianism', he did less than justice to the Synod's long-term goals and Jansenism's clear development, by the 1660s, into a movement that had reforming aims based on concrete contemporary pastoral needs.\(^{62}\)

JANSENISM: A PRACTICAL RESSOURCEMENT IN SCRIPTURE, THE FATHERS, AND LITURGY

Louis Bouyer saw the failure of Jansenist attempts at liturgical reform as a tragedy that thwarted the legitimate introduction of vernacular translation, lay participation, and practical ressourcement into the liturgy.\(^{63}\) The Sources chrétiennes series sought to 'trace Christian doctrine to its sources, in order to find there the truth on which our lives are based'.\(^{64}\) In this, the twentieth-century ressourcement owes a major debt to the renewal of biblical, patristic, and liturgical scholarship, and of eclesiology, in the Port-Royal circle. What united the 'new' theologians was the conviction that theology must present itself as relevant to the present and that the source of this relevance lay in the recovery of the past.\(^{65}\) The intentions of Antoine Arnauld of Port-Royal and of de Lubac sound remarkably similar: 'The great effort lies in rediscovering Christianity in all its fullness and purity. It is an effort that lies ceaselessly before us, as does the task of reform within the heart of the church itself'.\(^{66}\) The similarities lie not only in their methodology but also in their anxiety to provide answers from the past to the dilemmas of the present.

It was in the result that they differed so radically, since the ressourcement of the seventeenth century led to an overall rejection of modern life, whereas it led the twentieth-century theologians to embrace it as a potential source of divine revelation. The contribution of nouvelle théologie must be acknowledged in recovering a tradition of thought, grounded in appeal to historical sources and oriented towards a conciliar construct of church authority that was particularly strong in France and stretched from the patristic era into the middle ages and the doctrines of Gerson via the Jansenists to the Second

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62. Congar, *Sainte Église*, 305, 309, and *Mediator Dei*, 64. The crucial charitable role played by Port-Royal during the *Fronde* and the contribution of Jansenist spiritual directors to Catholic renewal points to their engagement with contemporary anxieties and contradicts suggestions that Jansenism had little pastoral perspective.
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Vatican Council. In this, there is a clear link between both ressourcement movements; as de Lubac says, ‘every time that a Christian renewal has flourished here in the West […] it has flourished under the sign of the Fathers’.68

68 De Lubac, Mémôrre, 96.

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