"Fr. Charles Cummings's revised *Monastic Practices* is an insider's guide to life in the monastic world. Although specifically directed at monastics, it offers secular readers much worthy of pondering value. Drawing on his lifetime in a Trappist abbey, Fr. Charles offers a richly austere, very beautiful volume. For many topics, Fr. Charles provides both the historical practice and the ways in which it has been modified more recently, assisting someone living in community to understand some of the more mystifying customs, or a secular reader to comprehend something of the way monks adapt to the changing world. The meditative bits that appear scattered throughout—discussion of silence, the quality of the cell, and the presence of death—add to the overall balance between instruction and reflection, history and now, individual and community that make *Monastic Practices* a distinctive and valuable contribution to the body of monastic literature."

—Marjory Lange
Western Oregon University

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Monastic Practices

Charles Cummings, ocso

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional practices of the monastic life are directly connected with our search for God. These practices—sacred reading, liturgical prayer, work, silence, asceticism, and many others—are concrete ways and means by which we in monasteries seek God. In and through these practices we express our spiritual values and daily live out our vowed commitment to God. Our monastic life in its outward practices as well as its inward spirit is totally oriented toward seeking and finding God.

Sometimes it may not be completely obvious, especially for newcomers to monastic life, that a particular practice such as rising long before dawn and keeping watch can foster and facilitate our journey toward God. Or, if the value of such a practice did seem clear to us at an earlier stage of our monastic life, it may no longer seem important now that we have reached greater maturity in our vocation. In either case, the practice loses its meaning for us and becomes merely another exercise to put up with, a lifeless formality to go through each day. The practice has lost its original power, and we get nothing out of it any more.

The question, as the Lord put it to the prophet Ezekiel, is "Son of man, can these bones come back to life?" (Ezek 37:3).[1]

The following chapters will explore common monastic practices in order to rediscover them as viable means of leading contemporary monks and nuns to a deeper encounter with God in faith, hope, and love. These traditional practices will be viable, in the sense of being at the service of life, if we know how to use them and how to give ourselves to them until they lead us to God. This is a "how to" book more than a theological or historical study of monastic customs. It is not only newcomers who need to appreciate the traditional monastic practices. The rest of us can discover still deeper levels of meaning, for example, in our interactions with others in the community or in the time we spend alone in our cell or in the common rituals we perform as we move through the monastic schedule. For monks and nuns, the ordinary things we do every day constitute the normal path to God. In the art of living the monastic life, we are always beginners, beginning anew our search for God, because there is always more of the triune, living God to be discovered.

External monastic practices are one thing—their inner spirit is another. The structural framework of observances exists to give support and form to the vivifying spirit of love. That spirit is in the way we do what we do and in our motivation for doing it. In focusing on external monastic practices, we run the danger of a kind of rubricism, as if following the rubrics of monastic living could magically unite us to God. What does unite each of us to God is the living faith, hope, and love that animate our heart and behavior. Monastic practices express those interior attitudes but cannot substitute for them. When the external practices are in harmony with interior attitudes of faith and love, our daily life is transformed, and the kingdom of God becomes a reality in our midst.

Reflections on the meaning and implementation of monastic practices are always provisional, always open to further insights. Although my own monastic experience is limited to the Trappist-Cistercian tradition, I have tried to situate these practices

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture translations are from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition*.

in the common Western monastic tradition of Saint Benedict, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and the Bible, with some references to other traditions as well.

My reflections are made with a view to both monks and nuns, for all the practices are common to monasteries of women and men. In fact, some of these practices are common to all forms of consecrated life and receive special emphasis even in non-monastic communities. A selective, prudent use of these practices also might benefit persons outside the monastery who wish to follow traditional Christian methods of spiritual deepening.

This revised edition of *Monastic Practices* updates, corrects, and slightly expands the first edition. I wish to thank very much the many editors and advisors, almost too many to mention by name, who have helped me in this task. I especially want to thank Sr. M. Bernarda Seferovich, OCist., for her thoughtful and clever drawings, which have joyfully introduced and illuminated each chapter of both editions of this book. Appreciative responses from readers of the first edition prompted me to improve the book as best I can, without detriment to its original purpose. Finally, it should be noted that opinions expressed here are the personal interpretations of the author and not the authorized statements of any monastic family.

SACRED READING

The monastic style of life that evolved in the West after the Desert Fathers and Saint Benedict stands on three foundation stones. Liturgical prayer, manual work, and sacred reading, that is, *lectio divina*, constitute the threefold footing of our daily monastic life. Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate foundation stone, and these three practices connect us to him. The personal stability of each monk or nun in the monastic vocation depends in part on this triadic foundation. If we attempt to build the whole structure of our monastic life on just one foot of the tripod, or even on two, it may all come crashing down some stormy day. A triple footing provides a foundation that is firm against storms and trials.

The numerous other practices of monastic life cluster around liturgical prayer, work, and sacred reading like stringers and trusses that tie a structure together and make it an integral whole. Our study of monastic practices begins with a consideration of each of the three principal supports, starting with sacred reading, because it may be the most problematic. Afterward, we will go on to liturgical prayer and then to monastic work.

Sacred Reading as Encounter

Although there are special challenges to be faced in our postliterate age, we all have the capability and the grace to become masters in the art of sacred reading. Reading has lost its savor for many in our culture and has been replaced by audiovisual media of communication. At the same time, the volume of printed material has soared. There is too much information to absorb. The result is a tension between contemporary habits and the slow, reflective reading typical of traditional sacred reading.

Historically, reading has been a major component of the monastic day. Saint Benedict allotted two or three hours a day to sacred reading in summer and up to five hours during the winter. His principle was to allow as much time as possible for sacred reading after the daily manual labor was completed: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading [*lectio divina*]" (RB 48.1).[1]

The high value monks have placed on sacred reading comes from the conviction that in this practice we meet God through the instrumentality of the inspired text. Before the fifteenth century there were no periods set aside in the monastic schedule for meditative prayer. The common way of communing with God was sacred reading; this was the monastic method of meditation. The monk or nun would sit with the text of Scripture and begin to read attentively and reflectively until a word or phrase or scene struck the imagination or the heart. At that moment the reader

[1] Translations of excerpts from the Rule of Saint Benedict are taken from *The Rule of Saint Benedict 1980*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981). The term *lectio divina* apparently was first used by Origen in a letter to Gregory the Miracle-Worker (see Sources Chrétiennes 148: 192). The term *spiritual reading* originated with the Jesuits in the sixteenth or seventeenth century as an approximate translation of *lectio divina* (see *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 9: 500). *Sacred reading*, as used in this chapter, is an attempt at a more adequate translation of *lectio divina*. The medieval history of *lectio divina* is competently investigated by Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, CS 238 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2011). Cistercian author Michael Casey presents the art of *lectio divina* with a view to helping those who live outside monasteries in his book *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of* Lectio Divina (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996).

paused, put the text aside, and gave himself or herself to prayer. The prayerful pause might last less than a minute or might be extended for a number of minutes. When attention faltered, the reader would return to the text until another moment of insight or another incentive to love should come along. The rhythm of reading and pausing would continue peacefully, unhurriedly, until the bell announced the next exercise of the monastic day.[2]

Listening and Responding

Sacred reading allows the Word of God to touch and awaken the heart. "Indeed," says the Letter to the Hebrews, "the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword . . . able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). When we spend time in sacred reading, we invite God's Word to penetrate our heart and to evoke from that deepest center of our being a response of surrender, wonder, praise, regret, petition, love.

In the words that we read, God speaks to us; in our prayerful pauses we respond to God, verbally or wordlessly. Sacred reading has this double articulation of listening to the Word and responding to the Word. Continual reading, without the periodic pauses, may be a pious exercise and even an appropriate way of praying at times when we are exhausted or distracted, but it is not sacred reading, strictly speaking. The true dynamic of sacred reading is captured in the following description, by the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke, of a man reading: "He does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood."[3]

[2] Sacred reading was a holistic activity that integrated imagination, memory, affections, will, and even speech and hearing. It was customary until the late Middle Ages to pronounce the words in a low tone. The effect was to inscribe the sacred text physiologically in the reader's mind and memory, resulting in a phenomenal recall of terms and themes from various parts of Scripture that shed light on one another. See Jean Leclercq, *Love of Learning and Desire for God* (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1962), 78–79.

[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 201.

Sacred reading is a process of assimilating the word of God and letting its meaning spread through our blood into every part of our being, a process of impregnation, interiorization, personalization of the word of God. Yet the process is a gentle one. The Lord does not come in an earthquake but in a soft, whispering sound (1 Kgs 19:22). In the course of our sacred reading, we meet the Lord in living faith, hope, and love. The encounter takes place without drama as we quietly savor and relish the mystery of God's caring presence. The encounter is real without being extraordinary or spectacular.[4]

As with any method of prayer, the effects of sacred reading should become evident over a long period of time in a person's life. Repeated encounters with the word of God will bring about a gradual transformation as our thinking and willing become progressively harmonized with God's will. Slowly we grow in interior freedom and lose our innate orientation toward comfort and security. Our monastic predecessors in past centuries lived by God's word in Scripture, thought in its categories, spoke in its language, and wrote as if they had a biblical concordance connected to their pen. These were fruits of a lifetime of sacred reading. Speaking at a large gathering of Scripture scholars in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI said, "If this practice is promoted with efficacy, I am convinced that it will produce a new spiritual springtime in the Church."[5]

Obstacles to Sacred Reading

Circumstances may prevent the experience of sacred reading from being fruitful. The text may be inappropriate to one's current ability because of its difficulty or to one's current needs because

[4]Sacred reading can, of course, be the occasion for God to act quite powerfully through a word that seems aimed directly at the reader. For an example, see Marylee Mitcham, *An Accidental Monk* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1976), 35.

[5] "Benedict XVI Promotes Biblical Meditation," *Zenit*, September 16, 2005, Code ZE05091608, http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=76678/.

of its content. Not all the books of the Bible are equally inspiring, though all are the inspired word of God. When nonbiblical material is selected for sacred reading, the author's style of writing or the limitations of his or her cultural background or scientific inaccuracies may be major distractions. The writings of some of the saints contain timeless truths about the spiritual life, but these are hidden like nuggets of gold amid piles of base material. At some point the reader has to make an honest decision about whether a particular text is worth staying with for sacred reading. Part of the art of sacred reading is selecting the appropriate text.

On the reader's part, a common obstacle to sacred reading is impatience. If we expect to receive lofty insights from every line of the text, our expectations are doomed to disappointment. Impatience drives us to another book. The reader who trusts in the power of the text to communicate God's living word, however, will be prepared to give the text adequate time, to dwell with the text, to engage it with a feeling for its mystery. God can communicate his word of life on many levels of meaning. Sometimes a patient openness to levels beyond the literal is needed in order to tap the life-giving springs. More will be said later about these levels of meaning.

Impatience also manifests itself in a voracious appetite to read more and more books and never to go back over a book a second time. We may have a long list of spiritual books we want to get through or a reading program that will take us through the entire Bible in six months. The compulsive urge to finish this book and get on to the next one prevents us from pausing to pray. Without the rhythmic alternation between listening and responding, sacred reading becomes reading for information or edification. True sacred reading is slowed-down reading and rereading with no regrets for the time thus spent. As Scripture scholar Francis Martin pointed out, "Prayerful reading happens in an atmosphere of 'wasting time.' There are no practical goals, no book to get through, no certain number of pages to read, but simply a deep sacramental use of God's word as a meeting place for God and man."[6]

[6] Francis Martin, "Prayerful Reading," *New Covenant* 2 (July 1972): 14.

Speed reading or scanning a text is useful and even necessary for digesting the contents of textbooks, periodicals, or newspapers. When the time for sacred reading comes, however, we have to be able to read slowly and patiently, in a relaxed and open spirit, ready to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:9). A businessman, Sidney Piddington, tells how he discovered the "special joys of super-slow reading" during three years of confinement in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Singapore. Trying to make his precious book last as long as possible, he disciplined himself to linger over each page and enter into the experience being described by the author. His reading fell naturally into the rhythm of listening and responding. As he describes it, "Sometimes just a particular phrase caught my attention, sometimes a sentence. I would read it slowly, analyze it, read it again—perhaps changing down into an even lower gear—and then sit for twenty minutes thinking about it before moving on."[7]

Not only did slowing down make the book last longer, but as a bonus Piddington discovered that the practice lifted him above the sordidness and senselessness of prison-camp life and put him into a more humane world. Super-slow reading preserved his sanity, his human dignity, and his inner freedom. If we transpose this experience to a faith context, we can see that a slowed-down style of reading can be a key that opens the door through which God manifests himself to those who search for him. A hasty impatience prevents us from entering this world of revealed mystery.

Another obstacle to sacred reading is today's lack of a biblical consciousness. Our culture has lost much of its familiarity with biblical stories, biblical symbols, biblical persons, places, and ritual practices. Authors and preachers can no longer make biblical allusions and be sure that the majority of the audience will understand the reference. Why have we lost this familiarity with the Bible? Possibly because the Bible has been crowded out of our consciousness by a multitude of other books and media that compete for our limited attention span. Living in the age

[7] Sidney Piddington, "The Special Joys of Super-Slow Reading," *Reader's Digest* 52 (June 1973): 158.

of information and instant communication means that we are overloaded with information. Today the Bible, the word of God, is just one source of information competing with all the others.[8]

Immediate Preparation

When I have selected an appropriate text and resolved to spend time in patient, prayerful reading, what is the next step? Experience suggests that sacred reading is easier when I do it at a particular time and a particular place each day, and when I invoke the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Learning the art of sacred reading is at first a methodical and systematic process; more is involved than merely opening a book and sitting down to read.

Time. Sacred reading can be prolonged, but perhaps twenty minutes would be the minimum time to set apart for this exercise. A certain amplitude of time seems needed for the listening and responding to become a rhythmic process. Experimentation will help us discover our best time of day for sacred reading. Perhaps the early morning, before the bustle of the day's activity has begun; or perhaps the evening hour when work is over and we are ready to quiet down. Ideally we should do sacred reading at a time when we are alert and will not have to spend all our energy fighting off sleep. Perhaps a cup of coffee, or some physical exercises, or two minutes of total relaxation might leave us feeling sufficiently awake for serious sacred reading.

Place. A suitable place for sacred reading is a place readily available where we feel at home and will not be disturbed. We may have more than one favorite place for sacred reading—our cell, or a corner of the library, or a certain tree in the courtyard. Physical solitude is not absolutely necessary for sacred reading, though such privacy would permit us to read aloud without disturbing others. Nor is it necessary to seek the presence of the

[8] For a more extensive treatment of the obstacles to sacred reading, see Susan Muto, *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), chap. 2. Writing out the text and writing one's response are also means of slowing down the reading. Muto suggests keeping a spiritual-reading notebook.

Blessed Sacrament for sacred reading. God is everywhere, but we will meet God primarily in the text when we do sacred reading. We may wish to reserve the church for a different form of prayer, one more wordless and contemplative or one more liturgical and communal. Saint Benedict wrote: "The oratory ought to be what it is called, and nothing else be done or stored there" (RB 52.1). Still, if we find that the church facilitates our sacred reading, then that should be the place for us. We will do sacred reading wherever we can be ourselves and be at peace.

Being at Peace. The listening involved in sacred reading presupposes a level of relaxed peacefulness and quiet receptivity on the reader's part. If our feelings and emotions are in turmoil, how can we hear the word of God? If we are full of tension and preoccupations, these will soon surface when we attempt to read. We need to create an inner space for the word, a space free of all worries, a free space. How do we calm down before reading? Our whole monastic life should be slowly calming us, freeing us from cares, creating in us that purity of heart that is the ideal soil for the word of God to take root and grow. If we are feeling restless at the beginning of sacred reading, a few deep breaths of fresh air may help to gather our forces and center our attention on the matter at hand. A prayer may serve to make our desires explicit.

Supplication. Sacred reading is a grace-guided activity. There was wisdom in the pious custom that formerly directed the monastic reader to kneel for a moment to pray for the Spirit's assistance before beginning sacred reading and even to kneel while reading the first few words of the biblical text. Fruitful sacred reading is not simply the result of our own efforts but also the work of grace. A brief prayer for God's help (almost any verse of Psalm 119 [118] is appropriate) expresses our faith in his power to enter our life and speak personally to us through the text in our hands. Prayer also disposes us to recognize the moment in our reading when we should pause and make our response to God's word.[9]

[9] On the immediate preparation for sacred reading see also Felix Donahue, "*Lectio* in Our Life," *Monastic Exchange* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 63–65; and Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality* (New York: Desclée, 1961), 53–55.

The Ladder of Guigo

From a twelfth-century Carthusian prior named Guigo II we have a letter with a detailed description of the monastic method of sacred reading.[10] Guigo distinguished four stages or rungs: reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation. "These," he said, "make a ladder for monks by which they rise from earth to heaven." Guigo's ladder still has value for us today, provided we understand that it bears the defects of all schematizations of the spiritual life. Our own personal ladder may have more rungs than Guigo's, or we may sometimes skip a rung or two under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There are also individuals who have problems with any structured form of prayer and prefer jumping into the Bible at random.

Reading and meditation, the first two rungs on the ladder, are climbed by our grace-assisted natural powers. At the third rung, prayer, we are partly active, partly acted on by God. On the highest rung (contemplation), the word of God lifts and draws us, carrying us into itself. The four rungs of Guigo's ladder amplify what I have been calling the prayerful rhythm of listening and then responding. Reading is listening to God's word, while meditation, prayer, and contemplation are degrees of responding to God's word. The four rungs are not four steps in a recipe that has to be followed carefully each time; they are a description of what usually happens when the reader contacts the word of God and lets it reverberate throughout the different levels of his or her inner being, beginning with the outermost level and moving progressively deeper.

Rhythm of Prayer

It will be helpful to explore briefly the dynamics of each of the four rungs of the ladder of reading proposed by Guigo. He tells

[10] Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978); also CS 48 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981). The next quotation in the paragraph is from the Image Books edition, p. 82, slightly altered.

us first that *reading* is a careful and attentive survey of the text in order to grasp the central idea. We begin to listen to the text by reading it slowly and attentively. Vocalizing slows the pace and helps imprint words on the memory. What is being said? What is the meaning of this episode or of this phrase? What is the truth being communicated? We are interpreting the words before us, trying to uncover everything they conceal. Perhaps a single word captures our attention. If we wish, we may concentrate on this word, murmur it aloud, even sing it if we can pick out its inmost rhythm. We listen more and more to the text until we understand it as fully as we can.

The next stage is to ponder the text in *meditation*, examining it in relation to other similar texts, turning it over in our mind, asking questions, noticing even what is not said. Reasoning is the primary tool used in meditation as we probe for the underlying meaning. There is also an affective and personal note as we permit ourselves to hear the words as if they were spoken to us, as a message for us. Meditation is the Marian stage of treasuring the word and pondering it in our heart (Luke 2:19, 31). We believe that God is speaking to us personally through this text, and we take his word to heart. By reflecting and mulling over God's word, we assimilate it and let it become a living part of us. As this truth touches our inmost self, it is no longer we who are interpreting it; now we are letting it interpret us and show us to ourselves as if in a mirror. The light of spiritual truth illumines weaknesses in us that we have not wished to face. The word of God is a judgment on our infidelities and disposes us to pray for grace, mercy, and the fulfillment of our spiritual longings.

In the stage of *prayer* our awareness shifts from the text to the divine author, from the written word to the unwritten Word of God. We dialogue with this Word in the interiority of our heart, in direct, personal conversation, with completely uncensored and spontaneous freedom, with the urgency of a beggar asking for a crumb of bread or a drop of water. We pour out to God our feelings and desires, even asking to know him face to face if his mercy permits. We surrender to his will communicated through the text. As we respond to various texts, gratitude may predomi-

nate, or repentance even with tears, or intercession and petition, or loving adoration. Without feeling hurried or rushed, we spend time with the Lord who knows all that we need before we ask for it (see Matt 6:32). Under the impulse of grace our affective prayer may pass into the fourth stage.

In the state of *contemplation*, we desire simply to rest in God and remain with God. We know that God is near. We experience God's nearness as a gentle, caring presence, the presence of a loving father or mother. From this benevolent source we are ready to receive all that we need to live on. There is no need now for words or thoughts. Our words and thoughts are absorbed into this loving awareness of a silent presence. We meet the Lord in the mysterious silence created around us and within us. On a deep interior level we sense a soothing calm, a refreshment for our weariness, satisfaction for our yearning, anointing with "the oil of gladness" (Ps 45:7). Then, before we are fully aware of who or what is present, the spell is broken by a passing distraction. Our restless imagination has interrupted the fragile encounter.

When distractions put an end to restful communing with God, we have several options. We can thank God for his gracious mercy and then terminate our period of sacred reading. If we wish to continue sacred reading, we can return to the stage of meditation or prayer or take up the book again and read the next passage. "Like the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder, [our] attention [can] go up and down the steps of the ladder of consciousness."[11] In fact, nothing prevents us from going back to the text we read originally in order to re-read it. Because we have already gone through it, this text will reverberate with special meaning, as if we were running our hand over the strings of a harp and resonating with each separate note on different levels within us. Sacred reading entails re-reading.

As a rhythm of prayer, sacred reading means listening, then responding, then resting, then going back to listen again either to a new text or to the same text with fresh docility. Each time we

[11] Thomas Keating, "Contemplative Prayer in the Christian Tradition," *America* 138 (April 8, 1978): 279.

approach the text in a loving, listening way, it can yield a new layer of meaning, like peeling off layer after layer of something that never diminishes in size. The Holy Spirit assists in this activity, disclosing truths, setting the heart afire, and leading the reader into the Sabbath rest of contemplation (see Luke 24:32 and Heb 4:9-10).

Fruits of Sacred Reading

Continual exposure to the power of the word of God in sacred reading will have noticeable effects on the reader. Gradually, with divine grace, the word will become flesh in the reader's daily life. He or she will become not merely a hearer, but a doer, of the word (Luke 6:47). Sacred reading makes an opening through which the life-giving word of God can enter the reader's heart and carry on its work of healing and transforming. The word, once received, is received more readily the next time.

The habit of listening during sacred reading fosters the attitude of listening in other situations to what the word of God is asking. The habit of mulling over words and phrases or murmuring them aloud promotes the practice of repeating short, spontaneous prayers during free moments or while working. Fidelity to sacred reading should produce a gradual change in the reader's relationships with other people, helping him or her become more generous, considerate, gentle, and less selfish, cranky, gossipy, touchy. Sacred reading spreads out into daily life as a power of ongoing reformation and conversion, enabling the reader to recognize and respond to the word of God spoken at diverse times and circumstances. Liturgical prayer, for instance, is a privileged place of encounter with the word of God. Sacred reading and liturgical prayer complement each other and are not intended to remain separate activities competing for a person's time. The psalms, hymns, and readings of the Divine Office come to life as they furnish occasions for brief but intense experiences of meditation, prayer, and contemplation.[12]

[12] One monk has described his experience during Vespers as follows: "After the choral psalmody, the monks sat down and the reader took up his

Extension of Sacred Reading

I have been discussing sacred reading as if Scripture were the only text that could lead to "the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). Scripture is the preferred material for monastic sacred reading, but God speaks in many ways. The concept of sacred reading is flexible enough to extend far beyond the books of the Bible. When one has mastered the art of sacred reading by learning how to perceive God speaking in Scripture, one possesses a tool that may be used fruitfully with nonscriptural material. Ultimately, it is not what we read but how we read it that is important; if we know how to read something in such a way that it nourishes our heart and rouses our spirit to pray, then it counts as sacred reading.

After Scripture, the writings of the saints are perhaps the most rewarding texts to explore in sacred reading. Works of spiritual masters both living and dead, biographies of the saints, devotional literature, and poetry can be used for sacred reading.[13] Other literature, such as T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which cannot be classified as devotional, may, nevertheless, be sensitive to the deeper mysteries of life and draw attention to ultimate values. These classic and contemporary writings can sometimes speak forcefully to the reader and become a place where God's word is encountered.

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book and began the scheduled reading for the 'Saturday of the Fifth Week of Easter,' taken from one of St. Augustine's discourses on the Psalms. . . . 'What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the first season with fasting and prayer; *but now the fast is over*.' That is as much as I heard. At the words 'now the fast is over' by spontaneous association the words from the Song of Songs sprang from my memory, 'and the winter is over and gone, come my beloved, come!' A prayer of desire and gratitude flamed out and filled the minutes of silence after the reader sat down" (A Monk of New Clairvaux, *Don't You Belong to Me?* [New York: Paulist Press, 1979], 139–40. See all of chap. 10, "The Way of *Lectio Divina*").

[13] For illustrations of these and other categories, see Muto, *A Practical Guide*, 4–17.

Once the practice is learned, sacred reading can be extended beyond written words to *auditio divina*, inspirational music, to *visio divina*, contemplating sacred art or a sunset or kittens at play, and extended even to *video divina*, watching an inspirational video. God speaks his word even in nonverbal language. God speaks eloquently in the great book of nature. Saint Bernard, who was surely a lover of the written word, also loved to walk in the forests and fields, sensing the vastness of God's presence.[14] Many monasteries are located in places of great scenic beauty that invites a contemplative response.

Even human-made objects of beauty may be the book, so to speak, where one reads of God. In the Middle Ages, the illiterate could understand the message of illuminated manuscripts, sculpted capitals on the pillars of the church or cloister, and stained-glass windows, which were called "the Bible of the poor."[15] God also speaks in the events of each person's daily life and in the larger events that affect the course of human history. Someone skilled in sacred reading can look back at the course of his or her own life and read there the record of God's wise and loving activity. As Matthias Neuman has written, "Here unfolds the deepest meaning of *lectio* as a reading, the reading of one's own life-history as ongoing dialogue of grace and conversion of life toward the Mystery of God."[16]

At the beginning of his third sermon on the Song of Songs, Saint Bernard wrote, "Today the text we are to study is the book

[14] Writing to Henry Murdac, Saint Bernard said, "Believe me who have experience, you will find much more laboring among the woods than you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master" (*The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James; London: Burns Oates, 1953 [Letter 106] 107, p. 156. See also William of St. Thierry, *Sancti Bernardi Vita* 5.26; and St. Bernard, *Apologia* 12.30, CF 1 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications], 68).

[15] Apart from the subject matter of the stained glass windows, the beauty of their bright ruby-and-blue colors was in itself inspiring even to such cultured people as Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis. See his remarks quoted in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., s.v. "Stained Glass," 631.

[16] Matthias Neuman, "The Contemporary Spirituality of the Monastic *Lectio*," *Review for Religious* 36 (January 1977): 110. See his entire discussion of material for sacred reading.

of our own experience."[17] When we have learned to read God's word in the book of our everyday life, then we are aware of a continuity integrating all that we do in the course of the day. Everything promises a potential encounter with the Word—not only sacred reading, but work and liturgical prayer, interaction with others, appreciation of nature, music, art—everything may become a medium through which the Word speaks to us.

When everything is sacred reading, however, the practice may become diluted to the point of vanishing. In order for our whole monastic life to be an encounter with the person of Christ, specific times must be set aside for encountering him through sacred reading in the strict sense. Only when "the words of God ring in the ear of his heart," as Saint Gregory the Great says, can the reader hear that voice resounding everywhere he or she turns.[18] Sacred reading can be extended to embrace the whole of monastic life provided it is also maintained as a distinct monastic practice. As Sr. Margaret Mary Hanron observes, "It could be said that *lectio divina*, in its broadest connotation, is coextensive with the entire life of the monk. In this understanding, *lectio* in its usual sense would be the form, the pattern, the place, and even the 'sacrament' of that broader *lectio* which is an ineffable and uninterrupted communion of prayer, increasingly pervading the whole existence of the monk."[19]

Concluding Examples

The actual experience of sacred reading is something quite simple. There is the text, there is the reader, and there is the Spirit of God. When these elements come together, almost anything

[17] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 4 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 16.

[18] Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 1, hom. 18.1, *Sanctorum Patrum Opuscula Selecta*, ed. H. Hurter (Oeniponte [Innsbruck]: Libraria Academica Wagneriana, 1892), 118, http://books.google.com/books/reader?id=8OFAyNEfPbsC&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&pg=GBS.PA118.

[19] Margaret Mary Hanron, "Lectio Divina and Study in St. Bernard and at Present," *Hallel* 1 (November 1974): 23, also 31. See also Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 58–61.

may happen. The reader needs to proceed with spontaneity and playfulness. Everyone has the right to approach sacred reading in his or her own creative and highly personal way without feeling obliged to imitate such medieval models as Guigo the Carthusian or even to keep in mind all the matters discussed in the present chapter. In this discussion, a fundamentally simple reality has been subjected to an analysis that might make sacred reading seem intimidating, especially to beginners. This chapter will therefore now conclude with two illustrations of sacred reading that may serve to bring the foregoing discussion down to earth.

The examples will be from Scripture, one from each Testament. Our text from the Old Testament is Psalm 23, and from the New Testament it is Luke 21:5-10. An unhurried, attentive reading of the whole passage is followed by a prayerful reflection and response. Paragraph divisions indicate the successive steps of Guigo's ladder. The moments of wordless communing cannot be captured in print, though these contemplative pauses are the soul of sacred reading. The following, then, are not so much models to be imitated as concrete examples, portrayed in print, of one reader encountering a sacred text in the presence of the Spirit of God.

Example 1. I begin with a short prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the heart of your servant and open for me your life-giving Word."

Text of Psalm 23

> The Lord is my shepherd;
> there is nothing I lack.
> In green pastures he makes me lie down;
> to still waters he leads me; he restores my soul.
> He guides me along right paths
> for the sake of his name.
> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
> your rod and your staff comfort me.
> You set a table before me in front of my enemies;
> You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
> Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me

all the days of my life;
I will dwell in the house of the LORD for endless days.

(*Reflection*) I notice that the figure of God as shepherd evolves toward the end of the psalm into a picture of God as the host of guests at a banquet. The image of the Lord as my shepherd is the one that speaks more to me right now. I recall other places where the theme of shepherd turns up, such as Ezekiel, "the lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal" (Ezek 34:16), or in John's gospel, "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

The Lord is the shepherd of Israel, the good shepherd who does not, like a hireling, abandon his sheep. He leads them to fresh, green pastures on the mountain slope. I get a visual image of an Alpine landscape with snow on the mountain peaks, a placid lake in the valley, and a large herd of sheep pasturing peacefully on the grassy slope. They lack nothing because they have a shepherd who loves and cares for each of them. I believe that I, too, am cared for like that. "There is nothing I lack." Even when I lose my way and wander into the dark valley of suffering and death, I have nothing to fear. My good shepherd will seek me out when I am lost and will bring me back on his own shoulders.

(*Prayer*) Lord, you are my good shepherd. You are there "with your rod and your staff." You are there with your cross as your rod and staff, that cross by which you won the right to be my shepherd and give me comfort in all my distress. Jesus, good shepherd, let me recognize your voice when you call me by name. Give me a place of repose, lead me into your rest. Make me trust more and more in your care for me. You have been a trustworthy shepherd thus far in my life. You led me to the fresh, green pastures of this place, and I want only to dwell here forever. When I injure myself, bind up my wound. When I fall sick, make me well again. When I am silly and stray off, guide me along the right path.

I feel myself being shepherded by your unseen hand, I feel that you are close to me. I want you to be my shepherd forever.

I surrender all my cares to your care for me. My Lord, my shepherd . . .

(I conclude with the Lord's Prayer.)

Example 2. I begin with a short prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the heart of your servant and open for me your life-giving Word."

Text of Luke 21:5-10:

> While some people were speaking about how the temple was adorned with costly stones and votive offerings, he said, "All that you see here—the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down."
>
> Then they asked him, "Teacher, when will this happen? And what sign will there be when all these things are about to happen?" He answered, "See that you not be deceived, for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he,' and 'The time has come.' Do not follow them! When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for such things must happen first, but it will not immediately be the end."

(*Reflection*) The Galilean disciples of Jesus were awestruck by the stonework of Herod's temple in Jerusalem, the immense blocks of perfectly fitting, gleaming white marble, the walls adorned with decorative ornaments donated for the honor of God. A huge grapevine of solid gold adorned the outside wall of the temple.

Jesus predicts that it will all come tumbling down. This did happen in AD 70, when the city fell to the Romans under Titus, and they burned the temple to rubble. Is Jesus telling me that every human construct is liable to come tumbling down, whether it be the tower of Babel, the commercial temple of the World Trade Center, the precarious temple of the stock exchange, or even the temple that is the monastery where I live, which is always vulnerable to fire or natural disaster? Or is Jesus talking about my personal temple that I have spent my life constructing—my career, my family, my reputation, my preferred path to God? Could it all come tumbling down? Like the crowd, I want to

know "what sign will there be when all these things are about to happen?" Jesus gives several signs. "Many," he says, "will come in my name." They are here already; they sometimes stand on street corners carrying signs that say, "Warning! God's judgment is near." Jesus says, "Do not follow them!"

(Prayer) Lord Jesus, I ask your forgiveness for times when I have run after false messiahs, putting my trust in something or someone—even my own wisdom and strength—that is not you. Forgive me the times that I have followed after my passions—my greed, my gluttony, my lust, my anger, my pride—thinking that I had found the way to happiness, forgetting that you are the only way, truth, and life. Lord Jesus, I choose you now as my only Savior, my deepest love. I want to follow you alone, so that I will be secure when all the temples of this world tumble down around me. Let me never lose sight of you, Lord Jesus.

I believe that you are with me always and within me, protecting me and caring for me. I wish only to dwell in your loving presence, loving you in return all the days of my life. You are my temple. You are the only temple that will never come crashing down . . . .

(I conclude with the Lord's Prayer.)

Questions for Reflection

Why should you follow a structure for your sacred reading, such as the four rungs of Guigo's ladder?

What is your greatest obstacle to sacred reading, and how can you overcome this obstacle?