



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Suffer me never to think that I have
knowledge enough to need no teaching,
wisdom enough to need no correction,
talents enough to need no grace,
goodness enough to need no progress,
humility enough to need no repentance,
devotion enough to need no quickening,
strength sufficient without thy Spirit;
lest, standing still, I fall back for evermore. Amen.

--Eric Milner-White, 1884-1964

Week #4b: Prayer (*Lectio Divina*) and Humility in the Benedictine Tradition

Summary of Previous Discussion of Benedict's Life and the Significance of His Rule for Western Monasticism

Benedict (480-550) wrote in 529 a rule for his own community at Monte Cassino, just north of Naples. Although much of the rule (prologue and the chapters on obedience, silence and the steps of humility) are not original to Benedict, **the rule as a whole is quite moderate in comparison with other contemporary rules for ordering monastic life.**

- Cf. prologue (p. 46): purpose of rule is “to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.”
- Contrast the rule of St. Columbanus, drawn up for use by Irish monks, which emphasized physical severity:
 - “He who fails to say grace at table or to answer ‘Amen’ will be punished with six blows...A monk who coughs while chanting the beginning of a psalm will be punished with six blows...If a monk comes late to prayers, fifty lashes...If he makes a noise during prayers, fifty lashes” (in Logan, *History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, p. 27).

The moderation of Benedict’s rule thus led to its almost universal adoption and it was commended for general use at a regional council at Aix-la-Chapelle in 817, with the support of the emperor Louis.

The rule is intended to guide the monks through three basic activities:

- (1) *Opus Dei* (“the work of God”), i.e. the **worship held seven times each day** (cf. Ps. 119:164: “Seven times a day will I praise you, O Lord”), since **worship is**

- seen as the **primary obligation of the monastic life** (“let nothing come before the work of God”)
- a. entire book of Psalms should be recited or sung during the week;
 - b. Psalms (together with other scriptural readings and prayers) a major component of the offices (worship services set at staggered times throughout the day= “canonical hours or prayer”):
 - i. Matins/Vigils/Nocturns (soon after midnight or at least prior to dawn)=principal morning service, includes the Canticle of Zechariah (Lk. 1:68-79)
 - ii. Lauds/Prime (early morning, at or shortly after sunrise, at the beginning of the new day)
 - iii. Terce (third hour=9 am)
 - iv. Sext (sixth hour=noon)
 - v. None (ninth hour=3 pm)
 - vi. Vespers (early evening)=principal afternoon/evening service, includes Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55); when compline was eliminated at the time of the Reformation, the Nunc Dimittis (Lk. 2:29-32) was moved from compline to evening prayer)
 - vii. Compline (night prayer—sometimes said individually prior to going to bed)
- (2) *Lectio divina* (sacred [divinely-inspired] reading) and silent meditation (typically occupies about 4 hours per day)—see below for further discussion
- a. “The best time of day” [=morning] reserved for this
- (3) *Opus manuum* (manual labor; typically occupies about 7-8 hours per day)
- a. *Ora et labora* (pray and work)
 - i. Scripture (esp. the Psalms) memorized during *lectio divina* was repeated and meditated upon while working.
 - b. Contrast the Roman Empire in which only slaves performed manual labor, while the upper classes adopted an ideal of *otium* (=unhurried leisure for study, reflection and writing plus time to dialogue with friends committed to similar interests and pursuits)
 - c. Decentralization and decline of urban centers meant that monasteries had to be relatively self-sufficient (though did engage in limited commerce and receive bequests; monks also had an obligation to produce enough to help the needy)

Further discussion of lectio divina

- Despite its emphasis on manual labor, the rule was primarily concerned to help the monk **move away from outward occupation** (and a sense of oneself as being divided between different outward concerns and tasks, which lead to personal spiritual depletion and a diversion from and diminishing sense of God)
- To be spiritually profitable, reading and praying the Scriptures must be unforced and gratuitous and can never be thought of as utilitarian in purpose (so private devotional time must be strictly distinguished from reading/using the Bible for sermon preparation or other public teaching functions).

- Need to cue oneself to this difference by changing one's posture (e.g. kneeling instead of sitting at a desk), crossing oneself as a transition to devotion, etc.
- One must not force or drive one's reading toward some definitely, previously determined goal or engage in conscious reasoning or systematization of the Scripture.
 - Instead one should follow one's attention as it passes toward different aspects of the text.
 - As the will is affected by the sense of the text and love is stirred up, through this attraction to God, one ultimately arrives at greater purity of heart and greater single-mindedness in relation to God. This softens the soul, so that one more readily feels compunction (the prick of conscience, under conviction by the Holy Spirit, when we have done wrong) and divine leadings.

Spiritual Reading and the Link Between Scripture, Prayer and Worship

Reading, memorizing, reciting and meditating upon Scripture is the foundation of the ascetic/monastic life.

The Reasons Why Prayer Must Remain Connected to Scripture:

- Prayer that does not begin with and remain rooted in the text of the Scriptures very quickly turns into a carnal, self-serving wish-list reflecting the wants of the fallen self and what we perceive to be our immediate needs:
 - ♣ “The prayer which is not made through Christ, not only cannot blot out sin, but is itself turned into sin” (Augustine, *On the Psalms*)
- Scripture is intended to be the object of our meditation: Ps. 118: 105: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.”
- **The reason that Scripture can play this role is that it occupies the mind with divine matters and draws the mind upward toward God.** On the other hand, the mind that starts not from Scripture but from images (representations that it has of the world and scattered thoughts that it has about the self and the needs, value and activities of the self) cycles downward away from God into an increasingly obsessive concern over what one has or must have.
 - ♣ “I am on fire with innumerable and various wanderings of the soul and shiftiness of heart, and cannot collect my scattered thoughts, nor can I even pour forth my prayer without interruption and images of vain figures, and the recollection of conversations and actions...I feel I cannot give birth to any offspring in the shape of spiritual ideas: In order that it may be vouchsafed to me to be set free from this wretched state of mind, from which I cannot extricate myself by any number of sighs and groans, I must full surely cry out: “O God, make speed to save me, make haste to help me.” (John Cassian, *The Second Conference of Abba Isaac*)
 - ♣ “The prayer of the mind is not perfect until one no longer realizes himself or the fact that he is praying” (Antony of Egypt)
- **When the Word is spoken, Christ is there present and active, though unseen:**
 - ♣ We have a consoler, our Lord Jesus Christ. Although we cannot see him with bodily eyes, we keep in written form in the Gospels the things he did and taught while he was bodily among us. If we take care to hear, read and confer with each

other about these things, which need to be preserved in our hearts and bodies, we will certainly conquer the obstacles of this age as surely as if the Lord were always standing by us and consoling us” (Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*)

Reverent Reading in the Refectory During Meals, While the Monks Listen Silently (RB 38)

Typically a chapter from Holy Scripture, followed by a expository comment on the text by one or more of the authoritative teachers recognized by the Church (the abbot may offer the interpretation himself in a brief expository reflection).

(In Benedict’s *Rule*, classic ascetic/monastic writings—e.g. Cassian’s *Conferences* or the *Lives of the Fathers*—were read at night before compline. After Benedict’s time, readings from the lives of the martyrs or saints were often read daily, esp. a quarter hour before the beginning of compline [night prayer=the seventh and last of the canonical hours]; note the importance of light, morally edifying narrative later in the day, as opposed to reading of more troubling [sensual and violent] imagery of the narratives of the Heptateuch and Kings, the passive reception of which is harmful to the tired, less attentive soul. [RB 42.4])

- Within the primitive monasticism of Egypt, silence was kept at meals. Where speaking was allowed (e.g. in the Cappadocian monasticism associated with the Rule of St. Basil), it was often confined to the reading of a chapter of Scripture by an appointed reader.
 - See the summary of John Cassian *Institutes* 4.17 in Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, p. 152: “Reading originated among the Cappadocians, not so much for the sake of giving good spiritual ideas as for the sake of preventing worse things from happening— ‘to prevent useless and idle talk and above all to put a stop to arguments which so easily arise when people are eating together.’”
 - A similar view is found in Peter of Celle, *The School of the Cloister*: “Even if the fruit of understanding and knowledge does not result from reading, reading is still always useful because our minds are occupied, and exempted from vain and useless thinking, which weighs them down and stubbornly intrudes itself.”
 - One could, however, see such reading as arising in a more positive way from earlier Christian ascetic practice. See Jerome’s description in *Ep.* 43.1 of Origen’s way of life: “Ambrose [Origen’s patron] mentions that he never took food in Origen’s presence without there being reading, nor ever go to sleep without one of the brethren reciting the sacred text. This was his practice by day and by night, so that reading followed prayer and prayer followed reading”

Lectio divina (=divinely inspired reading) as the basic form of prayer in the medieval period. (This is formalized by the Carthusian, Guigo II (d. 1188) into four basic parts: (1) *lectio* (“reading”) (slowly, attentively reading aloud in a soft voice, not too much at one time; text is entered into one's memory and the literal sense is grasped by the intellect)

- “When you read, God is speaking to you, when you pray, you are speaking to God” (PL 37, 1086)
- “When you read, He [God] talks to you” (Jerome, *Ep.* 22.25)
- “There is nothing that contributes so much to the life of our immortal soul as the word of God. For as the life of the soul is increased according to the measure in which the word of God is grasped, and understood, so, on the other hand, a failing of that life is experienced whenever the Word of God fails to be received” (Ambrose, *Exp. in Ps.* 118; PL 16,50A?)

(2) *meditatio* (“meditation”)(the passage is seen to contain a surplus of meaning in regard to nature of the person of Christ and the character of the history of salvation and also in connection with one's present situation)

**ruminatio*=as we repeat the text from memory and reflect on it, the mind "chews" upon the text to derive sustenance from it

**This occurs without the use of words, but rather in the heart with understanding. (E.g., recent example from “a bruised reed” in Is. 42:3, a passage about the servant of the Lord, which Jesus refers to himself in Mt. 12:20, spoken after healing the sick → an overwhelming sense of God’s gentleness and mercy; cf. 2 Cor. 10:1)

***Cf. the comments of Kestens, *Spiritual Guidance*, v. 1, p. 283: “These movements may find their origin in a formal meditation on some event in the life of Christ or on some point of faith, but the important thing to remember is that the perfection of mental prayer does not consist in the quality of its logical development but in its depths and sincerity as an expression of love. It is no use trying to dazzle the Lord with our brilliant mind: He made it Himself, and knows all about it; and He is not seeking a display of scholarly wit, but an act of gratitude, praise and love.”

***Isidore of Seville (*Sent.* III,8) distinguishes between reading and meditation upon the meaning of the memorized text as follows: “...by reading we learn what we did not know, by meditations we preserve what we have learnt.”

*the whole will becomes engaged so that we begin to taste the sweetness of what we read and are affected by it; it strikes us, touches us.

(3) *oratio* (“prayer”) (drawn toward God, prayer=“the raising up of the heart toward God” with a petition for divine assistance “in order to avoid evil and obtain God” [Guigo, *Scala Claustralium*])--text is turned into a prayer (slowly uttered; may be brief):

e.g. after reading on God supplying the Israelites with manna in the desert:

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|---|--|
| [Address to God]: | O God of all the living, |
| [Theme from the text, ref. to past] | When your people were hungry you fed them with manna, |
| [Petition drawn from the text, ref. to present] | Give us this day our daily bread, |
| [Development of the petition, ref. to future] | and may our trust in your providence never falter. |
| [Conclusion] | We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen. |

- For another example, see Casey, *Sacred Reading*, pp. 85-86 (which is also the source of the preceding example)
- The verse that is the subject of meditation and the prayer that is developed from the text can be written down in a journal and this act of writing helps imprint the text and its spiritual meaning more deeply upon the mind, as well as allowing these to be preserved as subjects for future meditation, e.g. on a retreat

(4) *contemplatio* (“contemplation”)—by God’s good pleasure we may find ourselves being content simply to remain silently in the presence of God (looking at Christ and remaining there with Christ), our communion with God being centered around themes arising within the reading/meditation upon it.

- The fruits of one's meditation upon the sacred text become the basis for the soul's unspoken (wordless) conversation and communion with God.
 - In this state the mind remains still, quiet and at rest, free from busyness and activity, having nothing particular to achieve [=vacatio].
 - One’s mind and will may sometimes be sensibly affected (warmed, inflamed) by the power and gentleness of divine love. On the nature and significance of this occasional, transient experience, see the important discussion of Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection*, p. 98

In some way, these four parts belong to together and each contributes something helpful to the other.

- Cf. *Scala claustralium* XII (PL 184, 482; tr. of Kestens, p. 283): “Reading without meditation is dry; meditation without reading is rambling; prayer without meditation is tepid; meditation without prayer is fruitless; prayer without the sweetness of contemplation is burdensome; the attainment of contemplation without prayer is either rare or miraculous.”
- Compare the similar remarks of Parente, *The Ascetical Life*, p. 221: “Without prayer, meditation is nothing but a study. Prayer, as the raising of the mind and heart to God, is also a part of spiritual reading...without this quality [sc. prayer] spiritual reading is merely a reading and nothing else.”

For Further Reading on the Practice of Lectio Divina:

--Jean Khoury. *Spiritual Reading of the Bible* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006) (available at http://www.cts-online.org.uk/acatalog/info_SP11.html)

--Michael Casey, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer*, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), pp. 66-75

--Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996)

--Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina, With 500 Scripture Texts for Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 36-44 (some good practical suggestions; the rest of the book is not as helpful or as theologically balanced)

Prayer Increases One’s Love for God and This Results in Increasing Humility

Question: Is there a role for **humility** today in popular culture? (excluding traditional religious figures like the Mother Teresa, the Pope, or the Dalai Lama)

What about in the popular media, e.g. pop music (e.g. Madonna, Janet Jackson, etc.) or reality shows like Survivor or reality romance shows like the Bachelor, Cupid, For Love or Money, etc.?

What is or is not lost within a society where humility is not valued or is not present? (In other words, why should we think that humility is a transcendental requirement for human well-being and human flourishing?)

Why do we fear that humility might have negative aspects or negative consequences?

Is there a false humility (a kind of simulacrum of humility) that is actually profoundly destructive of our inner selves and our relationships in community?

“Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Phil. 2: “He humbled himself, taking the form of a servant...that is why God has exalted him.”

Humility in earlier ascetic literature (Antony, Pachomius):

(a) **the example of Christ in his self-emptying** in the Incarnation (secondarily, the example of Mary, Peter and other saints may also be contemplated)

(b) **pride as the beginning of every evil and the greatest obstacle to our salvation**

(c) **humbling oneself** and bearing insults and loss of position/honor **as an antidote to pride**

- **humility as joined with patience**; it is still fitting to stand up to others, as required to prevent injustice;

- (d) **attributing all good things to God**, rather than oneself and one's own efforts and actions, helps us to understand the reality of grace and to avoid pride as we progress
- **humility as joined with truth**--the necessity of knowing oneself and arriving at true knowledge of oneself and one's own condition as a prerequisite for knowing God;

Note that ch. 7 of Benedict's *Rule* is derived from Cassian Institutes 4.39 (Abba Pinufius' conference on the journey from fear to love)
→ love allows one to conserve humility

For Further Reading: On the role that humility plays in the Christian life, see the summary of New Testament/Early Christian teaching in André Louf, *The Way of Humility*, tr. L.S. Cunningham (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007).