

# The Book of Experience: The Western Monastic Art of *Lectio Divina*

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We tried to console him with God’s word, but he was not one of the wise ants who, during summer, have gathered what they need to live on during the winter. When things are tranquil people ought to gather God’s word for themselves and store it in the inmost part of their heart, just like the ant who hides in the inner chambers of its nest the fruit of the summer’s labours. If it has a holiday in the summer and does not do this then, when winter comes, there is trouble. If it does not have inside what it needs to feed itself then, necessarily, it will die of hunger. The man of whom I am speaking had not gathered God’s word for himself so that, when winter came, he did not find what he was seeking. He did not have the means to be consoled by God’s word. He had nothing within him. (Augustine of Hippo, *On Psalm 36:2*, 11; CChr 38, p. 354)<sup>1</sup>

The medieval monastic practice of *lectio divina*, or “divine reading,” developed from the concern to build an ascetical and mystical life on the foundation of the Bible. In this endeavour the monks were the beneficiaries of Origen’s teaching on biblical interpretation which saw the inspired texts as layered with multiple meanings: doctrinal, moral and mystical. The practice, as it developed experimentally over the centuries, was the result of giving due attention to these various levels of meaning. Figuratively speaking, the medieval monk was trained to read two books simultaneously: the book of God’s word in one hand and the book of experience in the other.<sup>2</sup> The result of this dual focus was a dialogue between the monk’s inward aspirations and desires with the inspired writing that he reads from the sacred texts handed down to him through many centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> [Abbreviations at the end of the essay—ED.]

<sup>2</sup> For the *liber experientiae* see Bernard, SC 3:1; SBOP 1, 14, 7. Aelred *Sermon* 51:6; CCM 2B, p.42.

One who reads only from the book of the text without giving attention to the book of experience, risks being drawn into fundamentalism, attracted to meanings that are out of context both in a literary sense and with reference to the reader's own situation. Ultimately such a de-contextualised reading leads either to stupidity or to eventual alienation. Too much concern for "objectivity" hardens the heart and genuine receptivity declines. On the other hand, one who reads only from the book of experience is prone to becoming too subjective. It is easy in such blinkered activity, pursued without rigorous cross-checking, to read only what confirms—ignoring what contradicts or challenges one's long-cherished beliefs or invites one to change.

This essay offers an introduction to the history and development of the practice of *lectio divina*, from the Alexandrian tradition of Origen, through the medieval flowering of *lectio* found in witnesses such as William of St Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux and Guigo the Carthusian, to the close parallels that *lectio* finds with such contemporary hermeneutics as those of Hans-Georg Gadamer. But more than a simple history, this essay expounds something of the process of *lectio divina*: the multivalence of Scripture, the anagogic ascent, the holistic nature of this practice, and the transformative experience of this pursuit.

### ***The Life of Antony* by Athanasius of Alexandria**

The marriage of the book of the text and the book of experience is exemplified in the figure of St Anthony. St Athanasius (295-373) composed his widely influential *Life of Antony* (VA), shortly after the death of St Antony in 356. The narrative was intended to provide a prototype for monks to emulate. 'The life of Antony is a worthy model (χαρακτήρ) of asceticism for monks'.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning the author insists on the two-fold dynamism of Antony's ascetical effort. 'He paid attention to himself'<sup>4</sup> and 'he paid attention to reading the

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<sup>3</sup> VA Prologue 3; SChr 400, p.126. See also VA 94:1, p.376: 'Read these things to the other brothers so that they may learn of what kind the life of monks should be.'

<sup>4</sup> VA 3:1, p.136. See also VA 91:3, p.368. The verb used in these and in all the following instances is προσέχειν, to pay attention to, to be concerned about. To balance this dual attention, Athanasius frequently points out that Antony paid no attention at all to demons: 24:4, p.202; 24:7, p.204; 25:4, p.206; 26:3, p.208; 26:6, p.208; 31:2, p.220; 35:1, p.230; 35:3, p.230.

Bible'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, 'he paid so much attention to reading that he allowed nothing that was written to fall away from him to the ground but retained everything so that his memory began to take the place of books'.<sup>6</sup> It was from the Scriptures that Antony learned how to live his ascetical life.<sup>7</sup> His singular lifestyle did not take its origin from some weird psychological distortion, but from the call of God clearly heard as the Gospel was proclaimed in the church.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Antony was at a tipping-point where the merest fragment of the Gospel proclamation was sufficient to send his life hurtling in a new direction. The revealed word presented itself to Antony as the answer to the question already forming in his mind and heart. The book of the text and the book of experience were singing in harmony.

Not that Antony may be advanced merely as an apostle of intuitive enlightenment when it comes to understanding the inspired text. As one of the stories about Antony indicates, for him the first stage in understanding is the humble avowal of the impenetrability of the text.<sup>9</sup> Commenting on this, Douglas Burton-Christie writes, 'Stories like this which emphasised the need for silence before the text had a very particular pedagogical aim: to guide the one who would inquire into the meaning of Scripture into the humble way of practice.'<sup>10</sup> From humility the path ahead leads to the hard work of implementing what has been read. It is in obedience to the overt practical meaning of the Gospel text that a beginning is made to mental comprehension. In an age when orthodoxy was of paramount concern, Antony and the other desert-dwellers understood also the importance of orthopraxy. 'Progress in asceticism is the necessary prerequisite to mature spiritual insight into

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<sup>5</sup> VA 4:1, p.140: τῷ φιλολογοῦτι προσεῖχεν; 'He paid attention to the practice of philology'; "philology" was a Christian usage to indicate the reading or study of Scripture.

<sup>6</sup> VA 3:7, p.138.

<sup>7</sup> VA 46:6, p.260: ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν. Antony recommended to an inquirer, 'whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures' (cited in *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Antony 3, tr. B. Ward, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975, p.2).

<sup>8</sup> VA 2:1-5, pp.132-134. Note how the ecclesial proclamation of the Scriptures interacts with his solitary ruminations, themselves occasioned by his reflection on the Acts of the Apostles (see VA 2:2, p.132). The experienced call to conversion is repeated and intensified in VA 3:1, p.134.

<sup>9</sup> *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: Antony 17 (PG 65; 80D Ward, pp.3-4).

<sup>10</sup> D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.155.

the scriptures, while such exegesis in turn yields understanding which makes possible further progress in both asceticism and contemplation.’<sup>11</sup>

The perceived interaction between text and experience is a theme not unknown in Athanasius’s writings. In his *Letter to Marcellinus* he outlines the biblical hermeneutic that he had been taught by “a learned old man”.<sup>12</sup>

...And it seems to me that these words [of the Psalms] become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul (τὰ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς κινήματα), and thus affected he might recite them. Indeed he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him, and either, when he is convicted by his conscience, being pierced he will repent, or hearing of the hope that resides in God and of the succour available to believers—how this kind of grace exists for him—he exults and begins to give thanks to God... And so, on the whole, each psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words, as was said earlier, the stirring of out souls might be grasped, and all of them said as concerning us, and the same issue from us as our own words, for a remembrance of the emotions in us and a chastening of our life.<sup>13</sup>

By his image of the mirror, Athanasius is suggesting that the Scriptures can serve as an instrument of spiritual literacy; they enable us to read what the Spirit is intimating in the profoundest regions of the human heart.<sup>14</sup> Our felt response to the words we hear or read is an indication

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<sup>11</sup> L. Dysinger OSB, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.63.

<sup>12</sup> *Letter to Marcellinus* 1, cited in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* tr. R. C. Gregg, New York: Paulist Press, 1979, p.101. Some suggest that this person was Antony himself, but there is no evidence for this.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter to Marcellinus* 12; p.111.

<sup>14</sup> Just as the text is a mirror by which may be known the movements of the soul, so the soul itself is a mirror that reflects the Logos and, thereby, also reveals the Father. ‘For I believe that a soul purified completely and established in its natural state becomes transparent (διορατική),’ VA 34:2, p.228. On this theme see A. Pettersen, *Athanasius*, Ridgefield: Morehouse Publishing, 1995, pp.40-44. Many books of guidance in the medieval period were given the title *Speculum* or “mirror.” See M. Schmidt, art. ‘Mirror’ in DS p 10, 1979, col. 1290-1303.

of the shape of our interior vulnerability. When we are “pierced” by the words—the image of piercing (κατάνυξις) used here by Athanasius is one continued in the Latin usage of *compunction*—there is a strange collaboration between the objective message of the Bible and the subjective stirrings of conscience. As William of St Thierry (*circa* 1075-1148) wrote, ‘You will never understand David until by your own experience you clothe yourself with the very feelings of the Psalms.’<sup>15</sup> The Bible cannot be read properly without every day paying attention to its message of conversion.<sup>16</sup>

If the received meaning of the Bible is married to the daily-changing spiritual exigencies of each person, then it is clear that each text has many meanings, or that the word “meaning” itself must be given a more flexible interpretation. And if the meaning of the text is attuned to subjective dispositions, there must be some method or discipline to ensure that it is truly the text that speaks and not merely the private projections of the reader.

### The Multiple Meanings of Scripture

The Alexandrian tradition of biblical interpretation to which Athanasius belonged took seriously Scripture’s claim to revealed truth. Its great master and leader was Origen (*circa* 185-254) to whom is traced the formulation of the teaching about the spiritual, that is the non-literal, senses of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> The problem that the Christian of this

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<sup>15</sup> *Ep Aur* 121; SChr 223, p.238.

<sup>16</sup> The use of the phrase “every day” (καθ’ ἡμέραν) is frequent throughout the VA, especially in Antony’s discourse to the monks in VA 14-43, pp.176-252.

<sup>17</sup> For Origen, ‘The foundation of all knowledge [of the mysteries] is reading the Scripture and meditating on it. Its meaning is communicated to the intelligence by grace, sometimes by means of a sudden illumination. A moral and ascetical life is the condition *sine qua non* for this. The knowledge of God cannot enter into a heart that is not pure, or a soul given to sin and subservient to the desires of the flesh’ (translated from Henri Crouzel, ‘Origène, précurseur du monachisme’ in *Théologie de la vie monastique: Études sur la tradition patristique*, Paris: Aubier, 1961, p.36). This was the prevailing attitude among the monks of the Egyptian desert. ‘Origen, the greatest of the Alexandrian exponents of the allegorical approach, exerted a strong influence on monasticism and had many disciples in the desert’ (Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p.171). The method of interpreting the Old Testament by allegory, systematised by Origen, was also used by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria, including Philo (d. *circa* 50). ‘Thus the allegorical exegesis of the Fathers is a matter of the religious reality of the Hellenistic world. The taste for symbols was pronounced in the literary world of the Alexandrian age. The truth seemed more desirable if it was surrounded by mystery—

time encountered, as we do also, was that so much of Scripture appeared banal and without any utility for understanding or promoting spiritual life. The long and sometimes scandalous narratives of the patriarchs, the painfully detailed rubrical prescriptions of Leviticus, and the seemingly endless genealogies appeared so irrelevant that the heretic Marcion (d. *circa* 160) and others rejected the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures from the biblical canon. Those who wished to accept these texts as canonical had to find some way to demonstrate their utility. Of what relevance to a contemporary reader in North Africa was the cruel campaign of conquest pursued by Joshua some thousand years before? Origen's answer: 'The wars which Joshua waged ought to be understood spiritually... Marcion, Valentinus and Basilides together with the other heretics refuse to understand these texts in a manner worthy of the Holy Spirit and so have fallen away from the faith and given themselves over to many impieties.'<sup>18</sup>

Once the proposition is accepted that the Bible<sup>19</sup> is divinely inspired then it becomes possible to assert that where the text is puzzling to us, this is not only because of our own interior confusion, which sometimes happens, as Augustine asserts,<sup>20</sup> but more especially is it due to the intrinsic and transcendent mysteriousness of the divine word. Gregory the Great (540-604) is insistent on this.

Sacred Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, is as superior to the most brilliant human mind as such brilliant people are inferior to God. They can see nothing in of its spiritual loftiness except what is revealed by the good pleasure of the divine goodness... Sacred Scripture has been so wondrously inspired by almighty God that even if it is expounded in many different ways nevertheless there are secrets that remain. It can almost never be so expounded that

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and less exposed to being despised' (translated from J. Daniélou, art. 'Écriture et vie spirituelle dans la tradition' in DSP 4.1, col. 134. The school of Antioch, on the other hand, preferred more literal interpretations.

<sup>18</sup> Origen, *In Iesu Nave* 12:1-3; SChr 71, pp.294-300.

<sup>19</sup> Reference to "the Bible" may be anachronistic for the earlier periods, in terms of the historical questions of the "published" form of the Christian writings; however, this term satisfies our purpose herein.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon* 47:13; CChr 41, p.583: 'If you do not disturb the water of your heart you will also recognise the peace [concord] of the Scriptures and you will have peace with the Scriptures and with yourself.'

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there are not more secrets remaining in it than are explained today.<sup>21</sup>

The task of the expositor is to penetrate to the heart of the mystery by reducing some of the obscurities of the text. But this is not to suggest that these obscurities were somehow flaws in the original text; rather they can be seen to serve a certain function in cultivating spiritual asceticism. As St Augustine says,

Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty.<sup>22</sup>

Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1167) compares this obscurity to a wall that separates the pious reader from Christ—but it is a wall in which there are windows and lattices through which Christ makes an occasional appearance in order that the reader may never doubt that beyond all the riddles and symbolic stories, the Lord is present.<sup>23</sup>

The notion of multiple meanings is based on the proposition that a text is understood according to the context in which it is read, that is, the reader's context. An avid botanist looking for data in the Bible may seem to be reading a text different from that being quarried by archaeologists or historians. In each case what is received from the text is shaped by the receptivity of the reader.<sup>24</sup> A person trying to garner theology from the Bible will read with heightened sensitivity anything that may seem to yield what is being sought. A believing community will inevitably draw forth from its sacred text more than agnostic or antagonistic readers. Whether this extracted content objectively pre-exists the act of reading, and whether it formed part of what the writer consciously or unconsciously intended to transmit, are legitimate questions, but not ones that can be usefully solved in this present discussion.

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory the Great, *In Librum I Regum* Prol: 3; CChr 144, p.51.

<sup>22</sup> CChr 32, p.35.

<sup>23</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Homelieae de Oneribus Prophetis Isaiiae* 27:1; CCM 2D, p.246.

<sup>24</sup> This recalls the Scholastic axiom: *quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur* ('Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the one receiving').

From the time of Origen, those who wished to propound the Bible to fellow-believers were comfortable in approaching the sacred text with their own most urgent—we might say existential—questions.<sup>25</sup> How may this text throw light on the total content of faith and, in particular, on the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ? How may this text serve as a guide to everyday behaviour? How may this text enkindle a more conscious desire for spiritual and eternal realities and thus lead into prayer?

Convinced that God's inspired word was capable of performing these functions, the expositors sought to develop a specifically Christian method of interpretation, that owed something to the Greeks and to Philo, but rested more fundamentally on the conviction that there was an over-arching coherence between God's revealing word in Scripture and God's revealing word in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Nothing true could be said in theology that did not relate to this fundamental and all-encompassing reality. 'The unity of the scriptures and the pervasiveness of Christ in them were the starting points for early Christian exegetes. Difficulties or obscurities in the text were thought by some commentators to protect the deeper meanings from those unprepared to receive them.'<sup>26</sup> The knack needed by the interpreter was that of uncovering this essential connection often hidden underneath a banal or puzzling text. Clearly this was a work of some ingenuity.

And so readers who could find nothing of substance in the letter of the text gave themselves permission, on the basis of St Paul's distinction between "letter" and "spirit" (2Cor.3:6; Rom.2:29, 7:6) and his own practice (Gal.4:24), to hunt for a spiritual source of nourishment and an answer to their burning questions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Two general treatments still worth consulting are: G. W. H. Lampe ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible Vol.2: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, Cambridge: University Press, 1969, and B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1983. The definitive study remains Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* 4Vols., Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1959, Aubier, 1961, 1964; English translation: *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* 2Vols. to date, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> C. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.91.

<sup>27</sup> Thus Bede the Venerable: *In Samuelem Propheta allegorica expositio* Prol; PL 91, 499D: 'If we bring forth from the treasury of the Scriptures only what is old, that is if ... we are concerned only for the literal meaning, then how can we, by reading or



This fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of Scripture, like the rivers of Paradise, flowed in four streams: history, allegory, tropology and anagogy. Beyond and below its historical or literal meaning, the Bible contained many messages about the content of faith, the conduct of life and the uplifting experience of Christian hope and desire.

John Cassian (360-435) who follows the Alexandrian method of interpretation gives a classic description of the results of an investigation based on what came to be known as “the four senses of Scripture.”

The four figures come together, if we wish, so that the one same “Jerusalem” can be understood in a fourfold manner. According to history it is the city of the Jewish people. According to allegory it is the Church of Christ. According to anagogy it is that heavenly City of God which is “the mother of us all.” According to tropology it is the soul of a human being, which by this name is frequently praised or rebuked by the Lord.<sup>28</sup>

### The Allegorical Method

To answer the question of how a text could express and throw light on the central mystery of salvation the ancient exegetes had recourse to the method of allegory. Latent beneath the overt meaning of the Old Testament text were mysteries concealed from its authors as well as its pre-Christian readers. Accounts of the crossing the Red Sea could be seen as having enough in common with baptism to suggest that the Christian could interpret these texts in the light of the experience of baptism. The manna, the bread from heaven that we read about in the light of the sixth chapter of John, surely points to the gift of the Eucharist. Once this basic assumption is made, then the clever expositor is, for example, able to find all sorts of parallels between the two saving events so that the Old Testament “type” is able to provide a ground for reflection on the New Testament “anti-type.” This is not exegesis, strictly speaking, but more a theological or catechetical procedure. It is poetry; an exercise of the theological imagination. Indeed there is an element of playfulness in proposing an allegorical interpretation. The more extravagant the distance between the text and its interpretation

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hearing, obtain correction for our daily sins, consolation amid the increasing hardships of this world and spiritual teaching for the numberless errors of this life?”

<sup>28</sup> John Cassian, *Conference* 14:8; SChr 54, pp.190-191.

the more fun it was. When we see how Mt.2:15 uses the text of Hos.11:1, 'I have called my son out of Egypt,' we do not understand this as serious exegesis. When Augustine proposes that the text of Jn.5:5, which describes the 38 years during which the paralytic at the pool of Bethzatha had been ailing, really meant that the man was perfect (40) but he lacked two things: love of God and love of neighbour, he is obviously enjoying himself and trying to keep his congregation amused.<sup>29</sup>

The ancient expositors used methods that we would regard as spurious, particularly etymology and numerology.<sup>30</sup> Regarding the former St Jerome (*circa* 340-420) published a whole book on the literal meaning of proper nouns in the Old and New Testaments, in effect declaring open season for would-be allegorists on any Hebrew names in the Bible. Alphabetically for each book of the Bible beginning with Genesis, he lists all the proper nouns and their meanings, based on the various meanings associated with the roots from which the names were derived.

Æthiopia, darkness or gloom; Assyrians, directors; Adam, human being, or earthling, or native, or red earth; Abel, grief, or vanity, or vapour, or wretched. [And so forth.]<sup>31</sup>

Isidore of Seville (*circa* 560-636) also provided instruments for practising allegory: his collection of etymologies, his listing of allegories and his brief foray into the meaning of numbers.<sup>32</sup> The much-utilised *Glossa ordinaria* compiled by Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) and his school, decorated the biblical texts with patristic quotations in the margins and between the lines that provided potential expositors with keys to

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV* 17:6; CChr 36, pp.173-174: 'If the number 40 has the perfection of the law and the law is not fulfilled except in the twofold precept of charity, who would be surprised that he was languishing who had 40 minus 2?'

<sup>30</sup> See T. Scott, 'Remarks on the Universal Symbolism of the Number 72', *Eye of the Heart* 1, 2008, p.121: 'For the septic, practices such as *gematria* appear to manipulate numbers to contrive capricious meanings. From a traditional perspective, *gematria* is an expression of a hermeneutic recognition of the interconnectedness of all things.'

<sup>31</sup> *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* in CChr 72, pp.59-161.

<sup>32</sup> *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, PL 82; *Allegoriae quaedam Sacrae Scripturae*, PL 83, 93-130; *Liber numerorum qui in Sacris Scripturis occurrunt*, PL 83, 179-200.

understanding and interpretation, and had the effect of perpetuating certain lines of allegorical explanation.<sup>33</sup>

Allegory does not try to communicate any new knowledge or to advance beyond the known to the unknown. It does not attempt any form of apodictic proof. It circles around the text and plays with it, in order to allow readers to come to a more comprehensive awareness of realities and connections that they already know and believe. It provides a channel for the content of the subconscious to come to the surface. It is an in-house method of reflection and instruction for believers.

### The Tropological or Behavioural Sense

It is, perhaps, significant that many medieval monastic writers, especially the Cistercians, were reserved about the value of too much allegory, even though they happily exploited Jerome's listing and Isidore's *Etymologiae* if it suited their homiletic purposes. Their preference, however, was with tropology, the moral or behavioural interpretation. To be noted is that their interest was not in the formulation of an objective ethical system, based on or derived from Scripture, but the practical improvement of the everyday conduct of their listeners or readers. 'Tropology is a moral explanation with reference to the amendment of life and practical instruction.'<sup>34</sup> Benedict finds appropriate behavioural imperatives everywhere in the Bible. 'What page or what word of divine authority of the Old and New Testaments is not a most correct norm for human life?' (RB 73;3) Pastoral exhortation aimed to lead readers from the ambiguous heights of imagination to the clear and practical imperatives of Gospel living. 'Let us pass beyond the shadows of allegory to arrive at the investigation of moral matters.'<sup>35</sup> The moral sense seeks to find a close link between the sacred text and subjective experience, on the one hand, and behaviour, on the other. Aelred explains the difference between allegory and tropology by way of an example:

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<sup>33</sup> PL 113-114. Migne wrongly attributes the work to Walafrid Strabo (d. 849).

<sup>34</sup> John Cassian, *Conference* 14:8; SChr 54, p.190.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 17:8; SBOp 1, 103, 4. See also SC 16:1 (SBOp 1, 90, 1) and SC 80:1 (SBOp 2, 277, 16); in both case Bernard qualifies allegory as something "darksome." Aelred of Rievaulx, *Homelias de Oneribus Prophetis Isaias* 21:1; CCM 2D, p.187: *Itaque, fratres, de allegoricis montibus ad plana tropologica descendentes...* See also 26:1; CCM 2D, p.235.

According to the laws of allegory the Red Sea signifies the waters of baptism, made red by the blood of Christ. But in the laws of tropology it is the second baptism, that is the tears of confession, which is most suitably indicated by the Red Sea. From this the true Hebrews (that is those passing across) rise up free and cleansed from vices and sins.<sup>36</sup>

Allegory allows us to find the content of what we believe reflected in the text; tropology touches our own experience and, it moves us simultaneously energising us towards action and guiding our efforts.

Based on the conviction that all the various manifestations of the mysteries of Christ were on our account, *propter nos*,<sup>37</sup> the question that Bernard would ask is ‘What has this to do with our salvation?’<sup>38</sup> We read the Bible and other texts for formation and not merely for information—our reading is to be such that it increases our openness both to guidance and to grace. It follows that the act of reading attains its integrity only when the content of the text is internalised and appropriated by the reader, and then externalised in behaviour. Hearers of the word are two-a-penny; doers of the word are very much rarer.

### **The Anagogical or Uplifting Function of Reading**

There is some doubt in tradition about whether to distinguish three or four senses of Scripture.<sup>39</sup> Gueric of Igny (*circa* 1080-1156), for example, seems to prefer the former.

You can describe what has been written for our sake in three ways: so that there may be an ample meal made up of the three loaves of history, allegory and morality. All the contents of Scripture can be divided into three parts and absorbed like three loaves.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly Gueric is following the approach of St Gregory the Great and

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<sup>36</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 56:15; CCM 2B, p.95.

<sup>37</sup> Alberich Altermatt, ‘*Christus pro nobis*: Die Christologie Bernhards von Clairvaux in den “Sermones per annum”’, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 33, 1977, pp.3-176.

<sup>38</sup> *Quid hoc ad salutem nostram?* Csi 5:23; SBOp 3, 486, 1.

<sup>39</sup> See De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol.1, pp.75-115.

<sup>40</sup> Gueric of Igny *Sermon* 36:4; SChr 202, p.268. Aelred’s treatise *De Iesu puero duodenni* (SChr 60) has three sections corresponding to the three modes or levels of interpretation.

others for whom the “typical” interpretation includes both allegory and analogy in a single category.

The fourth sense extracted from a biblical text is its meaning in the life of interior discipleship—its capacity to inspire hope, to generate prayer in the reader. The story of the cure of the man born blind in the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel is read not only as a narrative, nor only as an account that tingles with baptismal symbolism, nor even as an instruction in appropriate Christian behaviour. It may also have the effect of encouraging the reader’s confidence in the restorative power of Christ even when things seem hopeless, of giving birth to a prayer for healing of whatever it is that bedevils the reader’s vitality, of uplifting the reader’s spirit. The text seems to act directly on the reader’s experience to cause a renaissance of fervour and love. Sometimes this analogical sense is described as the eschatological meaning of a text—it brings us into contact with the final realities when God’s Kingdom reaches its consummation.



The Pontifical Biblical Commission in its document on biblical interpretation is strongly in favour of the historico-critical methods of exegesis that have developed since the nineteenth century. It does, however, recognise the theological validity of a fuller sense, defined as ‘the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.’<sup>41</sup>

Ancient exegesis, which obviously could not take into account modern scientific requirements, attributed to every text of Scripture several levels of meaning. The most prevalent distinction was between the literal sense and the spiritual sense. Medieval exegesis distinguished within the spiritual sense three different aspects, each relating respectively to the truth revealed, to the way of life commended and to the final goal to be achieved. From this came the famous couplet of Augustine of Denmark (13<sup>th</sup> century):

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<sup>41</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome, 1993, II:B, 2.

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,  
moralis quid agas, quid speras anagogia.*<sup>42</sup>

In what does this spiritual understanding consist? Fundamentally it is that enlightenment and energising of the interior faculties which comes about by the action of the Holy Spirit guiding the reader in a way complementary to the guidance given to the sacred authors. In the Alexandrian tradition reading and writing are both regarded as inspired and revelatory, though in different manners.<sup>43</sup> The authenticity of an individual's interpretation is, of course, subject to discernment: it must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church. There is, however, another criterion, one drawn from the Gospel: the quality of the reader's life—by their fruits shall you know them.

### **The Process of Reading Sacred Texts**

Monks read the Bible with a view to arriving at a spiritual understanding of its meaning—to be led to a broader appreciation of the faith by which they lived, to find in the sacred texts a key to understanding their experience and a guide to living, and be drawn beyond the present into the mysteries of eternity in hope, desire and contemplation. They were not professional theologians, preachers, teachers or catechists. They opened the Scriptures principally to find God in their own hearts, in their own lives and, transcending the known, in contemplation.

Reading according to the four senses of the text is a holistic experience. It brings into play the reader's reason, imagination, memory, conscience, desire and feeling (*affectus*). Only such a reading does justice to the broad range of conscious and unconscious factors that have contributed to the writing of the text. Just as any book is not a pure emanation from the mind, but the expression of practical

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<sup>42</sup> Biblical Commission, *Interpretation*, II:B. The quoted ditty reads: 'The letter teaches what happened, allegory what to believe, the moral [sense] what to do and anagogy what to hope.'

<sup>43</sup> This is the foundation of Origen's exegetical approach. 'Or celui qui a inspiré les auteurs sacrés peut seul inspirer leur interprète, nous avons vu que c'était le principe de l'exégèse d'Origène. Par suite, le prédicateur sera d'abord homme de prière' ['Only the One who has inspired the sacred authors can inspire their interpreter. We have seen that this was Origen's exegetic principle. The preacher must, as a consequence, be a man of prayer'] (J. Daniélou, *Origène*, Paris: La Table Ronde, 1949, p.38).

craftsmanship stamped with every moment of the author's history, so the authentic reading of a book is one in which the reader is totally involved—mysteriously dancing in tune with the author's words. The same dynamic operates in sacred reading as in ordinary reading—the act of reading effects some kind of bonding between writer and reader that transcends the mere communication of knowledge. This is a theme that the novelist David Malouf spoke about not so long ago.

Nothing in the whole heady business of writing is more mysterious than the relationship between the writer and reader... This is what we, as writers, deal in daily, a dimension continuously negotiated, of mind, tone, language, where the writer's consciousness and the reader's imperceptibly merge, in an intimacy where, all conditions being propitious, I and other, mind and world, are one.

There is, accordingly an interpersonal element in their reading—monks come to the Bible with a view to knowing and experiencing Christ<sup>44</sup> and in that encounter discovering their own deepest selves. This is possible only when attention is paid to the fuller sense of the inspired book. It is not to be found in mere attention to its literal meaning.

Granted this monastic necessity of reading of the Scriptures and its derivatives,<sup>45</sup> it becomes obvious that reading gives shape to monastic observance, since the cultivation of a lifelong habit of reading by a community of twenty or thirty monks presupposes an ordered lifestyle, a developed economy that makes possible the possession of appropriate volumes, leisure for reading, a place to read, an advanced literacy that facilitates sophisticated reading, and a formation program that communicates these skills to newcomers.

Monastic reading or *lectio divina* is not the same as the ordinary

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<sup>44</sup> 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.' *Ignoratio Scripturarum ignoratio Christi est*: Jerome (340-420), *In Isaiam Prophetam* Prol., PL 24, 17B.

<sup>45</sup> 'Over the centuries, however, we must point out, the term "Divine Scriptures" acquired a much broader meaning in the spiritual literature of the East. It referred not only to Scripture but still more to the writings of the Fathers and also to everything that could be read, once pagan books had been eliminated' (T. Špidlik, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East: Volume 2*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005, p.133. In the West, to be noted is the extended reading list included in RB 73:4-7 and the use of readings from "recognised and orthodox Catholic Fathers" prescribed for the liturgy: RB 9:8.

perusal of a text—for information, instruction or amusement. It is the kind of reading that invites the monk's inner self into a profound dialogue with the page before him, the author of its content, the tradition in which it stands, and ultimately with God who is the source of all its truth. Such a reading can be done only in a supportive ambience. This means that there is an encouragement to read and that there are suitable books available, a place in which to read, an atmosphere of silence and a guaranteed length of time without interruption. Monasteries routinely provided such an environment; those outside monasteries wishing to practise *lectio divina* have to devise means by which comparable benefits accrue.

*Lectio divina* requires the allocation of considerable time. St Benedict made provision for a minimum of two to three hours daily for each monk, reserving for it the best periods of the day.<sup>46</sup> Without this massive exposure—think in terms of 1,000 hours per year for a lifetime—the exercise would be qualitatively different. It is the constant exposure to the Scriptures, read in different life-situations, that facilitates an awareness of its deeper meanings. With repeated readings superficial novelty wears off and there is a tendency to appreciate subtler elements of the text hitherto unnoticed.

### Three Monastic Witnesses

It is clear from the monastic writers of the medieval period that regular *lectio divina*, whether such reading was heard in the liturgy, as part of the common exercises or done privately in the cloister, was considered a prayer-like activity. William of St Thierry links *lectio* with reflection, rumination, feelings of love, prayer and seeking God. Bernard of Clairvaux sees it as not only as an experience of God remaining within

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<sup>46</sup> It is not always easy for us to calculate periods of time in the ancient world which kept solar time. A daylight hour was the twelfth part of the interval between sunrise and sunset; obviously a winter “hour” was much shorter than a summer “hour.” The exact timing depended on latitude and the day of the year. In Melbourne today (11 July, 2008), according to solar computation, a diurnal hour lasts only 49 minutes on the clock; whereas a nocturnal hour drags on for 71 minutes. Benedict's provisions for the balance between *lectio divina* and manual labour are found in RB 48. ‘RB seems to give precedence to *lectio* over manual labour. *Lectio* is always done during “prime time” (the morning) and never reduced to less than two hours’ (T. Kardong, ‘A Structural Comparison of *Regula Magistri* 50 and *Regula Benedicti* 48’, *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 6/7, 1981, p.103.



us, but also a source of delight, fervour and evangelical behaviour. Guigo the Carthusian (d. 1188) distinguishes the different aspects of *lectio* to construct a ladder for monks—a means of letting themselves be lifted up to heaven.

*William of St Thierry*

In his letter of instruction written in 1144 for the novices of the Carthusian house of Mont-Dieu, William of St Thierry describes the manner of sacred reading as it was accepted throughout western monasticism, borrowing ideas freely from the Stoic philosopher Seneca.

Then at definite hours space is to be made for definite reading. For random and varied reading, as if found by chance, is not constructive, but it makes the mind unstable since it enters the memory lightly and as lightly departs. Rather let the mind remain with works of good quality so that it becomes accustomed to them...

Something from the daily reading should, each day, be consigned to memory's stomach and brought up again for frequent rumination: this should be something that accords with your ideal (*propositum*) and seizes your attention so that it holds the mind in such a way that it does not want to think about other matters.

From the reading should be drawn feelings of love (*affectus*) and a prayer should take shape that interrupts the reading. Not that such interruption is a hindrance, since it immediately restores to the reading a mind that is purified for understanding.

Reading is governed by intention. If a reader truly seeks God in the reading, all that is read will work together to this end, captivating the perception and bringing all the understanding of the reading into service for the honour of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

*Bernard of Clairvaux*

Bernard was a man of the Bible, who read the Scriptures 'more wondering than examining'.<sup>48</sup> His theology is unequivocally biblical.<sup>49</sup> In

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<sup>47</sup> *Ep Aur* 120, 122-124; *SChr* 223, pp.238-240.

<sup>48</sup> *SC* 62:4; *SBOp* 2, 158, 3.

addition, so saturated was he with the biblical text that his personal writing style was strongly influenced by Vulgate rendering of the sacred text, heard daily in the liturgy and read and pondered alone.<sup>50</sup> In his discourses on the Song of Songs there are over 5,000 biblical quotations, about one every second line. These were not deliberately and painstakingly inserted; they simply fell in spontaneously as Bernard dictated his thought.

Bernard recommended his own practice to his monks and mediated the Scriptures to them constantly through his preaching and writing. Above all he wanted the monk not just to skim the surface of the text seeking knowledge but to search for the interior echo so that ‘what he hears outwardly he feels inwardly’.<sup>51</sup>

Bernard promulgated a triple imperative that he considered binding on true readers of God’s word: they must willingly receive it, they must remember it and they must put it into effect by action. The integrity of *lectio divina* depends on all three elements being present and so the process of reading, likewise, demands first of all a radical openness and a willingness to continue listening; it requires that the word be pondered, recited aloud, slowly meditated in a spirit of obedience; and the process must be brought to its conclusion by conversion expressed in a new way of acting.

This reading is not merely a burdensome obligation but a source of necessary sustenance and a generator of delight. It is by this means that Christ comes to the soul and remains within it. This is how salvation is brought about. Bernard explains how this happens in one of his Advent sermons.

Keep the word of God in the same way as you would preserve bodily food. For the word of God is a living bread and food for the mind. So long as earthly food is stored in a box it can be stolen or

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<sup>49</sup> D. Farkasfalvy, ‘The Role of the Bible in St. Bernard’s Spirituality’, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 25, 1969, pp.3-13. See also P. Dumontier, *Saint Bernard et la Bible*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953; De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol. 2, pp.153-162.

<sup>50</sup> C. Mohrmann, ‘Observations sur la langue et le style de S. Bernard’ in *SBOp* 2 (Introduction), pp.ix-xxxiii; ‘Le Style de S. Bernard’ in *San Bernard: pubblicazione commemorativa nell’ VIII centenario della sua morte*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1954, pp.166-184. Jean Leclercq makes this assertion repeatedly throughout his many writing on Bernard.

<sup>51</sup> *SC* 37:5; *SBOp* 2, 11, 7.

nibbled by mice or it can be stolen or nibbled by mice or it can go bad if it is left too long. But if you eat the food you don't have to worry about any of these. This is the way to preserve God's word; Blessed are they who keep it. (Lk.11:28) Let it pass into the innards of your soul, then let it make its way into your feelings and into your behaviour. Eat well and your soul will delight in the abundance. Do not forget to eat your bread, lest your heart dry up, but let your soul be filled as with a banquet. (Ps.101:5, Ps.62:6) If you thus keep the Word of God, you can be quite sure that it will keep you.

It is constant feeding on the Word of God that sustains a monk in his distinctive vocation; without it the heart dries up and commitment fades.

### *Guigo the Carthusian*

Guigo II, Prior of La Grande Chartreuse from approximately 1174 until 1180 brought together many of the traditional insights into the practice of sacred reading and constructed a kind of ladder by which monks are lifted up from earth to heaven. His description of the stages that link reading and contemplation has become classical.

One day when I was engaged bodily in manual labour, I began to think about the spiritual exercise of the human being, and suddenly four spiritual steps came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. This is a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has few distinct rungs, yet its length is immeasurable and beyond belief, for one end is fixed upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets...

Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, with a concentrated application of the soul. Meditation is the zealous application of the mind seeking to find knowledge of hidden truth by means of one's own reason. Prayer is the heart's devoted attention to God to banish evils or to obtain good things. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and, as it were, suspended above itself, tasting the joys of everlasting sweetness.

Now that we have given descriptions of the four steps, it remains for us to see what are their duties in our regard.<sup>52</sup>

In the next paragraph Guigo distinguishes the discrete phases on the single action involved in turning away from temporal reality towards God.

Reading seeks the sweetness of the blessed life, meditation finds it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts solid food into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer obtains its flavour, contemplation is the sweetness itself which brings joy and refreshes. Reading works on the husk, meditation on the ear; prayer asks for what we desire contemplation delights in obtaining the sweetness.<sup>53</sup>



The monastic authors, while being assiduous in their pursuit of the literal meaning of the text of the Bible, understood that the ultimate purpose of their labour was not an advance in technical knowledge of the text or theology, but the benefit of a more Christ-like life. John of Forde (d. 1214), regards the whole importance of *lectio divina* as concentrated in its capacity to bring forth love in the soul.

There are among them vessels of the purest silver, those who are the stewards of your sacred word, keeping the faith of your bride chaste and incorrupt by the purity of their word. They investigate your words in your sevenfold fire [the Holy Spirit], and by their interpretation bring back to love all figures, allegories, parables and riddles.<sup>54</sup>

### Later Developments

The cumulative effect of this monastic approach to Bible-reading was what has been termed “monastic theology.”<sup>55</sup> This was a subject-

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<sup>52</sup> *Epistola de vita contemplativa (Scala Claustralium)*, 2; SChr 163, pp.82-84.

<sup>53</sup> *Scala Claustralium* 3, pp.84-86.

<sup>54</sup> John of Forde, SC 108:8; CCM 18, p.734.

<sup>55</sup> The classic description of monastic theology may be found in J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York: Fordham

centred theology rather than an objective and systematic discourse suitable for the instruction of students in the emergent universities. Its special medium was a free-flowing and reflective discourse (*sermo*) addressed to a monastic audience in order to strengthen the beliefs and values already held. Monastic theology was not dialectical or argumentative; by choice it was reverent, wondering and meditative. It was often couched in poetic language and made use of many rhetorical devices to ingratiate itself with listeners and readers and to win from them an affective rather than a cognitive response. It was experiential in focus and traditional in content, more like a corporate meditation on truths commonly held than an extension of the frontiers of theological thought. It was primarily a life-sustaining theology.

For a while monastic theology co-existed with the new mode of theological discourse. In particular, the Victorines, especially Hugh of St Victor (*circa* 1096-1141), attempted to strengthen the scholarly basis of biblical interpretation to bring it closer to what was being sought in the schools.<sup>56</sup> As the thirteenth century progressed, however, scholastic theology and methodology were in the ascendant, spurred on by translations and commentaries on the works of Aristotle by Arabic scholars, and localised in the universities rather than in the monasteries. In this more academic approach the Bible was quarried for proof-texts to uphold theological positions: the clash of opinions in dialectic was welcome and texts and commentaries on texts were bandied back and forth. The Cistercian John of Forde was one of the last to maintain the traditional methods but, despite the high quality of his sermons, extant manuscripts indicate that he was not widely read. Interest had swung in another direction, even in monasteries. Scholastic methodology in philosophy and theology was to remain paramount in Catholic circles until the 1960s.

In the wake of the Reformation, Bible reading diminished among

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University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1982, pp.191-235. See also M. Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988, pp.32-37.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Hugh of St Victor, *Eruditionis didascalicae libri septem*, PL176, 759-837; J. Taylor tr., *The Didascalion of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991; also, I. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's "Didascalion"*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Catholics. It was permitted only through the medium of authoritatively translated and annotated versions, and its liturgical use remained in Latin. It is interesting that the monastic approach to the Scriptures was not considered by Martin Luther as odious as other aspects of monastic life. In particular he retained a great admiration for Bernard of Clairvaux.

In this preface to his German works Luther contrasted prayer and reason. He saw a fundamental dichotomy between *oratio* (prayer) and *ratio*; only the “*orational*,” not the “*rational*,” access is permitted when one approaches the Word of God. Therefore, Luther advocated letting go of one’s own reasoning when interpreting the Bible, since human *ratio* not only cannot achieve anything in divine matters, but will cause one to fall into hell like Lucifer. Luther’s “*orational*” approach was essentially grounded in the fear of God; humility was the beginning point in understanding the Word of God. Therefore, Luther advised, in place of the rational approach one should retreat into one’s private chamber, according to Mt.6:6, kneel down there, and pray to God “with the right humility and earnestness”. One is to pray that God may send through his dear Son the Holy Spirit who may illuminate and guide the person who prays. The Spirit is the only master who gives *verstand* (reason, insight). Apparently, then, only the Spirit-enlightened “*reason*” is ready to read and understand theology, the Word of God. Such understanding can come only by reading the Word of God meditatively “with closed eyes”. This does not mean that Luther dismissed the God-given gift of mental capacity, as his pejorative use of *ratio* may imply.<sup>57</sup>

The use of the fuller sense was termed by Luther “*catachresis*” and he defined this as ‘borrowing a statement from Scripture and playing around with it, but without harming the text and its proper meaning’.<sup>58</sup> He noted also a mastery of this art in the writings of the Abbot of Clairvaux.

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<sup>57</sup> F. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999, p.135. See also F. Posset, “Bible Reading ‘with Closed Eyes’ in the Monastic Tradition: An Overlooked Aspect of Martin Luther’s Hermeneutics,” in *American Benedictine Review* 38.3, 1987, pp.293-306. R. L. Plummer, ‘Luther’s Instructions for Studying Theology as a Biblical Hermeneutical Method’, *Tjuringa* 70, 2006, pp.39-48.

<sup>58</sup> WA 30-II:381, 24-27, quoted in Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, p.158.

## Casey: The Book of Experience

Bernard is a wonderful artist in catachreses. For he often connects a passage which should be referred to some specific image with some general meaning. In this manner, of course, it is permissible to resort to a catachresis and transfer a text to something else. This meaning is also good. Nevertheless, one must not do violence to simple grammar.<sup>59</sup>

Above all Luther recommended a method of reading that closely mirrored the monastic practice of *lectio divina*.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard and spoken [the words of Scripture] once or twice and that you have complete understanding. You will not be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.<sup>60</sup>

### The Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

In modern times the great exponent of active, as distinct from passive, interpretation of ancient texts has been Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) whose approach has enhanced the credibility of monastic *lectio* as far as contemporary readers are concerned.<sup>61</sup> By “active interpretation” is meant that, in the light of tradition, the interpreter contributes something to the transmission of the integral message of the text and is not merely an archeologist who unearths the meaning it had at the moment it was originally committed to writing. We see this in the realm of law, especially constitutional law, when subsequent applications of the law to new situations expand the scope of the written text by reference to the *mens legislatoris*, and such re-readings are assayed and institutionalised through judicial precedents. In music the notes on a page are one thing: talented conductors and musicians

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<sup>59</sup> WA 44:686; 25-26, quoted in Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, p.157.

<sup>60</sup> Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings in T. F. Lull ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic theological Writings*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p.66.

<sup>61</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1965.

bring their own experience, passion and history to produce new versions of the same music for each generations.

Every assimilation (*Aneignung*) of tradition is historically different: which does not mean that every one represents only an imperfect understanding of it.. This means that assimilation is no mere repetition of the text that has been handed down, but it is a new creation of understanding.<sup>62</sup>

Gadamer regards consciously standing within the tradition to which the text belongs is an important factor in reaching an integral understanding of it. For when we read a text we are exposing ourselves to a mere part of a fuller reality: the tradition in which both the writer and the writing stands. The meaning of a text is more than the meaning consciously intended by the author: ‘the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended.’<sup>63</sup> This tradition transcends the persons who embody or express it. For this reason the text is most fully interpreted when it is read in the context of its tradition. ‘To stand within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge, but makes it possible.’<sup>64</sup>

Gadamer is adamant that to interpret a text adequately in our own historical context we must bring to it our own experience and work to achieve a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*).<sup>65</sup> It is like a necessary conversation with a stranger; we must begin by finding a common language and a common ground on which to stand. Then dialogue, learning and mutual enrichment become possible.

Gadamer’s list of the qualities of sound interpretation apply also to *lectio divina*.

- a. The experienced reader approaches the text with humility, not seeking to master it,<sup>66</sup> but to enter into dialogue with it.

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<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.430.

<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.335.

<sup>64</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

<sup>65</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.273: ‘Understanding ... is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.’

<sup>66</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.323.



- b. This dialogue presupposes a degree of self-knowledge,<sup>67</sup> which implies an experience of human finitude: a deep awareness of the limitations of humanity learnt through suffering<sup>68</sup>
- c. To understand a text the reader must try to establish a common language with the text.<sup>69</sup> This means acquiring the discipline of accepting the relativity of one's own culture and striving to understand reality from a different perspective. In practical terms this will often mean learning new languages and appreciating a different culture.
- d. The reader must have the fundamental openness of a listener.<sup>70</sup> 'The hermeneutical experience also has its logical consequence: that of uninterrupted listening.'<sup>71</sup> Note this phrase: "uninterrupted listening."
- e. This openness to experience means that the reader needs to be "radically undogmatic";<sup>72</sup> the reader must be detached from antecedent expectations of what the text contains, somewhat ready to be surprised—or not. 'The claim to understand the other person in advance performs the function of keeping the claim of the other person at a distance.'<sup>73</sup>
- f. The reader must accept that listening to tradition involves accepting that 'some things are against myself',<sup>74</sup> and will therefore challenge complacency. The text cannot be made into the servant of the *status quo*; it is, rather, an agent of change. Integral reading demands that the text retains its independent voice and that includes the capability to challenge the reader's prior convictions.
- g. Every understanding reached must be subjected to testing. The reader needs to return anew to the text to verify that the message received is concordant with the objectivity of the text. As in conversation, the only way to guarantee that the message has been heard is to paraphrase it and check the accuracy of what has been

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<sup>67</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.318, 320.

<sup>68</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.320.

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.341.

<sup>70</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

<sup>71</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.421

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.319.

<sup>73</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.323.

<sup>74</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.325.

understood. Also like conversation, interpretative reading needs questioning and continual cross-checking.<sup>75</sup> Often clarity emerges from successive approximations.

Gadamer provides intellectual respectability for the idea of a fuller sense of Scripture and for the subjective meanings that are the grist of *lectio divina*. The monk saw himself as located within the great tradition of humanity addressed by God's self-revelation and, therefore, read the Bible as an insider. In the sacred text he heard echoes of his own experience, and often it was that experience that gave relevance and pungency to the words on the page written so long ago.



*As the sun rises above the horizon, the monk makes his way to the place where he normally reads. His mind is rested, cleared by the night of yesterday's concerns. His heart has been awakened by the familiar rhythm of liturgical prayer and there is a lightness in his step as he approaches his reading, savouring already the long period of free time that stretches before him. He sits down and reaches for the volume which has been his companion these past months, and a smile hovers over his lips as the memory of past graces rises in his heart. He utters a brief prayer for enlightenment as he opens the book and gazes appreciatively at the text before him. He finds the place he had been reading yesterday and reads it again, wondering at its power to reveal new facets of its truth with each new encounter. He reads a little and pauses. Maybe he reads it again, his lips quietly forming the words as his eye caresses the text. He stops again, perhaps to listen to the echo of the words in his memory and in his heart. Sometimes he is overwhelmed by consolation and he remains silent and still soaking up the grace that is poured over him. Sometimes he finds a challenge in what he reads and he has to struggle to quell the rising dread and the first stages of resistance. He has to re-affirm his willingness to be led by God to a greater purity of life, to be converted, to be changed. Sometimes he feels nothing at all, except a hollow sense of alienation*

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<sup>75</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.330. 'The unfolding of the totality of meaning towards which understanding is directed, forces us to make conjectures and to take them back again. The self-cancellation of the interpretation makes it possible for the thing itself—the meaning of the text—to assert itself' (p.422).

## Casey: The Book of Experience

*from God and all that in meaningful in his life. Whatever his experience he is led to prayer – the prayer of love, the prayer for divine assistance, the prayer of desolation. Imbued with this reaching out to God he returns to the text, finding there a clearer focus, perhaps, a nuancing of the message received, an encouragement to dig deeper. And so the process continues. Reading. Meditation. Prayer. Reading. Meditation. Prayer. The stages do not always follow one another immediately, on some days one or other element dominates. Sometimes one aspect may be deferred until later in the day. And on some graced occasions just to begin the reading leads rapidly beyond itself to deep prayer. Perhaps the monk picks up a pen and carefully writes down a few words both as a means of impressing them more deeply into his awareness and as an adjunct to memory. There are times when the power of the Word lifts him up above himself and his deeds into the deep upper ocean of contemplative quiet, where all external activity ceases, consumed by an interior fire of love and desire that displaces everything but itself. And then, just as suddenly, he returns: a simple monk seated before a book, his heart and his mind open to its message. Later the moment will come when it is time to close the book, to gather up some memories of what he has read to sustain him during the day. And so the monk goes off to his work; the sun has risen high in the sky and the day is already begun.*



Saint Benedict recognised that not all parts of the Bible would at all times yield spiritual fruit to the monks, especially those with weak intellects (RB 42:4). *Lectio divina* in fact is a highly complex exercise, as is any reading. Ink marks on a page are seen by the eyes and translated by the brain into oral-aural words which designate not only concrete realities but also abstractions. Those attuned to their own experience may find more in a text than its authors consciously intended. Persons engaged in *lectio divina* may uncover great mysteries about God and about themselves through this medium, may be converted to a new manner of living, may with years of regular practice grow in wisdom. A simple practice may yield sublime results.

## Abbreviations

CChr	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina (Turnholt: Brepols); cited according to volume and page.
CCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols); cited according to volume and page.
Csi	Bernard of Clairvaux: <i>De Consideratione Libri V</i>
DSp	Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, (Paris: Beauchesne); cited according to volume and column.
Ep Aur	William of St Thierry, <i>Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei</i> ; SChr 223.
PL	Patrologia Latina (Paris: Migne); cited according to volume and column.
Prol	Prologue
RB	Rule of Saint Benedict
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi Opera (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses).
SC	<i>Sermones Super Cantica Canticatorum</i> . (SBOp Vol. 1-2)
SChr	Sources Chrétiennes, (Paris: Cerf); cited according to volume and page.
VA	<i>Vita Antonii</i> , St Athanasius' <i>Life of Antony</i> in SChr 400.
WA	Martin Luther's works: Weimarer Ausgabe