

Scholarship and Sanctity: A Lesson Aquinas Teaches the Priest and Seminarian¹

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“[I]t is not praxis that creates truth but truth that should serve as the basis of praxis.”

—POPE BENEDICT XVI
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Aquinas and the Life of the Spirit

THE Dominican saint and scholar whom the Church calls the Common Doctor, Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274), instructs us that “the true is the good of the intellect; for an intellect is said to be good because it knows the true.”² Today, however, many persons think primarily about knowledge as a tool of expediency, that is, as something that helps them to achieve an objective. While many care only about the successful, few, it seems, devote much time to pursuit of the true. For instance, college students oftentimes think of their studies as a means to attain career goals. In other words, they instrumentalize their lessons. Again today, professional and proprietary schools, courses, and programs that train people to supply services (and so find employment) tend to fare better than do schools, courses, and programs that instruct in art, literature, and what broadly we still call liberal studies.

Seminaries have not been preserved from these professionalizing tendencies in higher education. Nor have seminarians been preserved from courting an instrumentalist view of human knowledge. Since the 1970s, seminary education in the United States has been influenced, I would aver unduly, by

¹ A shorter version of this essay appeared as “Scholarship and Sanctity,” *Second Spring* 10 (2008): 13–20.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (ScG), trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), bk. 1, chap. 71.

the standards and ideals set by the professional accrediting associations. Take, for example, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which follows a professional model of ministry broadly construed to accommodate its ecumenical constituency. Tensions inevitably arise: for example, between the requirements of practical learning based on the supervised social work model and the liberal studies traditionally offered to clerics.

The English word “clerisy” gives us a clue about the origin of the word “cleric”: clerisy means a distinct class of learned or literary people. Since the development in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of seminaries, Catholic clerics have been formed to become learned and literary men. The Church underwent a hard lesson at the time of the Protestant Reform. This lesson is illustrated in a famous dispute between Catholics and Reformers held at Lausanne in 1536. Not one Catholic cleric could be found to answer the humanist Reformers’ objections that, since the word “sacrament” could not be found in the New Testament, the sacraments must represent superstitious historical accretions to Christianity.³ Since no priest was able to deal with the issue, a Catholic doctor volunteered to reply. He explained that the whole New Testament was about sanctifying the mind—*sacra mens*—and so the text refers throughout to sacraments that make the soul holy. The Greek scholars scoffed, and the Swiss Canton of Vaud passed over to the reform of Zwingli and Calvin.

The word “liberal” in the phrase “liberal arts” comes from the Latin for “free.” Historically, then, liberal studies were meant for those citizens who enjoyed the leisure to think, even though thinking about the traditional liberal arts, for instance, the trivium, grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, involves forms of doing, that is, language, oratory, and logic.⁴ Roughly until the high Middle Ages, those other than nobles and rich persons who received a liberal education were almost exclusively Catholic clerics. Priests became the learned men in the street. The Church made them free for this purpose. Other persons who were not free enjoyed no leisure, and so were obliged to engage in servile work to ensure their livelihood. They received an education in *technē*. That is, they were taught how to accomplish certain tasks but not how to think about the highest principles or causes of the

³ For further information, see Eric Junod, *La dispute de Lausanne 1536: La théologie réformée après Zwingli et avant Calvin*, Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise 90 (Lausanne: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise, 1988).

⁴ The Trivium, the *artes sermocinales*: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (language, oratory, logic) and the Quadrivium, the *artes reales* or *physicae*: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The arts admittedly were considered perfections of the practical intellect (*recta ratio factibilium*), whereas prudence the *recta ratio agibilium*.

effects that they produced. Today, even the highest form of technological expertise ordinarily finds its rationale in a task-ordered making of things, whether they be microchips or spaceships.

Cardinal Newman reminds us that we proceed at great peril when we forget that the perfection, the good, of the human intellect is the possession of the true, and not the attainment of whatsoever bits of learning, including the acquisition of practical knowledge useful for solving a here-and-now problem.⁵ When we fail to reach out for the knowledge of the Highest Truth, the stakes become very high inasmuch as the human person stands to lose what is most important in human life. The Church speaks clearly to the point: “[W]hen the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned, as the Second Vatican Council concisely states: ‘Without the Creator the creature would disappear. . . . But when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible.’”⁶ In other words, the human race risks losing the truth about what it means to be human. Perhaps more today than in Newman’s period, what is at stake is not only how to achieve the best form of education but also how to preserve the dignity of the human person. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was once asked what future he foresaw for our civilization. He replied, “Internequine fighting. . . . People killing one another in the streets. . . .”⁷

Aquinas clearly grasped the connection between knowledge and the good of persons. He replied to those who used the text of 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Knowledge puffs up,” as a weapon against those clerics who devoted themselves to study by saying that “the text applies when science is without love.”⁸ In other words, knowledge inflates with pride only when knowledge is separated from the embrace of the good. We return to Aquinas’s notion of what perfects the human intellect: “an intellect is said to be good because it knows the true.”⁹

When one considers the high mindedness of Enlightenment thinkers, especially the Continental ones, social critics and intellectual historians should regard our contemporary cultural circumstances as ironical. Who would have thought that “Dare to know”—*Sapere aude* (a phrase borrowed from Horace)—would have led eventually to a generation of twenty-first-century Westerners whose highest aspirations may include something

⁵ For one example, see John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, discourse 6, and below, note 21.

⁶ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, §36, as cited in *Evangelium Vitae*, §22.

⁷ Stephen Spender, “Remembering Eliot,” *The Sewanee Review* 74 (1966): 69.

⁸ Aquinas, *Contra impugnantes*, no. 11.

⁹ Aquinas, *ScG I*, chap. 71.

so banal as manipulating MySpace?¹⁰ Even when we consider the legitimate progress made in human knowing, such as computer technology and space exploration, the fact remains that the instrumentalization of human knowledge leaves the human person at a great disadvantage. If the only thing a person can do successfully is deploy knowledge to achieve practical results, there develops something incomplete in the person's character. Technocrats forget about loving the true. Thus we encounter the well-known stereotypes of the computer geek without the social skills to make friends or of the astronaut driven to senseless jealousy within a love triangle. In these examples and in other familiar figures from our culture, it is difficult to discover human persons in whom one finds verified the Thomist principle that "an intellect is said to be good because it knows the true." To put this otherwise, we discover smart but not wise people. "Wisdom," says Aquinas, "differs from mere science in looking at things from a greater light."¹¹

We learn from what Aquinas teaches us about the divine image in man that nothing short of God fully satisfies the human mind.¹² The intellectually deprived children of educational programs dedicated to the acquisition of information or the aggregation of skills do not suffer definitive lobotomies. Their intellects still want to look at things from a greater height. They remain made in the image and likeness of God, and so by nature desire to know what is true. Indeed, to know the Highest Truth. Herein lies the challenge of Catholic seminary education. Seminarians must learn how to communicate sacred truth to people who have forgotten that truth alone satisfies the human creature. For the priest, the stakes are high. He must preach about the Highest Truth. About God. Otherwise, he falls under the stricture Saint Paul enunciates: "If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it" (1 Cor 9:16). Aquinas helps us to see the urgency behind the preaching act: "A man cannot believe unless the truth be proposed to him."¹³

The depreciation of the human good illustrates only one dimension of the difficulties that arise in a world saturated with *technē*. A concomitant result of the modern penchant to regard knowledge only as instrumental to the achievement of created objectives involves the eclipse of God from

¹⁰ See Horace, *Epistles*, I, 2, 40: "Boldly undertake the study of true wisdom: begin it forthwith."

¹¹ *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II, q. 51, a. 4.

¹² See my "Sonship, Sacrifice, and Satisfaction: The Divine Friendship in Aquinas and the Renewal of Christian Anthropology," *Letter & Spirit* 3 (2007): 71-93.

¹³ ST II-II, q. 1, a. 9.

the conscious activity of human knowing. God becomes a no longer useful hypothesis. It is easy to assess the dimensions of this eclipse. When was the last time you heard someone immersed in *technē* talk about the contemplative life? Religion maybe, but not contemplative prayer. The secular philosophical currents of the modern period account largely for the present-day penchant to push God to the margins of thinkable objects. Seminarians study these movements and ideas in their philosophy and theology courses. At the same time, the best professors will instruct their students that the great Christian tradition does not accept the extraordinary myopia that displaces God from the apex of the intellectual life. Hegel's Absolute Spirit or Idea. Tillich's Ultimate Concern. Whitehead's Process. To discuss why God evaporates in modern philosophy and even from some contemporary theology belongs to another essay. But the fact is incontestable. For instance, not everyone who exegetes sacred Scripture shares the premise that Catholics do, namely, that God speaks. Thus divine revelation. Many advance the view that the sacred Scriptures represent man-made expressions of the legitimate aspirations of the human race. Call them, if you will, Neo-Feuerbachians.

Thomas Aquinas would find the modern proclivity to marginalize God a strange turn of events. To return to a point already made: he built his whole practical theology, his moral theology, upon the premise that "there can be no complete and final happiness for us save in the vision of God."¹⁴ When Aquinas speaks about a vision of God, he is not referring to a sense vision, obviously. Rather he means the human mind's capacity "to come through to the essence itself of the first cause" of all things that exist.¹⁵ He is talking plainly about God, the maker of heaven and earth. In fact, Aquinas advances the startling claim that "all conscious things implicitly know God in everything they know."¹⁶ Contemplative knowledge of God cannot be instrumentalized. The proof for this axiom is easy to state: nothing exists "beyond" God. So the saints commonly teach that only in God do our souls find rest. They have "come through to the essence itself of the first cause." The saints should be allowed to set the functional objectives for clerical education. The holy men and women who have done God's will throughout the ages demonstrate the Thomist axiom that theology forms a science of faith.

The classical theologians of the Christian era were not loathe to borrow from ancient philosophy in order to enlarge upon and to express

¹⁴ ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8. See also my *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

¹⁵ ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

¹⁶ *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1.

the truths of faith. It has been said that Aquinas baptized Aristotle. This long-accepted practice is discussed in the 1998 encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*. The Pope in fact refers to the figure of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Here is what the Pope has to say: "Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the meaning of this reasonableness."¹⁷ Aquinas, it should be emphasized, does not obscure the truths of faith by preparing for them or examining them in light of the conclusions of ancient philosophy. He rather scrutinizes what is held by faith with the help of the philosophy available to him. So when Aquinas tells us that our highest and most perfect fulfillment lies in a knowledge that remains entirely without further usefulness, he reflects what Christian teachers have taught from the beginning. In fact, Aquinas actually builds upon an important element of divine revelation: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life."¹⁸

In order to see the importance of knowing the true God and coming to share in his own blessed life, one may start with the New Testament. Recall for a moment what Saint Paul says at the beginning of the Letter to the Romans about the natural knowledge of God: "For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them" (Rom 1:19). Saint Paul refers of course to those were without the benefit of the divine revelation made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The first chapter of the Letter to the Romans goes on to explain that those who failed to draw the right conclusions about God the creator of all things quickly fell prone to committing forms of immorality that brought them special shame: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper" (Rom 1:28). The warning remains valid for us. Saint Thomas commenting on the text of Romans 13:12—"The night is far spent, the day is at hand"—says: "The entire stretch of our present life may be compared to night, because of the darkness of ignorance lying heavily on it; the state of future happiness today, for God's brightness shines on the blessed."¹⁹

The biblical and Thomist texts capture the theme of our discussion: holiness of life and embrace of the true. The theme merits special attention from seminarians. The priest above all must strive to offer a perspective that allows his parishioners to gain a glimpse of the whole, of a vision

¹⁷ *Fides et Ratio*, §43.

¹⁸ CCC, §1.

¹⁹ *On the Epistle to the Romans*, xiii, lect. 2.

of life that encourages the sanctification of the intellect. "Wisdom," Aquinas again reminds us, "differs from mere science in looking at things from a greater light."²⁰ Cardinal Newman offers the same advice. He urges educators to give students perspective: "[I]f one leads students to the mountaintop, so that they see all the surrounding territory, then they may go back and work in detail at some specific spot of the valley. But they will never forget that vista from the top of the mountain; all their work will have reference then to the whole terrain."²¹ The seminarian who has scaled the top of the mountain will, as a priest, know how to lead others there. That is, he will have gained a glimpse of God's brightness that shines on the blessed, at least as much as this is possible in the present life, and then may allow this blessed light to illuminate every other aspect of human life. This illuminating glimpse escapes those who spend all their time in the valleys.

The Love of Learning and the Desire for God

In the academic year 1955–1956, a distinguished Benedictine monk, Dom Jean Leclercq, gave a series of lectures at Sant' Anselmo, the Benedictine college in Rome. He pointed out that in the twelfth century, there were two kinds of preparatory schools, a school for monks and a school for clerics, that is, those who were destined to serve as diocesan priests. These latter studied in what was called the "exterior" school, a room not within the monastic enclosure. They received instruction in the seven liberal arts, the Trivium and the Quadrivium, that would prepare them for when they later attended schools of theology, often located near

²⁰ *ST* II–II, q. 51, a. 4.

²¹ See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, discourse 6, section 7 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 139, 140: "I say then, if we would improve the intellect, first of all, we must ascend; we cannot gain real knowledge on a level; we must generalize, we must reduce to method, we must have a grasp of principles, and group and shape our acquisitions by means of them. It matters not whether our field of operation be wide or limited; in every case, to command it, is to mount above it. Who has not felt the irritation of mind and impatience created by a deep, rich country, visited for the first time, with winding lanes, and high hedges, and green steepes, and tangled woods, and every thing smiling indeed, but in a maze? The same feeling comes upon us in a strange city, when we have no map of its streets. Hence you hear of practised travellers, when they first come into a place, mounting some high hill or church tower, by way of reconnoitring its neighbourhood. In like manner, you must be above your knowledge, not under it, or it will oppress you; and the more you have of it, the greater will be the load." This citation of Newman's words comes from an address delivered by Dr. Louise Cowan at Thomas More College, Merrimack, New Hampshire. See the college's *Newsletter*, vol. 14.3 (March, 1997): 6–9.

a cathedral. Monks, on the other hand, were educated differently. They were instructed individually in “interior” schools under the guidance of an abbot, a spiritual father, through the reading of the Bible and the Fathers, within the liturgical framework of the monastic life.²²

We get a glimpse of this monastic pedagogy from the prologue of St. Bernard to his sermons on the Canticle of Canticles, where he addresses the young monks with these words: “The instruction that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world, at least the manner will be different.”²³ Saint Bernard proceeds on the assumption that the monks already find themselves disposed to love the sacred text, and so he can speak to them not as searchers for but as lovers of what is true.

By referring to the provocative essay of Dom Jean Leclercq it is not my intention to comment on the distinctions that he introduces between scholastic and monastic theologies. Still less do I want to lend credence to the view that one should drive a wedge between professional studies for ministry and monastic studies for consecrated persons. The fact of the matter is that Saint Thomas Aquinas has taught us how to combine both the salutary emphases of the monastic tradition with the reasoned argumentation that later developed within the scholastic tradition. It also has been argued that the birth of scholasticism was inevitable once ancient philosophy, especially Aristotle, became known to the universities of Europe from the twelfth century. In any case, Aquinas never lost sight of the importance of the affective theology that Saint Bernard urged upon his monks. Aquinas’s treatment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of wisdom, affords a good example. Or, we can turn to the text from the *Summa contra Gentiles* where Aquinas explains that “our intellect . . . extends to the infinite in understanding. . . . But this ordination of the intellect would be in vain unless an infinite intelligible reality existed.”²⁴ In other words, since nothing is loved unless it is first known, the love of learning inevitably leads to the desire for God.

Yearning is never absent from Aquinas’s theology, although he admittedly prefers to express the affective movement of the soul in a way that one may call “intellectualist” rather than emotional. In any case, I return

²² Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 3.

²³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* I, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. 2, trans. Kilian Walsh, O.C.S.O. (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1971), Sermon 1, “On the Title of the Book,” 1.1; as cited in Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 5, 6.

²⁴ ScG I, chap. 43.

to the more than fifty-year-old lectures of Dom Leclercq to defend a thesis that today may be considered in some quarters quite controversial, namely, that every authentically Christian approach to knowledge remains monastic in character. This means that all learning is fundamentally contemplative. Study proceeds successfully only within the establishment of a real contact with God. This thesis holds especially true for the training of diocesan priests. Although things may have been different in Saint Bernard's day, the fact of the matter is that in the reforms that followed upon Trent, reforms that still more or less inspire programs of priestly formation, the distinction between the exterior and interior classrooms was dissolved. All priests are expected to receive an affective training in theology. We call it human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral training.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), as we have seen, exemplifies the monastic style of doing theology. He displays a surprisingly modern emphasis on experience. To return to his Prologue, Bernard says of the Old Testament book, the Song of Solomon, or the Cantic of Canticles: "Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning. Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it; let all others burn with desire rather to attain to this experience than merely to learn about it."²⁵ It would be a supreme anachronism to interpret Saint Bernard's emphasis on experience according to the contemporary fashionable but still Marxist-inspired views of experience. When people today talk about experience as a locus for learning they usually proceed on the supposition that knowledge develops only from below, from the bottom up, so to speak, and that the task of the inquirer is to immerse himself as much as possible into the rhythms of the materialist evolution that governs the universe. On the contrary, Saint Bernard held and expressly taught that in the knowledge of divine things, such as the text of a biblical author, it is God who really does the teaching. Saint Bernard's understanding of experience approaches an affective knowing, an *amata notitia*. Really, an affective beholding. Aquinas later would take up this same point, observing that there is something of love in knowledge and something of knowledge in love: "[L]ove of the word [*dilectio verbi*] . . . is a beloved awareness [*amata notitia*]."²⁶ He learned this principle from his study of the divine persons of the Trinity.

Jean Leclercq recapitulates what Saint Bernard emphasizes about the nature of monastic learning: "Just as there is no theology without moral

²⁵ Bernard, *On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 1, 6.11.

²⁶ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 9, ad 4: "Ad quantum dicendum quod dilectio verbi, quod est amata notitia, pertinet ad rationem imaginis; sed dilectio virtutis pertinet ad similitudinem, sicut et virtus."

life and asceticism, so there is no theology without prayer.”²⁷ Prayer is the way that we let God instruct us. Bernard of course shifts the movement of learning from the one who seeks (*quaeritur*) knowledge to the one who desires (*desideratur*) to know, and from what is to be known (*sciendum*) to what is to be experienced (*experiendum*). The moral life. Asceticism. Prayer. These qualities of life still mark the monastic culture that sets the standard for all authentic learning.

In order to develop his thesis about the evolution of monastic culture in the West, Dom Jean Leclercq conducts his reader on a tour of the history of monasticism from the beginning to the dawn of the High Middle Ages. He begins with Saint Benedict and Saint Gregory the Great, and goes on to show how their program of study, contemplation, work, and loving God within the context of a virtuous life was spread throughout Europe during what we call the Carolingian period by Benedictine missionary monks. The love of learning and the desire for God did not create theocracies. The Christianization of Europe did not require the complete suppression of pagan literature and wisdom. Even before the thirteenth century, the monk Rabanus Maurus (c.780–856) wrote, commenting on the provision of Deuteronomy 21:10–13 that allows an Israelite to marry a pagan woman in time of war: “That is what we customarily do, and what we ought to do, when we read pagan poets, when the books of worldly wisdom fall into our hands. If we meet therein with something useful, we convert it to our own dogma [*ad nostrum dogma convertimus*].”²⁸ It is worthwhile to note that the methodology that Aquinas developed when he read the works of Aristotle may not have been as innovative as certain researchers sometimes claim. The Angelic Doctor was perhaps developing lessons that he had learned while a young student in the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. He took Aristotle’s philosophy and converted it to Catholic doctrine. In more areas of Catholic thought than is commonly acknowledged, the Church has canonized this conversion.

The great heritage of classical Christian culture recognizes that on the one hand learning is necessary if one is to approach God and to express what is discovered about him, while on the other hand, literature must be continually transcended and elevated in the striving to attain eternal life. Leclercq speaks about “devotion to heaven.”²⁹ The principal literary sources of monastic culture are those that still occupy our attention. Of

²⁷ Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 7.

²⁸ Rabanus Maurus, *De clericorum institutione* III, 18 (PL 107: 396); as cited in Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 60.

²⁹ Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, chap. 4.

course, since the contributions of the scholastic and the later doctors of the Church were not yet available to them, the monastic tradition was founded upon the patristic heritage. But if we enlarge the patristic tradition to include the later scholastic and theological tradition, such as Thomism, then we can say that this body of literature, along with the Sacred Scriptures as well as classical literature, a category that can be expanded to include modern classics, remains the source of Christian learning. We see this rule maintained in our seminaries and programs of ongoing formation. Catholic seminary education revolves around three foci: Bible, the tradition, and philosophy. Mention needs also to be made of the Liturgy as the place where the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers and the doctors of the Church are first received and where one gives the assent of faith to what these *documenta fidei* contain. In short, then, what has contributed to the shaping of monastic culture and to the intellectual tradition of the West continues to set the perennial norm for the training of priests. Dom Leclercq urges us to answer the question whether other disciplines taught in Catholic seminaries can contribute to the preaching of the gospel without seminarians standing squarely on the foundations of monastic culture.

When he describes the flowering of monastic culture in the early Middle Ages, Leclercq completes his essay on the "Love of Learning and the Desire for God." This history is well documented. The general storyline is well-known: Monastic schools gradually gave way to the development of the universities. Although some monks participated in the evolution of European education, the most famous actors from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries were drawn from among the friars, and after the sixteenth, from the Jesuits and those congregations of religious men who followed their example. It is not possible at this juncture to trace the history of the effect of the sixteenth-century Reform and of the new humanism that developed after Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in 1509 his *Praise of Folly*. The Dispute at Lausanne provides an instructive and perhaps indicative anecdote, however. All in all, we can conclude that the Church has undergone a more difficult time sustaining her seminaries in the last 400 years than she experienced during the first 1600 years of her existence. Take another example: the French school of priestly formation that dates from the seventeenth century suffered the outrageous assault of the French Revolution. Instead of surveying the history of seminary education in the modern period, I would like instead to return to an important lesson that the monastic experience continues to teach seminarians. That is, the importance that holiness of life holds in the advancing toward knowledge of the truth.

How to Develop a Clerical Heart?

One of the most important texts in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is found at numbers 19 and 20 when the text discusses the spiritual life of the priest. It speaks about a “‘specific’ vocation to holiness,” or more precisely of “a vocation based on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, as a sacrament proper and specific to the priest, and thus involving a new consecration to God through ordination.”³⁰ We can discover the foundation for this specific form of priestly holiness in the pattern that has been called monastic. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* confirms that the relationship of holiness to learning remains as true today as it did during the decades when monastic culture was transforming old Europe.

I would like to comment briefly on how to apply to seminarians the principles that monastic culture placed at the center of all human life and learning. They are six altogether. The first group addresses issues of personal discipline. They include the moral life, asceticism, and prayer. The second group specifies the texts that undergird liberal studies, namely, the Sacred Scriptures, works of theological learning, and lastly, philosophical texts.

First, the moral life. It was Saint Gregory the Great in his commentary on the book of Job, known as the *Moralia*, who for the first time presented to the Christian West a pattern of life based on the virtues and vices. Aquinas put systematic order into Gregory’s text. As the Dominican scholar Servais Pinckaers has pointed out, a virtue-based program for Christian living found antecedents in the earlier Fathers, especially in Saint Augustine, and continued to provide the model for giving pastoral care until the mid-sixteenth century.³¹ It was around the time of the Council of Trent that an alternate model for doing moral theology, what is known as casuistry, arose. The virtues of the Christian life are seven: faith, hope, and charity; prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. It would be impossible to sketch even briefly the material content of these theological and moral virtues.³² Suffice it to observe that it constitutes a high-risk experiment to develop the intellectual virtues without the moral virtues. There are many examples that demonstrate this point: the expert in accounting who does not love justice. Possible outcome: embezzlement. The humanist who is a womanizer. Possible outcome: self-destruction. The seminarian who is lazy. Possible outcome: pastoral neglect. The seminarian who abets unchastity. Possible outcome: too tragic to think

³⁰ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §20.

³¹ See Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

³² See my *Virtues, or the Examined Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

about. When the moral virtues are not functioning in the way that they should, which is not to affirm that every sin results in the loss of a virtue, the intellectual life falters.³³ The human mind is made to know the Highest Truth, and this pursuit proves impossible when we find ourselves consumed by vicious disorders. Or, to return to Saint Bernard, the attainment of the Highest Truth requires passionate desire to embrace the True.

Asceticism. The high calling that is the priestly vocation requires of each priest and seminarian a special discipline of the senses. The seminarian and priest are required to think seriously about the ascetical life. In brief, to reflect on an organized pattern of self-denial. Asceticism is not reserved to monks and religious fanatics. Of course, the choice of ascetical practices, especially for the beginner, requires wise counsel. Saints in the past have been reprimanded for their youthful indiscretions. One can offer a short reason for adopting some ascetical practice, such as observing the fasts that occur throughout the Church's year or sacrificing one's own pleasure in order to help others in need or to step back from even legitimate entertainments, such as music, computer games, and television. The effects of original sin leave us prone to sin. Saint Augustine devoted extensive reflection to the vice of *curiositas*, the vice that prompts us to look around unnecessarily. So our movements require vigilant watching. We facilitate this self-discipline by fasting, almsgiving, and voluntary works of self-denial. One of the most unhappy examples of the hermeneutics of discontinuity after the Second Vatican Council is the wholesale abandonment of ascetical practices, fasts, vigils, acts of personal sacrifice, in favor of what was falsely presented to represent their legitimate substitutes. In short, these alternatives included non-burdensome activities such as fulfilling one's ordinary duties or performing those everyday works of charity that comprise Christian life. Ascetical practices are especially urgent in circumstances when temptations are strong, such as happens with internet pornography and other illicit satisfactions of the concupiscence of the eyes. Because there are so many instances when sinful self-satisfaction is forbidden, the Christian life requires that one become accustomed to self-denial.

Prayer. The third and principal element of monastic culture is prayer. It is not often remarked that the pattern of the Church's official prayer has been set for many centuries. This pattern was developed normatively in the monasteries. Take for example the Liturgy of the Hours or its adaptation for the laity that is found in the monthly *Magnificat*. The praying of

³³ For a discussion of the unity and the connection of the moral virtues, see my *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

psalms and canticles and readings from the Bible forms the background for Catholic worship. The concrete expressions that these prayers adopt are each monastic in origin. The seminarian may not dispose of the time or schedule to take up the rhythm of monastic hours. He must, however, establish a regular rhythm of prayer at certain set hours. Prayer without times for prayer evaporates. Indispensable moments in this rhythm are morning, evening, and before retiring. Eventually, the seminarian must learn to embrace the complete Liturgy of the Hours. Contemplative prayer complements this commitment, indispensably.

The practices of prayer that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recommends are vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplative prayer. The latter form Saint Teresa of Avila describes as “a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”³⁴ I would strongly encourage seminarians to read closely what the *Catechism* has to say about contemplative prayer in numbers 2709–2719. Indeed, I would encourage seminarians to read again the whole of Part Four of the *Catechism*, which is devoted to Christian prayer. The monastic culture confirms that learning and prayer go hand in hand. Prayer is the place where desire is enkindled. Remember what Saint Bernard told his monks: “Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it; let all others burn with desire rather to attain to this experience than merely to learn about it.”³⁵ Burning. Desiring. Experiencing. These activities, when they have God for their object, transpire only within the context of regular, personal prayer.

The other feature of monastic culture that Dom Leclercq draws to our attention is the program of monastic studies which was built around the Bible, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the philosophical texts considered suitable for monastic studies. This is not the occasion to comment on curriculum development. At the same time, the list of subjects that seminarians are required to master makes it clear that they can only complete the program to the extent that they develop the habit of recollection. At this juncture note the congruity between the features of monastic life and the program for priestly formation: human formation, asceticism, spiritual formation, prayer. Human and spiritual formation: the life of virtue. Intellectual formation, study.

We should further note the importance that the monastic tradition attaches to the study of the Bible, the tradition, and philosophy. First, the Bible. One may pose the question whether Saint Bernard would have been able to encourage his monks to read the Canticle of Canticles if he

³⁴ Saint Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of Her Life*, 8, 5; as cited in CCC, §2709.

³⁵ Bernard, *On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 1, 6.11.

had known about the requirement of higher exegesis, as it is called. I expect that seminarians are accustomed to read prayerfully the Sacred Scriptures without too much reliance on scientific Scripture studies, at least the first time through. One of the sad results of modern Scripture studies manifests itself in the pulverization of the sacred texts. As one of my friends likes to remark, the commentaries keep getting bigger and bigger. The reason for this obscurantist development is closely linked to the requirements of academic institutions that put a premium to research. In any case, recently the Holy Father has remarked on what he calls canonical exegesis. One feature of this method is to read all the Sacred Scriptures together. In other words, there is an effort afoot to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. The Pope's own book on Jesus Christ tries to implement the principles of this canonical exegesis. My recommendation to seminarians is that they read the Sacred Scriptures with confidence and devotion. The text of Saint Bernard on the "Canticle" returns with special aptness: "Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning."

Second, the tradition. No seminarian can ignore the patristic and scholastic traditions and at the same time succeed in his priestly office. There always lingers the temptation to adopt the encyclopedic view of knowledge. Only what is up-to-date is true. I refer to this approach to learning as romantic evolutionary. It is romantic because it places without sufficient warrant a premium on what is the latest. It is evolutionary because it assumes that things keep getting better. The fact of the matter is that there are many good books that are old books. To read Saint Athanasius's *On the Incarnation* is worth more than reading almost any 100 of the books written about Christ since 1900. The same may be said for Saint Thomas Aquinas. I made this case in my book *A Short History of Thomism*. One witness from the Thomist tradition who helps us understand the importance of seeing things from the perspective of the whole is the French Dominican author A. D. Sertillanges, who wrote a short classic translated into English as *The Intellectual Life*. Sertillanges helps us grasp why holiness and learning must go together. He writes: "Great men seem to us men of great boldness; in reality they are more obedient than others. The sovereign voice speaks to them. It is because they are actuated by an instinct which is a prompting of that sovereign voice that they take, always with courage and sometimes with great humility, the place that posterity will give them—venturing on acts and risking inventions often out of harmony with their time and place and even incurring much sarcasm from their fellows. They are not afraid because, however isolated they may appear to be, they feel that they are not alone. They

have on their side the power that finally settles everything. They have a premonition of their empire to come.”³⁶ He refers to those persons who give themselves over to the Bible, the tradition, and philosophy.³⁷

Philosophy. The importance of philosophy and the classical disciplines that support it, including the classical languages, is central for seminary formation. The Church is taking back some of the ground lost in the 1960s and 1970s when it was thought that human sciences may replace philosophy. If you cannot distinguish, you are left with no alternative but to deny or affirm. To always deny results in recalcitrance. To always affirm makes you a dupe. Today it is not easy to choose the kind of philosophy that one should read. Again, I recommend that one follow the tutelage of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The reason for this suggestion is not partisanship. The suggestion follows the urging of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter that I have already cited, *Fides et Ratio*. Aquinas calls for a philosophy that merits the name of metaphysical realism. “If I insist so strongly,” writes the Pope, “on the metaphysical element, it is because I am convinced that it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment [1998], and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behavior now widespread in our society.”³⁸

This warning from Pope John Paul II brings us back to where we began. Holiness and learning. It would surprise me to discover that Pope Benedict XVI had not read Jean Leclercq’s book. Whether he read it or not, Pope Benedict agrees with Leclercq on the contribution that Saint Benedict made in establishing the Christian intellectual roots of Europe.

³⁶ A. G. Sertillanges, O.P., *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1959), xi–xii.

³⁷ We call them recognized spiritual authors. Dominican Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (+1964), in his monumental work *The Three Ages of the Interior Life* (Rockford: Tan, 1989), provides a list of the saints and other spiritual giants whose works “we should not ignore” because “these works, though not composed under infallible inspiration, were written with the lights and the unction of the Holy Ghost.” Garrigou-Lagrange’s list of indispensable authors reads as follows: “The chief spiritual works of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Cassian, St. Leo, St. Benedict, St. Gregory the Great, St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, Dionysius, St. Maximus Confessor, St. Anselm, and St. Bernard. Very useful also is an acquaintance with what most concerns the interior life in the writings of Richard of St. Victor, Hugh of St. Cher, St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure. Profit may always be drawn from the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena, the works of [John] Tauler, and those of Blessed Henry Suso, Blessed Angela of Foligno, Blessed John Ruysbroeck, Thomas à Kempis, the probable author of *The Imitation*” (Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages*, 249–50).

³⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §83.

These Christian roots mean a great deal to the Pope, and they should also to us. So I urge seminarians to take up the essay of Dom Jean Leclercq and to discover the monastic culture that is required for seminarians to lead a happy life, and to realize the priestly vocation, the seed of which God has placed in seminarians. Marriage is noble and essential for the well-being of the human race. Consecrated or religious vocations adorn the Church with special witnesses to the consuming power of God's face. But neither the Church nor the world can survive long without priests. So I conclude by encouraging seminarians to fulfill the role that clerics played in creating Western civilization. The world needs wise diocesan priests who desire God ardently. So, as Pope Benedict XVI recently reminded priests and deacons: "Let us be the first to demonstrate the humility and purity of heart which are required to approach the splendor of God's truth. In fidelity to the deposit of faith entrusted to the Apostles (cf. 1 Tim 6:20), let us be joyful witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel!"³⁹ N.V

³⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, 19 April 2008.