

The Studiousness of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet

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Entre toutes les passions de l'esprit humain,
l'une des plus violentes, c'est le désir de savoir.

—*Sermon sur la Mort*, 22 March 1662

“LET ME tell you, my God, how I squandered the brains you gave me on foolish delusions.”¹ St. Augustine knew from bitter experience that if man’s desire to know is to serve him, it must be bridled by the will and ruled by reason, must be subject, that is, to the virtue of studiousness.² It is a virtue that, being particularly foreign to our temper, is difficult for us to understand. For in the long years since T. S. Eliot mourned the passing of the “wisdom we have lost in knowledge,” we have so immoderately partaken of encyclopedic learning that we are almost sure to have a habit of curiosity rather than one of studiousness.³ If we seek, then, to recover the true ideal of studiousness, the true mean with respect to the desire to know, we would do well to turn to the witness of the tradition. One exemplary model of this virtue comes to us from the age of Louis XIV in the person of the great orator Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.

In his day, Bossuet was widely recognized as one of the most learned churchmen in Europe. Today he is little known outside of Francophone

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.17, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 37.

² See, for instance, St. Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing*, §22, trans. C. L. Cornish, in *Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates, 2 volumes (New York: Random House, 1948), I:414.

³ T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” in *Collected Poems*, 1909–1962 (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 147. On the danger of curiosity and need for the cultivation of studiousness, see Paul J. Griffiths, “The Vice of Curiosity,” *Pro Ecclesia* XV (2006): 47–63, and Reinhard Hütter, “Intellect and Will in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* and in Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vêtera* 3 (2005): 579–602, at 592–96.

lands, which is lamentable, if for no other reason than that it indicates the loss of the riches of his oratory. For its sonorousness, for the beauty of its orderliness, and for its penetrating vision into the depths of the soul, Bossuet's oratory endures as one of the highest achievements of the Catholic Baroque. And his erudition was by no means exhausted in rhetorical composition. As the tutor to the Dauphin in the 1670s and bishop of Meaux and royal advisor until his death in 1704, he was called upon to write a wide variety of pedagogical, pastoral, and learned works, from letters of spiritual direction to textbooks, to apologetic works of tremendous weight such as his *Exposition of Catholic Doctrine* (1671) and the *History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches* (1688). By the last decade of his life, when he was exchanging letters with Leibniz about the prospects of the reunion of the Protestants with the Catholic Church, Bossuet had become an honored voice of the living Catholic tradition: to the faithful, a champion, and to the nascent Enlightenment, a barrier to be overcome or cast aside.⁴

There are two reasons why Bossuet can serve us as a compelling model of studiousness. The first is that he defended and practiced the virtue at a time when it was being rejected by the new learning of the Renaissance. The virtues are not necessarily the stronger for being opposed, but when they are opposed, those who would uphold them are forced to reflect upon their ideals and practices with a sharpened awareness of them. The second reason is that Bossuet pursued wisdom within the context of an active life. From his early days as a Doctor of the Sorbonne until his death, his life of study and writing was always at the service of the pressing needs of the Church and of his roles as educator and pastor. In our day, similarly, most of those who pursue wisdom within the Catholic intellectual tradition do so not in the cloister, but in the academy, whose groves are not so well-suited to contemplative repose. And so, while Bossuet himself would tell us that if we wish to be studious we should imitate St. Bernard, St. Gregory, and St. Augustine, we may gain from him some insights more immediately applicable to our condition than from those who were more deeply rooted in the liturgical life and in religious community.

Curiosity Becomes an Ideal

The full meaning of the virtue of studiousness is difficult to appreciate without reference to the opposing vice of curiosity. In his discussion of the vice of curiosity, St. Thomas Aquinas points to four ways in which the natural desire for knowledge can become inordinate, that is, wrongly

⁴ See the classic characterization of Bossuet in Paul Hazard, *The European Mind (1680–1715)*, trans. J. Lewis May (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963), 198–236.

directed. The third of these will be our chief concern because it came to typify the new learning of the Renaissance: “when man desires to know the truth about creatures, without referring it to its due end, which is the knowledge of God.”⁵ It would be hard to imagine a more perfect embodiment of the vice than the new learning of the seventeenth century. Consider, for instance, Descartes’s prohibition of the search for final causes, or, more provocatively, the name Bacon gave to his imaginary academy, the College of the Six Days Works, a name suggesting that productive work and not contemplation was man’s highest good.⁶ For their audacity in digging down to principles starkly contrary to those of the Aristotelian tradition, Bacon and Descartes have long been numbered among its chief rivals. Principles, however, rarely spring to life fully-formed. They more often grow slowly in a soil prepared by gradual changes in practice. Around Bacon and Descartes stood an array of men-of-letters and *érudits*, philologists and antiquarians, experimental philosophers, autodidacts and innovators, in a word, the curious. In the lives and works of these many inquirers the principles expressed by the more well-known thinkers found their origin and their elaboration.

Two texts from the late Renaissance are particularly helpful for laying bare the inordinate desire for knowledge that characterized the new learning: Gabriel Naudé’s *Advis pour dresser une Bibliothèque* (1627) and Pierre Gassendi’s *Viri illustres Nicolai Claudii Fabricii de Peiresc, senatoris Aquisextiensis, vita* (1641). Naudé, a librarian, and Gassendi, a cleric and philosopher, were both significant members of the emerging Republic of Letters; their works, accordingly, shed light upon the mentality of the men who prepared the ground for and welcomed the innovations of Bacon and Descartes. In these two treatises can be seen three common characteristics of the new learning: first, that the word curiosity had become the name of a positive character trait and even of an ideal; second, that the ideal consisted in the lack of restraint in the pursuit of knowledge; third, that new institutions were emerging to support and instantiate the new ideal.

Naudé’s *Advice for Fitting Out a Library* was a courtly work, addressed by a savant to his patron, a member of the legal aristocracy who had been bitten by the love of books. Written with all the fervor of youthful conviction, Naudé’s essay proposed a refinement of the Renaissance cultural ideal:

⁵ *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 167, a. 1: “Quando homo appetit cognoscere veritatem circa creaturas non referendo ad debitum finem, scilicet ad cognitionem Dei.”

⁶ See Descartes, *Meditation* #4 and *Principles of Philosophy*, I.28; Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 471.

the learned courtier's books were not to be beautifully bound, artfully arranged, or magnificently housed, but useful, up-to-date, and numerous. In his *Advice* the forms of the word curious appeared regularly, most often when qualifying a book as curious, which served principally to indicate its rarity, but sometimes when directly referring to a scholar's desire for knowledge. In those cases the term was not used with a negative meaning; one commentator has observed that Naudé used *curieux* as a synonym for *docte* (learned).⁷ Gassendi's *Life of Peiresc* was written less from a desire to please a patron than from admiration for a celebrated member of the Republic of Letters whom Gassendi commended as a model for his "unquenchable thirst after knowledge" and his "unwearied care to advance all ingenious and liberal arts."⁸ Here, too, the word curious was employed as a term of approbation, as when Gassendi said of the young Peiresc that "his most curious mind began to burn like fire in a wood."⁹ For both Gassendi and Naudé, giving the word curious a neutral or even positive connotation accorded with their broader doctrine. Both scholars shared the conviction that the pursuit of knowledge should suffer no restraint.

The emerging Renaissance ideal of curiosity was the precise opposite of Aquinas's conception of studiousness. For Aquinas, studiousness owed its name to its secondary quality of removing the obstacles to learning posed by man's distaste for the pains of study (*labores inquirendi*), but its essential function was to curb the desire for knowledge. "Studiousness," he said, with his usual economy, "consists in restraint."¹⁰ But the new learning was departing from the older, theological model of learning by seeking a different kind of universality. Thus Gassendi lauded Peiresc in these terms: "Being moderate in all other things, he seemed only immoderate in his desire of knowledge; and never man was more desirous than he, to run through the famous encyclopedia, or whole circle of the arts."¹¹ Naudé

⁷ Paul Nelles, "The Library as an Instrument of Discovery: Gabriel Naudé and the Uses of History," in Donald R. Kelley, ed., *History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 41–57, at 44.

⁸ Gassendi, *The Mirrour of True Nobility and Gentility: Being the Life of the Renowned Nicolaus Claudius Fabricius, Lord of Peiresk*, trans. W. Rand in 1657, ed. Oliver Thill (Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2003), 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ *ST* II–II, q. 166, a. 2, ad 3: "Studiositas in refrenatione consistit."

¹¹ Gassendi, *Mirrour*, 280. I respectfully differ from the judgment of Lynn Joy, who sees "mixed admiration and regret" in this and similar passages in which Gassendi "reluctantly acknowledged" Peiresc's immoderate desire for knowledge. See Lynn Sumida Joy, *Gassendi the Atomist: Advocate of History in an Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 59.

made the lack of restraint in the pursuit of knowledge almost the measure of human happiness. "If it is possible to have in this world some sovereign good, some perfect and complete felicity," then, he explained, it was to be found in a library of a learned man who, "does not desire books so that they might be the ornament of his dining room so much as the instruments of his studies." With the right library, a man "might know all things, see all things, be ignorant of nothing"; he would be "the absolute master of this contentment, that he might arrange it according to his fantasies, enjoy it when he will, leave it when it please him, and, without suffering contradiction, without labor, and without pain he may instruct himself and know the most precise particulars."¹² To the partisans of the new learning, curiosity, the unchecked desire for knowledge, had become the name of a virtue. The desire for knowledge was a measure and rule unto itself.

To divine what was the end of the knowledge so eagerly sought by Naudé and Gassendi's Peiresc is not a simple matter. Both acknowledged the duty to use the truth to convert heretics, yet their thoughts were clearly elsewhere. Naudé gives us a clue in his judgment that collections of ancient sources are most valuable for a library because of "the brevity of our life and the multitude of things that one must know today in order to be placed in the ranks of learned men." And the library was to have works by scholars of the present century, so that one could avoid being a pedant, that is, one who "disdains all the modern authors so that he might pay court only to a few of the ancients."¹³ Membership in the Republic of Letters on good standing, it appears, was Naudé's goal. On a similar note, Gassendi painted the copious learning of Peiresc as being its own justification. In his *Life*, after a bewildering chronicle of his friend's interests, from the bones of saints to new stars, turtles to tulips, and Coptic manuscripts to Roman coins, he reported a conversation in which Peiresc had defended his antiquarian researches as worthy of praise because "they give light to the understanding of good authors," assist in knowing "the circumstances of histories," and cause "persons, things, and actions" to be "more deeply fixed in the mind."¹⁴ One studies, then, in order to study with more understanding. Undergirding this reflexive justification is the unspoken premise that the best knowledge is that which is most recently acquired. Naudé's concern to have the latest texts by the most current scholars was matched by Peiresc's searching of the Mediterranean world for rare manuscripts, old in themselves, but new to

¹² Naudé, *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque*, edition of 1644 (Paris: Isidore Lisieux, 1876), 12–13.

¹³ Naudé, *Advis*, 43 and 47.

¹⁴ Gassendi, *Mirrouir*, 292.

the learned. If the merits of a bit of knowledge cannot be judged with respect to the object of the knowledge or the transformation that the knowledge effects in the knower, what remains is some quality that the knowledge brings with it, such as pleasure, usefulness, or fame, all of which are readily found in novelty. The most telling evidence that it was the love of the new that motivated Peiresc's studies is that Gassendi told the story of his discoveries and experiences in chronological order, with one thing simply following another in time. There was no single great achievement or guiding inquiry for this new-model antiquarian, who studied the old in order to find the new.

Institutions and practices soon embodied the love of novelty that colored the new learning. Naudé's *Advice*, of course, was itself the blueprint for just such an institution, a new kind of library, whose end was not the fame of the patron but "public use," and especially by the "least of men."¹⁵ Wide use by many scholars being the *sine qua non*, the library's collection was to be arranged so as to be most easily accessible. For Naudé, this meant that the order of the books was not a matter of principle but of practice. He was content to cleave to the established custom of separating volumes according to the various faculties of the university, but as the basis for the organization was now merely custom, "the traditional order of the disciplines" was placed "in a much weaker position."¹⁶ Gassendi was less interested in the library than in the scholar who inhabited it. Peiresc had been more valuable than any collection of books; indeed, from Gassendi's portrait one might conclude that he had been essentially a reference librarian. For Peiresc had been prompt in the service of the Republic of Letters: "he never stood considering, when occasion was offered to advance learning, and assist learned men." The books themselves were merely tools; the inquirer was the maker. Accordingly, Peiresc spent more time in his later years acquiring rare books and manuscripts for his correspondents than he did in reading them himself.¹⁷ He stood at the heart of a vast correspondence network linking scholars from Alexandria to London, from Antwerp to Rome. Letter writing, the exchange of books, and conversations in libraries and salons: as the century wore on, these institutions grew and multiplied, to be joined by learned journals, academies of science, and, finally, coffee houses, all of them providing what one well-known journal of the day called "News from the Republic of Letters."¹⁸

¹⁵ Naudé, *Advice*, 103.

¹⁶ Nelles, "The Library as an Instrument of Discovery," 46.

¹⁷ Gassendi, *Mirrouir*, 281, 288.

¹⁸ Pierre Bayle edited the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* from 1684 to 1687. On these developments, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy*

It is a sign that our age is characterized by the struggle among principles born in the distant past that a latter-day Gassendi has arisen to newly recommend Peiresc as a model of “learned sociability” and as a pattern for the intellectual life.¹⁹ Yet he cannot be a model for anyone who believes the mind to have an end beyond the enjoyment of its own exercise. For what Gassendi’s *Life* and Naudé’s library both represented was a rejection of the traditional hierarchy of knowledge. In other tracts of the Renaissance, such as Léon Battista Alberti’s *On Painting*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and Galileo’s *Two New Sciences*, individual pursuits had been declared to be autonomous, that is, neither ordered to nor directed by the truths contemplated by metaphysics and theology. In the works of Naudé and Gassendi, the practices and goals of the humanistic scholarly life as a whole were similarly set free. To their conception of the new learning, the virtue of studiousness was entirely irrelevant, because there was no hierarchy of studies and, consequently, there could be no harm in choosing the lower over the higher. At best, the new learning occasionally acknowledged the need for a kind of moderation in the pursuit of knowledge akin to the Epicurean’s care not to gorge himself. For the desire to know had become merely another passion of the soul, to be enjoyed in its operation like any other.²⁰ Curiosity was no longer a vice; it had become the name of the passion. On this point, as on many others, it was Montaigne who summed up his age: “When the mind is satisfied, that is a sign of diminished faculties or weariness.”²¹

Bossuet’s Witness to the Virtue of Studiousness

The Christian mind thirsts not for the endless quest, but for the peace of resting in God. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully” (1 Cor 13:12). There was a promise of limitless knowledge in that first temptation, and similar chimeras have led countless souls astray through the ages. The most clear-sighted of Christian teachers, therefore, have always followed St. Paul in seeing the mind as a glorious but unruly gift. Our “every thought” is to be taken “captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 2:5); we are to be “renewed in the spirit of our minds” (Eph 4:23). In his convictions about knowledge

and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119–55.

¹⁹ See Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc’s Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁰ See Descartes’s discussion of wonder in *The Passions of the Soul*, II.70–78.

²¹ Montaigne, “On Experience,” in *The Essays: A Selection*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1993), 368.

and learning, as in much else, Bossuet was a student of St. Paul. In chronicling his witness to the virtue of studiousness, it is necessary first to sketch the outlines of his life of study, then to consider his assessment of the threats posed by the new learning, before at last turning to his prescriptions for the right ordering of the desire to know.

Like his contemporary Molière, whose nemesis he was, Bossuet was formed by the *Ratio Studiorum*, at a Jesuit school in his hometown of Dijon.²² His youth there was a serious one, as was often the case with the sons of the French judicial nobility. When he was eleven, his father was appointed to the *Parlement* of Metz, and Bossuet was left in Dijon in the home of his uncle, also a judge, and a formidable figure who made his nephew memorize verses of Virgil beyond those he was required to learn at school. It was in his uncle's library that Bossuet happened upon the Latin text of the Holy Scriptures and thus, at fourteen, began a lifelong devotion to the Word of God. He left Dijon for Paris when he was fifteen, and passed from success to success, ending with his recognition as Doctor of the Sorbonne and his ordination to the priesthood, both in the spring of 1652. Already by his early twenties he had been introduced to the Republic of Letters in Paris at its twin poles, the fashionable Hôtel Rambouillet and the learned cabinet or study of the brothers Dupuy—frequented by Gabriel Naudé, among others—to which he had been recommended for his “taste for belles-lettres,” “grace,” and “ability to speak in public.”²³ A recent biographer, and not a sympathetic one, has tried to see Bossuet as a “worldly young cleric” who knew from firsthand experience the attractions of Parisian society.²⁴ But the documentary evidence that remains from this period of his life offers scant support for such a view. The *Meditation on the Brevity of Life* that he wrote on the eve of his ordination to the diaconate in 1648 bespoke an elevated piety and treated the sins of youth in conventional terms: “What then remains to me? Of lawful pleasures, a useless memory, of unlawful, a regret, a debt owed to Hell or to penance.”²⁵ Also to be noted is the early influence of St. Vincent de Paul upon Bossuet, who made a week-long retreat under the saint's direction prior to his priestly ordination, as well as the impos-

²² On Bossuet's education, see Thérèse Goyet, *L'Humanisme de Bossuet*, 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1965), I: 3–44.

²³ Letter of Nicolas Rigault to the Brothers Dupuy, April 3, 1650, in *Correspondance de Bossuet*, nouvelle édition, eds. Ch. Urbain and E. Levesque (Paris: Hachette, 1909), I:415–18, at 417.

²⁴ Georges Minois, *Bossuet: Entre Dieu et le Soleil* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), 39.

²⁵ Bossuet, *Méditation sur la Brièveté de la Vie*, in *Oeuvres Oraitoires*, édition critique de J. Lebarq, revue et augmentée par Ch. Urbain et E. Levesque, 7 volumes (Paris: Desclée, 1926), I:11.

ing achievements of his youth, which suggest that dissipation was never his flaw.

To take the measure of Bossuet's mind is the work not of a few sentences.²⁶ As an introduction, however, one might do worse than to note the parallels between him and John Henry Newman. For all of the inevitable differences between one man rooted in the soil of Catholic France and another who spent half of his life discovering the Catholic Church, the similarities of their minds are striking. Each man was educated in the Classics, read and wrote Latin as if it were his mother tongue, and had a mind shaped by Virgil and Cicero. Each also mastered Greek. They were immersed in the writings of the Fathers of the Church; Bossuet was more indebted to St. Augustine, Newman to the Cappadocians, but both were Patristic in their sensibilities. Both were incomparable master writers, who composed effortlessly and powerfully in their native languages, whose respective geniuses each one lifted to new heights. Both were men of letters who kept abreast of the learned world, wrote works of controversy to stem the tide of what they perceived to be dangerous innovation, and were often consulted by their peers and regarded as trustworthy judges in matters aesthetic, moral, and theological. Both were lifelong churchmen who understood that their significant talents had been entrusted to them that they might make a serious use of them in the service of the people of God. Both were critics of the new learning and educators charged with transmitting the old. Both, finally, had minds trained to seek the end in all things by the careful study of the works of Aristotle.

Just as some of the most piercing phrases in Newman's work are to be found in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* of his Anglican years, so also is Bossuet's genius visible in the sermons he delivered from his late twenties to his early forties, when he was a canon of Metz and occasional preacher before the Royal Court. From his panegyric of St. Joseph (1656), his charge "On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church" (1659), and his "Sermon on Death" preached at Court during his Lenten series in 1662, to what is often said to be his masterpiece, his funeral oration for the Duchess of Orléans (1670), he composed a series of great works that secured his reputation as one of the most eloquent preachers in an age that cultivated refined taste in oratory. Few were published during his life, but since his death they have been endlessly reprinted and

²⁶ The three authoritative studies of Bossuet consider him under only one aspect, each at great length: Goyet, *L'Humanisme de Bossuet*; Jacques Truchet, *La Prédication de Bossuet* (Paris: Cerf, 1960); Jacques Le Brun, *La Spiritualité de Bossuet* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972).

anthologized and are still studied in the schools of the Fifth Republic, not much known for their interest in France's Catholic past. Themes such as the hatred of the truth by free-thinkers and the necessity of preaching the Word of God are widespread among them. In one sermon in particular, however, the vice of curiosity forms the entire subject, the panegyric of St. Catherine of Alexandria, preached by Bossuet first in 1660.

Bossuet's exposition began, appropriately, with a commonplace. "Knowledge" is one of "heaven's gifts," but it is often "spoiled in our hands by the use that we make of it." The body of the sermon consisted in three points, divided according to a passage from one of St. Bernard's sermons on the *Song of Songs*. St. Bernard had identified three vices stemming from the improper pursuit of knowledge: curiosity, in those who seek to know "only that they might know"; vanity, in those who would know that they might be admired; and greed, in those who would know that they might become rich. Bossuet set the example of St. Catherine against these vices—all forms of curiosity on Aquinas's accounting—showing in each case that right intention was the crucial cause of the proper regulation of the desire to know. Thus to "the curious," who "fatten themselves with fruitless and idle speculation," he explained that the "light" of knowledge was not given "only that you might enjoy seeing it" but to "conduct your steps and rule your will." Christ is to be the ultimate object of our knowledge, and not merely as the truth, but also as "the way." The vain he reminded that truth does not "belong to us," for it is a gift from on high and it is destined for the service of others. Like St. Paul, we are not to "show forth our knowledge" for any other purpose than "to make known Jesus Christ." And he placed before the avaricious, who study theology merely to gain a benefice, the example of St. Catherine, who "consecrated" her knowledge "uniquely to the salvation of souls." The sermon concluded on a note of evangelical zeal: "And so, my brothers, may everyone preach the Gospel, in his family, among his friends, in his conversation . . . and may each of us make use of all his lights to win souls entangled by the world and to make the holy truth of God reign upon the earth."²⁷

Bossuet's sermons often convey a similar sense of urgency, and especially on the subject of knowledge. The age of St. Vincent de Paul, the Jesuit martyrs of North America, and the Trappist reform was also the age of Montaigne and Peiresc, Molière and Naudé. There was a war being waged for the soul of France, with the "science of the saints" set against a "false wisdom, which, shutting itself within the walls of mortal things, entombs

²⁷ Bossuet, "Panegyrique de Sainte Catherine," in *Oeuvres Oratoires*, III: 548–74.

itself with them in nothingness.”²⁸ Bossuet was not alone in seeing the danger. Pascal, whom he admired, inveighed against the tendency of the age to pursue “the bustle which distracts and amuses us” and saw in an “uneasy curiosity” the “chief malady” of mankind.²⁹ And Racine came to see more harm than good in the world of letters, urging his son to form his mind by “rereading his Cicero” and warning him not to let his love for French books “inspire in him a distaste for more useful reading, especially that of works of piety and morals.”³⁰ To Bossuet, the snares for the Christian mind were many. In an age of great preachers, there was the possibility of letting the ears be “flattered by the cadence and arrangement of the words” and failing to let “wisdom walk in front as mistress, eloquence behind as servant.”³¹ In an age of antiquarians and philologists, an “insatiable desire to know history” was emerging; some were even daring to treat “Jesus Christ as a subject for the inquiry of the curious.”³² In circles in which piety had become fashionable, some read the Port-Royal Bible “more on account of the translators than of the God who is speaking.”³³ In an age when theological controversies were the common coin of the chattering classes—as witness the popularity of Pascal’s *Provincial Letters*—there was the danger of allowing oneself to be “carried off by the desire to know” in the premature reading of theological works.³⁴ In each of these errors or excesses there was a common denominator of rebellion, sometimes subtle, sometimes open, against the order of divine wisdom. For “our reason,” Bossuet once explained in a letter to a close friend, “is reason only to the extent to which it is submitted to God.”³⁵

²⁸ Bossuet, “Sainte Catherine,” III:552, and “Oraison funèbre de la Duchesse d’Orléans” (1670), in *Oeuvres Oraatoires*, V:661.

²⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 168, 618, trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 45, 136.

³⁰ Racine’s letters to his son of October 14, 1693 and October 3, 1694 in *Oeuvres Complètes*, II: *Prose*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 540 and 552.

³¹ Bossuet, “Sermon sur la Parole de Dieu,” (1661) in *Oeuvres Oraatoires*, III: 626–27.

³² Bossuet, *Traité de la Concupiscence* (first published posthumously in 1731), in *Oeuvres Complètes de Bossuet*, ed. Abbé Guillaume, ten volumes (Lyon: Briday, 1879), IX: 554; “Panégryrique du Bienheureux François de Sales” (1660), in *Oeuvres Oraatoires*, III: 578. Bossuet was not alone in his condemnation of curiosity for historical knowledge; see Michele Rosellini, “La curiosité pour l’histoire dans la formation intellectuelle au XVIIe siècle,” in Gérard Ferreyrolles, ed., *La Représentation de l’histoire au XVIIe siècle* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 1999), 51–76.

³³ Bossuet to the Maréchal de Bellefonds, letter of December 1, 1674, in *Correspondance*, I:334.

³⁴ Bossuet to Bellefonds, letter of July 7, 1673, in *Correspondance*, I:293.

³⁵ Bossuet to Bellefonds, letter of February 8, 1674, in *Correspondance*, I:307.

The vision that recognizes the characteristic faults of the age is valuable, but still more so is the one that perceives the true excellence of virtue. Bossuet was not merely a critic of curiosity, nor even a theorist of studiousness; he was a defender and exemplar of the virtue. In his expression of the ideal, his elaboration of its practices, and his own pursuit of wisdom there are three principal notes to the virtue of studiousness: the necessity of moral virtue for the search for truth, fidelity to the tradition of the Church, and the ordination of knowledge to the common good.

Bossuet set forth studiousness as an ideal in his funeral oration for his mentor, Nicolas Cornet, Doctor of the Sorbonne. As Grand-Maître of the theology faculty, Cornet was responsible for having drawn the famous “Five Propositions” from Cornelius Jansen’s *Augustinus* that formed the basis of the ecclesiastical and royal censures of Jansenism and were a source of controversy for decades. Bossuet’s oration was not published in his lifetime, and its textual integrity has been questioned. Jean Calvet, for instance, declined to place it in the same company as the later and more famous funeral orations, reckoning Bossuet’s praise for Cornet as cast in “conventional terms.”³⁶ If lacking in drama, the oration does paint a portrait of a Christian scholar almost the precise opposite of Gassendi’s *Life of Peiresc*. Cornet was just as selflessly devoted to his studies as the Provençal antiquary had been, but added ascetic practices to single-mindedness. Bossuet lauded his innocence and modesty, his rejection of luxury and his generosity to the poor, and—unheard of excellence—his steadfast refusal of preferment. “Imitate his virtues, practice humility as he did, love obscurity as he loved it.” Unlike Peiresc, Cornet checked his desire for knowledge and made it serve the Church. “The first duty of a man who studies sacred truths,” Bossuet explained, “is to know how to distinguish the places where it is permissible to enter from those where we must stop short, and to remember the narrow limits by which our intellect is bounded.” The wise man knows how to “moderate the fire of that restless mobility that causes in us that intemperance and sickness of knowing, and to be wise soberly and according to measure.” Cornet, accordingly, shunned “refined chicanery and the subtlety of vain distinctions” and instead devoted himself to St. Augustine, whom he held to be the “most enlightened and profound of all the doctors,” and also to “the school of St. Thomas.” His fidelity to the tradition of the Church was matched by his spirit of service. He “consecrated his understanding to the

³⁶ Calvet, *Bossuet: l’homme et l’oeuvre* (Paris: Hatier-Boivin, 1941), 10. It is to be noted that Urbain and Levesque concluded with “certitude” that the “discourse as a whole belonged to Bossuet, though there were reserves to be made about the details.” *Oeuvres Oratoires*, IV:471.

Faith and his memory to the eternal memory of God,” and spoke as an oracle and with gravity amidst the tumult of the dispute over grace, when he was “consulted by all of France.” In sum, this “hidden treasure” was also a “public treasure.”³⁷

With less eloquence and insistence upon the moral virtues, but with greater precision about the intellectual life, Bossuet composed two brief treatises for clerical protégés, which, taken together, provide a summary of his views on theological education. The first was a treatise written in 1670 for the young Cardinal de Bouillon, “On Style and the Reading of the Fathers of the Church for the Formation of an Orator.” Here Bossuet wrote with sovereign confidence about the means by which to attain a “figurative” and “ornate” style. Demosthenes in the Greek and Cicero in the Latin were his models. From the “few books” he had read in French, he recommended those by Pascal and Racine, but like Racine, counseled that reading in the vernacular was to be done “without abandoning other, serious reading; one or two pieces suffice to give an idea” of the style. Far more important, even for “forming style” was to “understand the thing, to penetrate the basis and the end of it all,” which was to be done by “knowing very well” the Old and New Testaments. Here, too, he warned against a certain excessive curiosity: “I have learned by experience that when one attaches oneself stubbornly to penetrating the obscure passages instead of passing them by, one wastes on difficult questions time that should have been spent reflecting upon what is clear, which is what forms the mind and nourishes piety.” The Fathers, finally, were the essential guides, and among them, St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom: “The former raises the mind to great and subtle considerations, and the latter draws it back and fits it to the capacity of the people.” To the theological treatises of Augustine and the sermons of Chrysostom, he added St. Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Rule*, explaining that “these works” were to be read “for the sake of forming a body of doctrine.”³⁸

Five years later, Bossuet’s counsel took the form of a letter “On the Studies that Ought to Follow the Licentiate.” Here again, for a different clerical student and at greater length, he sketched a program of reading Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. The treatise is significant for containing a statement of Bossuet’s understanding of the academic forms of his day. The studies for the licentiate he held to be strictly

³⁷ Bossuet, “Orasion funèbre de Nicolas Cornet” (1663), in *Oeuvres Oratoires*, IV: 470–93. On Cornet’s influence upon Bossuet, see LeBrun, *Spiritualité de Bossuet*, 42–46.

³⁸ Bossuet, “Sur le Style, et la lecture des Pères de l’Eglise pour former un orateur,” in *Oeuvres Oratoires*, VII: 13–20.

preliminary; they were “exercises for disputation” that instructed in a “few questions” but did not “compose a body of doctrine.” At that level, the ancient texts of the Fathers were read only in extracts, and therefore gave only “slim and confused knowledge.” With one’s licentiate behind him, the student could devote more time to the “reading of the ancients,” that he might “penetrate their sentiments and attempt to conciliate them, and, finally, to search for the tradition of the Church.” This experience of apprenticeship to the Fathers is what “properly makes a body of doctrine and merits the quality of doctor.” It is what allows the student to “give an account, on each dogma and question, of what was the sentiment of the Fathers of the Church.”³⁹ What is crucial to note here is that Bossuet understood theological studies to have a determinate end, which might be expressed by the biblical injunction “to account for the hope that is within you” (1 Pet 3:15). To attain that end was a duty for a preacher, whose office was to fulfill the divine command to teach the faith: “it is the fear of judgment that makes preachers ascend into the pulpit.”⁴⁰

It was the same clarity about the end of studies that shaped Bossuet’s years as tutor of Louis XIV’s son, the Grand Dauphin. Bossuet described his aims and practices in a letter to Pope Innocent XI, which he composed towards the end of his tenure. *De Institutione Ludovici Delphini* deserves to be placed in a select company of Christian pedagogical works, and might fruitfully be compared to St. Basil’s *Address to Young Men on Reading Greek Literature*. Just as St. Basil exhorted his hearers to attend first to the “care of the soul,” so also Bossuet made the three words piety, goodness, and justice the “principles” to which referred “everything that we have given [the Dauphin]. He saw that everything came from this source, that everything tended to that point, and that his studies had no other object than to make him able to acquit himself of all of his duties with ease.”⁴¹ In his catechism and elementary religious instruction, the Dauphin learned “to love Jesus Christ; to embrace him in his infancy, to grow with him, obeying his parents and making himself agreeable to God and to man.” After having “read and reread the Gospels,” he passed to the Old Testament, and, for “diversion,” to the lives of the Fathers and martyrs. In his study of grammar, he was made to read pagan authors, but “without ever straying

³⁹ Bossuet, “Ecrit de Bossuet sur les études qui doivent suivre la licence,” ed. E. Levesque, *Revue Bossuet* 1 (1900): 11–20, at 14.

⁴⁰ Bossuet, “Sur la Prédication Evangélique” (1662), in *Oeuvres Oratoires*, IV: 177. The comment was based upon II Corinthians 5: 10–11.

⁴¹ St. Basil, *Address to Young Men on the Reading of Greek Literature*, in Anton Pegis, ed., *The Wisdom of Catholicism* (New York: Random House, 1949), 20. Bossuet, *De Institutione Ludovici Delphini*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, VII: 348.

from our design, which was to hand on piety and good morals at the same time as civil prudence." To this end the Dauphin read many historical works, but he was not allowed to "descend into minutiae or follow curiosities"; rather he concentrated on the study of customs and laws and exemplars of the craft of kingship, especially St. Louis, "absolutissimi regis exemplar."⁴² In the words of Thérèse Goyet, "never was a single subject, at any moment, studied without a view of its ends."⁴³

In his own life as a scholar Bossuet conformed to the practices he recommended and imposed upon his royal charge. Like many great preachers and scholars and countless contemplatives through the ages, his mind was formed by Holy Scripture, which he knew from memory. He took with the utmost seriousness the call to submit his own mind to that of the Fathers, whom he read systematically in the 1650s as a canon of Metz, again in the 1670s, and for a third time later in life in response to the challenge of Biblical criticism.⁴⁴ Perhaps only a celibate could really hope to imitate his single-mindedness and industry; it seems probable that, like Newman, he was capable of reading with attention for upwards of eight hours a day.⁴⁵ What makes Bossuet more approachable and even a relevant model is the decade he spent as the Dauphin's primary instructor. All through his forties, this orator of consummate mastery revisited the texts that had formed him in his youth, taking an indifferent student line by line through Caesar and Virgil. The *Discourse on Universal History* remains as a testament to the benefits that accrued to Bossuet from his rereading and teaching, and his funeral oration for the Prince de Condé amply proves that his eloquence did not suffer from the trial.

In an age when partisans of the new learning such as Gabriel Naudé and Pierre Gassendi were advancing the ideal of a life spent in the limitless pursuit of any sort of knowledge whatever and assisting in the creation of institutions dedicated to just such a project, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet resolutely defended the necessity of restraint in the pursuit of truth and dedicated himself to the perpetuation of the traditional practices of Christian studiousness. Today, heirs to Naudé, Gassendi, and Peiresc speak freely of their role in what is called the "production of knowledge" and glory in projects that would make whole libraries accessible in digital form to

⁴² *De Institutione Ludovici Delphini*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, VII: 347–54.

⁴³ Goyet, *L'Humanisme de Bossuet*, II: 103.

⁴⁴ See the comments of Jean Calvet, *La littérature religieuse de François de Sales à Fénelon* (Paris: Editions Mondiales, 1956), 265–66, 278–79.

⁴⁵ Newman's diaries recording the details of his studies are reproduced in volume 1 of *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

anyone at any time. To those who believe that the mind is a gift given to us that we might come to know God, it is becoming plain that “the intellectual appetites” demanded by “the contemporary academy” are “corrupt,” and that fidelity to the Catholic intellectual tradition demands the recovery of practices of “religious reading.”⁴⁶ The example of Bossuet can provide some markers for the path to that recovery. First, his awareness that curiosity was an imminent and serious danger is itself instructive. The recovery of what has been called “the intellectual custom of the Church” will require critical reflection upon the practices of learning and teaching.⁴⁷ Without that critical reflection, the structures of contemporary academic culture will continue to encourage individual scholars to pursue their private career goals in such a way as to make curiosity and narrow specialization the more likely result of their endeavors than studiousness and wisdom.⁴⁸ Second, Bossuet’s counsel and practice of the reverent rereading of Holy Scripture and apprenticeship to the Fathers of the Church provides a vivid model of the restraint that is studiousness. The desire to know can be properly restrained only when it is properly directed, when we most keenly seek the best and highest kind of knowledge, putting in the second place or even setting aside knowledge of lower things. For Bossuet, the duty to preach and to teach the Faith kept his life of studies rightly ordered. Yet as the Dauphin’s tutor, he was forced to return to those elementary subjects and subordinate sciences that occupy much of our attention and that indeed need to be mastered before one is ready to ascend to higher subjects. Bossuet’s pedagogical principles and practices show that even in the lower subjects, he kept his sight trained on those which were above, and thus was true to Hugh of St. Victor’s saying that “our objective” in learning “ought to be always to keep ascending.”⁴⁹

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⁴⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, “The Vice of Curiosity,” 48; and see his *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ See Ronald McArthur, “Saint Thomas and the Formation of the Catholic Mind,” in *The Ever-Illuminating Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 123–43.

⁴⁸ See Alasdair MacIntyre, “The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University,” *Commonweal* (October 20, 2006): 10–14, and at greater length, “Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices,” in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*, ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 1–21.

⁴⁹ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalion of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 133.