

Vineyards and Landscapes: *Lectio Divina* in a Secular Age

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“FOR NOW treat the Scripture of God as the face of God. Melt in its presence.”¹ We hear references to the approach to Sacred Scripture known as “*lectio divina*” in an increasing variety of contexts. What do people mean when they use this term? Does what they mean by it enable them to treat the Scriptures as “the face of God” as Saint Augustine’s ancient and still eloquent preaching invites? This question will be explored in the following essay first by considering the goal of the Dominican monastic/contemplative life, then by presenting *lectio divina* as a primary means to this goal, and, finally, by highlighting some of the obstacles we face to living our life in today’s secular world.² I will present the goal as a participation in God’s own life that anticipates the life to come. I will suggest that *lectio divina* is a crucial means of perpetual and vigilant receptivity to and engagement with the Word of God, which has a formative effect on the mind and heart. Understood in this way, *lectio* provides a foundation for a whole way of life that is fundamentally a liturgical life wherein the mysteries of salvation are rendered present and active through Word and Sacrament. I will also suggest that this liturgically divinizing life is being jeopardized by the pernicious influences of secularism and that it is precisely a renewed understanding of *lectio divina*, not as simply one *practice* among others, but, rather, as an undivided *life* of

¹ Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 22.7, cited in Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 50.

² Originally delivered on April 27, 2011, to the Novice Mistresses of the Association of the Monasteries of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers in the United States of America. Slightly modified.

vigilant availability and docility to the Word of God, that can help to counteract these obstacles and speed us toward our goal.

I. *Lectio Divina* and the Goal of the Dominican Monastic/Contemplative Life

In an essentially liturgical life such as ours, the Spirit is always active, causing the sanctification of human persons, enabling them to render worship and praise, in conformity with our great High Priest, the Person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and the Eternal Word and Wisdom of the Father. Hence, it is a life that conduces to a participation in God's own Trinitarian life and thus anticipates the life to come. The goal of our lives is nothing less than this. We are moved toward this goal by beginning in the beginning with the Word, for "in order to enter into the world of the liturgy, we must first of all enter into the world of the Bible and place ourselves in the perspective which is that of the Bible."³ This perspective revolves around the fundamental and unique belief of Christians that God has spoken to us and, with the intention of drawing us into His own relational life of knowledge and love, continues to speak to us.⁴

God speaks to us in various ways. He speaks to us through the world He created through His Word. He speaks to us in and through His Son, the Word made flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. He speaks to us through the inspired Scriptures as they are read and interpreted in the Church's life of faith and sacraments. What does God say when He speaks? What is the message that He communicates to us?

In one sense it is all very simple. "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, in a plan of sheer goodness,"⁵ although He stood in need of no one and no thing, in an unfathomably generous and mysterious act, brought into existence a created order of beings, the pinnacle of which is created persons, angelic and human.⁶ These He created and destined to

³ Cyprian Vagaggini, O.S.B., *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, vol. 1, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1959), 3.

⁴ See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 25–26, where he explains: "The basic reason why man can speak with God arises from the fact that God himself is speech, word. His nature is to speak, to hear, to reply. . . . Since there is relationship within God himself, there can also be a participation in this relationship. Thus we can relate to God in a way which does not contradict his nature. . . . [M]an is able to participate in the dialogue within God himself because God has first shared in human speech and has thus brought the two into communication with one another."

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, prologue.

⁶ "With unimaginable love you looked upon your creatures within your very self, and you fell in love with us. So it was love that made you create us and give us

share in His own life of infinite Wisdom and delight.⁷ All things were created in and through the Word and, bearing an imprint of their Maker, possess, as it were, a “Logos pattern.” This Logos pattern marks all of creation with an intelligibility that can direct the mind and heart back to God. As our Holy Father, following the 2008 Synod on the Word of God, wrote in *Verbum Domini*: “Creation is born of the *Logos* and indelibly bears the mark of the *creative Reason which orders and directs it*.”⁸

God created all things through the Word and spoke that same Word in time in order to bridge⁹ the distance caused by our creatureliness and by our sin, and so to lead back to Himself a world which had strayed far from the “creative Reason which orders and directs it.”¹⁰ The Word He spoke in time is the Eternal Word that He is always generating, always speaking, and that is therefore infallibly efficacious. Like the snow and rain, the Word is always returning to Him who speaks it, achieving the end for which He was sent.¹¹

That the culmination of God’s speech in creation and in history occurred in the Person of Jesus Christ was something that the early Christians knew well. It was what led some of them out into the desert where they could have an undivided availability to hear and respond to this Word. This availability to the Word was not something that they practiced for a couple of hours a day as some might try to do in a practice of *lectio divina*. Rather, it marked their whole way of living.

being just so that we might taste your supreme eternal good.” Saint Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 13, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 49. Later in the *Dialogue*, God will say to Catherine: “I . . . created them in my image and likeness so that they might have eternal life, sharing in my being and enjoying my supreme eternal tenderness and goodness” (21, p. 58). To which Catherine responds: “O immeasurably tender love. . . . You, deep well of charity, it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us! Yet you are our God, and have no need of us” (25, p. 63). See also Prayer 10 in *The Prayers of Saint Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

⁷ “From the beginning God created man out of his own generosity. . . . He who stands in need of no one gave communion with himself to those who need him.” Saint Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Lib. 4, cited in *Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 2, 177.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 8 (emphasis in original).

⁹ As God says to Saint Catherine: “I have made a bridge of the Word, my only-begotten Son, and such is the truth” (*The Dialogue*, 21, p. 58). “. . . it stretches from heaven to earth by reason of my having joined myself with your humanity, which I formed from the earth’s clay” (*ibid.*, 26, p. 64).

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 8.

¹¹ See Isaiah 55:10–11.

The Cistercian monk and scholar Armand Veilleux makes the distinction between the “technical (and reduced) sense” with which *lectio divina* has been invested in “the spiritual and monastic literature in these last decades” and the meaning which it had for the desert fathers. He explains:

The Latin word *lectio* in its first sense means a teaching, a lesson. In a second derived sense, *lectio* can also signify a text or a group of texts transmitting this teaching. Thus we speak of the lessons (*lectiones*) from Scripture read during the liturgy. Finally, in a still more derived sense, *lectio* can also mean reading.¹²

He continues:

This last sense is obviously the one in which this expression is understood today. In our days, in fact, *lectio divina* is spoken of as a specific observance; and we are told that it is a form of reading different from all others, and that above all we must not confuse true *lectio divina* with other forms of simply “spiritual reading.” This is a completely modern version, and as such, represents a concept foreign to the Fathers of the Desert.¹³

For our monastic predecessors, reading the Sacred Scriptures was not an isolated practice that they engaged in for an hour or two a day. Rather their whole lives were shaped in such a way that the Word was always on their lips, in their minds and in their hearts. This is quite evident in the emphasis placed on the ability to read that is apparent in the Pachomian tradition. For example, we find in the *Precepta* (The Precepts of Pachomius) that newcomers should be compelled to read even if they did not want to. The precepts go on to state: “[T]here shall be no one whatever in the monastery who does not learn to read and does not memorize something of the Scriptures. [One should learn by heart] at least the New Testament and the Psalter.”¹⁴

Familiarity with the Scriptures was essential, since it was the Word of God itself that provided the way of life, the *regula*, for the early monks and nuns. When Rules eventually began to be written in the fourth and fifth centuries, they were considered to be nothing more than commentaries on the Scriptures or practical advice on how to put the Word of God into

¹² Armand Veilleux, O.C.S.O., “Lectio Divina as School of Prayer among the Fathers of the Desert,” a translation of a talk given at the Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français, in Rome, November 1995.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Precepts of Pachomius,” 139–40, in *Pachomian Chronicles and Rules, Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 2, trans. Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 166.

practice in the shaping of a community and in one's own daily monastic life. The Scriptures themselves were to be memorized, recited, and reflected upon. This was to be the constant interior preoccupation of every monk or nun and the most frequent topic of their conversation. The goal was to immerse oneself in the sacred mysteries revealed in the Bible to the point that the monastic community and the individual member of the community would be so formed as to recapitulate or appropriate salvation history within themselves. All the structures of daily life were then, as they are today, meant to foster this reception of the Word.

The Word, of course, is not simply the written word. It is something living and active. The responsibility of the monk or nun was, and is, to open himself or herself to it, to receive it. It has a power and a dynamism of its own which creates its own response.¹⁵ The purpose of the constant study of, and meditation on, Scripture was that the monks themselves would become God's own people, His adopted children. So, "for the monk reading [was] not one activity but a way of life"¹⁶ and a way of life that so transformed the reader that he or she already began to participate in the life of heaven.

This transformation, however, was a long, slow, and very arduous process. It engaged the monk or nun in the daily martyrdom involved in the recognition of, and struggle with, his or her own fallen nature and false self. One of the greatest contributions of Egyptian monasticism was the categorization of all the various manifestations of fallen human nature and the ways that human beings are trapped in falsehood and illusion. Evagrius, and Cassian after him, based their writings on the experience of generations of monks and nuns and their efforts to save their souls in the desert. These texts were intended to help the monastic person diagnose, understand, and fruitfully struggle against the disorder in their hearts, the lies that were woven into their fallen human nature. These disorders, these lies, constrict and complicate the human heart, making it a rocky path, barricading it with thorns and briars.

The Sower is relentless. The same Word Who searches hearts also bruises and burns, roots up and tears down.¹⁷ At the same time, He also

¹⁵ "So powerful is the Word of God that we shall be set free by its efficacy and sing triumphantly with the prophet: *Lord, you have broken my bonds; I will offer you the sacrifice of praise.*" Alonso de Orozco, O.S.A., *Tradition Day by Day*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1994), cited in *Magnificat* (December 2011): 141. See also Armand Veilleux, "Holy Scripture in The Pachomian Koinonia," in *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974): 143–53.

¹⁶ Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 58–59.

¹⁷ See Jer 1:10.

raises up and gives new life, divine life, through His own power. He accomplishes this by conforming those who receive Him to His own death and resurrection. This very Word is Himself the sword given to wield in the battle against falsehood.¹⁸ This is something that the early monks and nuns knew well. It is why they spent their lives dwelling in the Word Who would protect, save, free, elevate, and transform them.

When we move from our earliest monastic roots to our more proximate roots in the medieval world, forty-two years before the birth of our Holy Father Saint Dominic, around the year 1128, we find Hugh of Saint Victor's *Didascalicon*, a text considered to be "the first book written on the art of reading."¹⁹ There is much we can learn here, for the art of reading is closely connected to the art of the monastic life—to the living of our form of life in a way that is truly beautiful and a manifestation of the glory of God. Ivan Illich, in his *In the Vineyard of the Text*, a commentary on Hugh's *Didascalicon*, describes reading as "an ontologically remedial technique,"²⁰ which brings healing to the disorder that has plagued man since Adam's sin. He also explains how, for Hugh, "the book page is a supreme remedy; it allows the reader, through *studium*, to regain in some part that which nature demands, but which sinful inner darkness now prevents."²¹ The page is meant to function as a mirror. "Hugh asks the reader to expose himself to the light emanating from the page, '*ut agnoscat seipsum*,' so that he may recognize himself, acknowledge his self. In the light of wisdom that brings the page to glow, the self of the reader will catch fire, and in its light the reader will recognize himself."²²

In the chapter "Monastic Reading," Illich emphasizes the process of self-recognition and transformation in the light of wisdom. Reading is presented as a monastic activity which involves assiduous effort and the discipline of combining moral behavior with knowledge. It requires investing "everything in the ascent of the steep road toward wisdom."²³ Illich writes:

Meditative reading can sometimes be difficult, a chore which must be faced with courage, *fortitudo*. But the reader, sustained by the 'zeal to

¹⁸ The Incarnate Word instructed us by His own example in this regard. "'If you are the Son of God command that these stones become loaves of bread.' Jesus said in reply, 'It is written: "One does not live on bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God."'" Mt 3:3–4.

¹⁹ Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

inquire,' will derive joy from his application. Eagerness comes with practice. To foster his zeal, the student needs encouraging example rather than instruction. Wisdom is of great beauty . . . 'Reading' is an iconogram for the foretaste of wisdom.²⁴

The beauty of wisdom, reading as a foretaste of the wisdom of our beautiful God—these are themes that should appeal to our hearts as Dominican Nuns. Our own Order was born at the dawn of the Middle Ages when the *lectio* of the monasteries was giving rise to the *quaestio* of the Schools. Saint Dominic, in a sense, spans both ways of life. During his years as a canon he was immersed in a life of reading. He was said to have arrived at that purity of heart which disposed him to the grace of founding the Order through his reading of Cassian's *Conferences*. In the Eighth of the Nine Ways of Prayer we find him seated with an open book, a posture also captured by Fra Angelico in one of his better-known frescoes. Saint Thomas was said to have read from Cassian every day in order to lift his *affectus* up to God and so be able to return to his study and writing refreshed. Saint Raymond claims that Saint Catherine received infused knowledge of the whole spiritual tradition of Egyptian monasticism, disposing her for listening and engaging in her *Dialogue* with the Father.

We, as Nuns of the Order of Preachers, follow in their steps. We do not have the capacity for memorizing texts that the ancients had and our lives are more properly liturgical than were the lives of our monastic predecessors. Yet, as women called to be living in freedom under grace,²⁵ we have been set apart exclusively for the reception of the same Word that came to them—that beautiful, efficacious Word, that one Word of the Father who always was, and always will be, the Word Who breathes forth Love.²⁶

We have been set apart by that Love, to receive that Word, to the glory of the Father from Whom He was sent.²⁷ Therefore our whole life can be seen and understood as one great act of continuous *lectio divina*—of receiving, pondering, responding to, resting in, being molded and transformed by the Word in Whose Image we were first created. And this, in such a way that we begin to live, even now, something of the life to come.²⁸ This

²⁴ Ibid., 53–54.

²⁵ See *Rule of Augustine*, 48.

²⁶ See *ST I*, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2.

²⁷ See *Verbi Sponsa*, 3.

²⁸ "Monastic vows are not a sacrament (unlike marriage vows) because, it may be suggested, they anticipate that life—this *heavenly* life—to which all sacraments mediate entry." Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 131. *Verbi Sponsa* specifically highlights the anticipatory/eschatological

is, of course, provided that we endure the progressive purification of our hearts, and earnestly seek that purity of heart to which is promised the vision of God.

It may be deduced from what has already been said that a life of *lectio*, a life shaped by the art of reading, is concerned with the acquisition of wisdom, both speculative and practical, that is, with seeing clearly and living well. Reading well means reading towards a wisdom which enables one to perceive, however obscurely, something of God's own knowledge of Himself and the world He created through the Word, that "*creative Reason which orders and directs*."²⁹ Returning for a moment to our monastic roots: This ability to see, to perceive the intelligibility written into creation, to see the natures of things, was precisely what Evagrius proposed as the first fruit of the struggle against disorders of the human heart.³⁰ This knowledge of the created order is the first flowering of the contemplative life. It involves a way of seeing things as they are. But, it does not stop there. Ultimately the wisdom that we read toward, in the whole of our monastic lives, is not something which is limited to the created order. It is not simply a skill that might be acquired, or a deeper knowledge of the things around us. Rather it opens out to Someone: to the Logos, to Wisdom Himself, the Son who is the Word that breathes forth Love, the Word that the Father speaks not only in time but in eternity—the One Who even now is seated in glory at the right hand of the Father.

character of the life of cloistered nuns: "... the mystery of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with the Lord is expressed in the vocation of cloistered nuns, precisely because their life is entirely dedicated to God, loved above all else, in a ceaseless straining towards the heavenly Jerusalem and *in anticipation of the eschatological Church* confirmed in the possession and contemplation of God. Their life is a reminder to all Christian people of the fundamental vocation of everyone to come to God; it is a *foreshadowing of the goal* towards which the entire community of the Church journeys, in order to live for ever as the Bride of the Lamb." *Verbi Sponsa*, 4 (emphasis added).

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 8 (emphasis in original).

³⁰ "... there are in Evagrius' understanding two major divisions within the realm of knowledge, the first and highest being the knowledge of the Trinity, the second being generally all the lesser forms of knowledge. . . . Several general terms cover the whole area of knowledge which lies below that of the Trinity. It is called natural contemplation (φυσική) or also contemplation of created things (θεωρία τῶν γεγονόντων). . . . The scope of such contemplation is . . . a discovery of the reasons (λόγοι) with which the Logos made the world. What these reasons show, step by step, is that all things have been made toward the end of leading the mind to knowledge of the Trinity." Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., *The Mind's Long Journey to the Trinity: The Ad Monachos of Evagrius Ponticus* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 25–26.

Moving from a consideration of our monastic and medieval roots and turning now to the current legislation concerning our way of life as cloistered nuns, it is significant to note that at the beginning of *Verbi Sponsa* two Gospel scenes are presented: the Baptism of the Lord and His Transfiguration. At both of those events the Father's voice was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." At the Transfiguration the Father says further, "Listen to him."³¹ This is the way that the Church presents the vocation of the contemplative nun. Listen to Him. Read Him wherever He is present, in creation, in the sacraments, in the Sacred Scriptures, in one another. Receive from Him the grace of adoption and become daughters in the Son; return with Him to the bosom of the Father. At home there, in the heart of the Father, begin to taste even now the goal that the whole Church awaits in hope.

Similarly, Saint Ambrose, in the first book of *Concerning Virgins*, which he wrote for his sister Marcellina, speaks of the eschatological character of the life of a nun, in a way both beautiful and profound:

Virginity has brought from heaven that which it may imitate on earth. And not unfittingly has she sought her manner of life from heaven, who has found for herself a Spouse in heaven. She, passing beyond the clouds, air, angels, and stars, *has found the Word of God in the very bosom of the Father, and has drawn Him into herself with her whole heart.* For who having found so great a Good would forsake it?³²

Our way of life should be totally ordered to the reception of this Word, the one Word of the Father, now risen from the dead and breathing forth His Spirit wherever the Father wills. The Word Who pitched His tent among us invites us, while we are still in exile, to make our home in His Word, promising that here we learn the truth that makes us free.³³ It is here that we read about and linger with the wise love Who pursues, adopts, and refashions us. Here we expose ourselves to the truth that elevates us, heals us, and draws us into the inner life of that "mad lover"³⁴ Who created us for His own sheer delight. "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him."³⁵ "On that day you will realize that I am

³¹ Mt 3:17; 17:5.

³² Saint Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, I, 3, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. X (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 365 (emphasis added).

³³ See Jn 8:31–32.

³⁴ Saint Catherine of Siena, Prayer 10 in *The Prayers of Saint Catherine of Siena*, 79–80.

³⁵ Jn 14:23.

in my Father and you are in me and I in you.”³⁶ “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you.”³⁷ Responding to the invitation to make His Word our home means that we make the practice of *lectio divina* not simply one observance but, rather, a whole way of life, a way of life that is ordered to and anticipates the life to come.

The notion that reading the Bible is meant to reintroduce us to paradise is one that appears frequently in the monastic and patristic traditions. Mariano Magrassi, in his very fine book *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, cites several ancient authors on this theme. He writes:

The ancients insisted especially on the link between Scripture and the beatific vision. . . . Rabanus Maurus does not hesitate to say that Scripture “opens to us the gates of the heavenly kingdom.” To understand it here below is already a “kiss of eternity,” adds William of St. Thierry. . . . Pope Gregory sums up the general thinking in these words: “When Scripture recounts eternal events as though they were happening in time, it causes those who are accustomed to temporal thoughts to pass imperceptibly to those of eternity.” When we study the sacred text, we feel as if we had already left the land of slavery to enter the land of freedom and knock at the doors of the kingdom. Reading is seen as an anticipated vision of divine glory.³⁸

If we agree with the teachings of the Church that our lives as nuns are meant to foreshadow the eschatological goal of the whole Church,³⁹ and if there is a direct link between Scripture and the beatific vision, then it is clear that familiarity with the Bible is essential. Therefore, women coming to our monasteries need to learn to linger with the Word within the context of the whole of regular observance. They need to be encouraged to stroll into the “vineyard of the text,” to seek its fruits⁴⁰ and to

³⁶ Jn 14:20.

³⁷ Jn 15:15.

³⁸ Mario Magrassi, O.S.B., *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 24–25.

³⁹ See above, n. 28.

⁴⁰ The metaphor of picking and eating grapes is one that Guigo II uses to describe the function of reading in his classic text *The Ladder of Monks*. First he describes the four rungs: “Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart’s devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.” Afterwards he speaks of the functions of each: “Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation

learn to be comfortable in the spaces between the lines. For this they need time, but even more importantly, an atmosphere of silence.⁴¹ They need to learn to read, listen, and ponder in order to enter into the world of the Bible, to perceive the unity of the story of salvation history and to glimpse the many and varied prefigurements and presentations of the paschal mystery, in both the Old and New Testaments. Developing a familiarity with the literal sense of the text, through prayer and study, will foster the openness of their hearts and minds to the deeper hidden levels of the text. This will, in turn, enhance their participation in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, especially the praying of the psalmody. It will foster their immersion in the daily and weekly liturgical cycles, shaped as they are by the whole of the liturgical year, in which we commemorate and re-present the saving actions of our Lord Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh. In this way the story of salvation history becomes their own.

What is this story? It is the story of the divine desire to have created persons share in God's own life of knowledge and love and His willingness to go to the extremes to enable us to accept the invitation. It is one word about a love affair that began in a garden, passes through a desert, climbs a tree and concludes in a city which needs no lamps for light but shines with the glorious radiance of God's own splendor;⁴² a splendor now participated in by the elect, who were not only called but chosen and, having been conformed to the Son through the grace of the Holy Spirit, have finally come home to the Father's house. What God reveals to us is a simple story. The human person was created in God's image, the

perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes." He proceeds to give an example to develop the idea of reading as putting food whole in the mouth: "I hear the words read: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' This is a short text of Scripture, but it is of great sweetness, like a grape that is put into the mouth filled with many senses to feed the soul." *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 68–69.

⁴¹ The Holy Father has recently highlighted the necessity of silence for communication with and contemplation of God. "We need that silence which becomes contemplation, which introduces us into God's silence and brings us to the point where the Word, the redeeming Word, is born." Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Eucharistic Celebration with Members of the International Theological Commission, 6 October 2006, cited in his "Between Silence and Word," *Message for the 46th World Communications Day in L'Osservatore Romano*, No. 5 (1 February 2012): 5.

⁴² See Rv 21:22–24.

image was defaced by sin, is restored by *the* Image Himself through His incarnation, and passion, death and resurrection. This restoration is gradually accomplished in us through the grace of the Holy Spirit and is perfected in the glory of the beatific vision. This is the end for which God sent forth His Word, a Word that does not return to Him void but accomplishes the end for which He sent it. He desires to accomplish this end in *us*, whom He calls into the garden, through the desert and up onto the tree, to become co-operators in the work of redemption,⁴³ to suffer with Him in order that we might be glorified with Him.⁴⁴

Some years ago I was teaching in a high school, and one of the classrooms that was assigned to me had a poster of a rag doll going through one of those old wringer machines that people used before washing machines did the wringing and spinning for us. She looked to be caught about halfway through, and had arms outstretched in agony. The caption read: "The Truth Will Make You Free But First It Will Make You Miserable." The Truth ultimately does make us free but it begins, if we let it, if we don't abandon the struggle or run away, by making us miserable, by exposing our own falsehood. Because of our sinfulness, the Word, rather than coming to us as gentle rain,⁴⁵ as dew from heaven, comes to us as "hammer and fire"⁴⁶ and begins by exposing, tearing down, uprooting.⁴⁷ The Word truly becomes "the joy and happiness of our hearts"⁴⁸ only gradually and through living, over a long period of time, the whole complex unity of the various observances, as these are harmonized by a continual pondering of Sacred Scripture.

This is no small task, for as T. S. Eliot wrote, "Humankind cannot bear much reality,"⁴⁹ and we are complicated. I would venture to say that the ability to read well is possibly the single most important factor of stability in our vocation. Even for women who remain in the monastery, but have not developed good reading habits, there can still be an instability that manifests itself in a restlessness that affects the whole community. There is the temptation to flee, but docile reception of this efficacious Word is precisely the goal of the structures and practices of our lives. Fidelity to it is made manifest in lives in which the image of God is progressively restored and perfected; lives in which our passions are fully alive and properly ordered, disposing us freely, joyfully, and promptly to believe in God,

⁴³ See *Liber Constitutionem Monialium Ordinis Praedicatorum* (LCM), 96 I.

⁴⁴ See Rom 8:17.

⁴⁵ See Hos 6:3.

⁴⁶ "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, like a hammer shattering rocks?" Jer 23:29.

⁴⁷ See Jer 1:10.

⁴⁸ Jer 15:16.

⁴⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *The Four Quartets*.

to lean on His power and mercy, and to love and find delight in Him for His own sake. Increasingly caught up by and at home in this Love, tasting the first fruits of paradise as it were, we love those whom He loves and with whom He has joined us, through the bonds of profession, especially those in our particular and unique monastic families. We turn to them and, in generous liberality, bow down and serve; giving ourselves to God through our hidden, self-donative lives in community, spending ourselves entirely, at the heart of the Order of Preachers, for the salvation of souls.

Obstacles to the Practice of and Formation in *Lectio Divina* in a Secular Age

We have reviewed briefly the centrality of the Word in the tradition that Saint Dominic drew from and adapted, and how a perpetual and vigilant receptivity to the Word conduces towards the goal of sharing in God's Trinitarian life. Now we turn to some contemporary difficulties. In our secular age, the ability to linger perseveringly in the Word will perhaps present a greater challenge and take much longer to acquire than it did in the past. This is so because God's revelation of Himself in the sacred text presents a storyline, a vision, that is radically different from the one that is provided by today's culture. Reading Scripture is meant to be a subversive activity, a way of life, whereby we are "transformed by the renewal of our minds"⁵⁰ and put on "the mind of Christ."⁵¹

There should exist in our monasteries a counterculture, a culture that is grounded in and built up on this revelation that God has made of Himself. We need to be aware of the ways in which our post-Christian, and therefore post-biblical, culture has shaped the minds and hearts of those coming to us. And we need to be aware of ways that the prevailing secular culture may have infiltrated our enclosure walls. Our *Constitutions* remind us that "the purpose of all regular observance, especially enclosure and silence, is that the word of God may dwell abundantly in the monastery."⁵² How might our observance of enclosure and silence have been or be affected by the culture in which we live?

In his beautiful and astute address promulgating our 1971 provisional *Constitutions*, the Master of the Order, Fr. Anicetus Fernandez, claimed that "for various reasons the contemplative life has become more difficult today."⁵³ He went on to suggest that "the great ease in communication

⁵⁰ Rom 12:2; see also Eph 4:22–24.

⁵¹ 1 Cor 2:16.

⁵² *LCM* 96 II.

⁵³ Anicetus Fernandez, O.P., Address given at Tallaght during the General Chapter of the Brothers of the Order of Preachers, July 22, 1971; printed in *LCM*.

through numberless and marvelous inventions results in our living in a state of perpetual external agitation” with thousands of things “which draw us away from the interior life.” The result is that “it is almost impossible to cultivate an interior and contemplative life.”⁵⁴ This was written more than forty years ago, before the introduction of the internet and all that it entails and makes possible. Needless to say, the situation has only intensified. Have we faced the effects that all this has had on our withdrawal from the world and, more concretely, on our silence? Is there still a place for the Word in our hearts and in our homes? It has been said that the book has been replaced by the screen and the word by the image.⁵⁵ What effect is this having on us and on the women coming to our monasteries? What effect is this having on our ability to sit quietly with the plain printed text of the Sacred Scriptures?⁵⁶ These are crucial questions that need to be asked. But the overarching issue of secularism poses an even greater, more pervasive and insidious challenge that is worth considering.

What is secularism? Charles Taylor, in his massive work *A Secular Age*, presents three different meanings of the term.⁵⁷ First, it can refer to the privatization of religion and the absence of reference to God in the public forum. It can also refer to the decline of religious belief and practices. These are fairly obvious manifestations of secularism that we can all point to as “out there” in the “world.” But Taylor identifies another meaning of secularism, more difficult to define, and possibly affecting us in ways we don’t even realize. Secularism in this third sense involves a whole “context

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “The screen, the medium, and ‘communication’ have surreptitiously replaced the page, letters and reading. . . . The book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age; the screen has taken its place.” Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 1, 3.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Carr, in his *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) offers an account of the import and the effect of the internet within a context of intellectual history and popular science. He suggests that various tools of the mind, e.g. alphabets, maps, clocks, computers, actually reshape the brain and its neural pathways. The development of the printed book, he posits, fostered deep reading and thinking in such a way that the wholly engaged reader could become closely identified, even symbiotically, with the writer and his world. This engagement led to a greater capacity for contemplation and reflection (see 74–75). The use of the internet does precisely the opposite. “Dozens of studies by psychologists, educators, and Web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking and superficial learning” (116). In sum, Carr warns that the use of the internet is rewiring people’s brains towards a constant distractedness “preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively” (119).

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of understanding,” a “new spiritual landscape”; or, as Charles Larmore in his review of Taylor’s book articulates it, a “fundamental alteration of world view.”⁵⁸ Edmund Norman in his book *Secularisation: Sacred Values in a Godless World*, speaks of an “unconscious orientation of life and thought, [which is] entertained in an inarticulate and unrecognised form.”⁵⁹

Norman explains: “Secularisation is a subtle process, or accumulation of processes, which many regret but whose evidences they look upon helplessly.”⁶⁰ He goes on to claim that secularism has “with frightening frequency infiltrated the church members’ perception of their own religion.”⁶¹ This particular author wrote his book as an Anglican, and the church he refers to throughout the book is the Church of England. Nevertheless, some of the characteristics or effects of a secular world view do not sound all that unfamiliar.⁶² Particularly striking to me was a description of secularization that echoed almost *verbatim* what I have heard older nuns say, in the context of various discussions on the topic of “what has happened, where have we come from, where are we now, and where do we want to go?” These comments of the nuns were made, some with consternation, others with painful resignation; Norman’s comments echo them all too clearly. He writes:

Because secularisation . . . does not result from the application of an ideology, or derive from an assault upon religion, and is a *practical reorientation of life produced gradually, drip by drip, in a piecemeal abandonment of traditional observances, it has not been resisted in any systematic fashion*. People rather regret what is happening but are unprepared to do anything about it.⁶³

⁵⁸ Charles Larmore, “How Much Can We Stand?” *The New Republic* 238, no. 4 (April 9, 2008): 40.

⁵⁹ Edward Norman, *Secularisation: Sacred Values in a Godless World* (New York: Continuum, 2003), ix–x. Norman’s repeated references to the “corruption” of humanity by sin and his morality of obligation, though problematic in themselves, do not negate his clear and valuable insights into the dynamics of secularization.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶² Norman outlines a dynamic of secularization that may find echoes in our monasteries: human need becoming the sovereign principle (4); intensification of the “human pursuit of security, and an escalating set of entitlements” (6); claims of a “right to a painless human existence” (9); overemphasis on the body. Concerning the latter, Norman states that “modern culture is obsessed by the moral autonomy of the human person and the claims made by people to welfare and repose. In place of God they worship the human body itself” (8).

⁶³ Norman, *Secularisation*, 49–50 (emphasis added).

I found this frighteningly on the mark. The monastic tradition can teach us to unearth the falsehoods and distortions that lie hidden in the crooked corridors of our hearts and that inhibit the planting and growth of the seed of the Word of God. But who is going to help us to uncover and reverse the lies and distortions of our culture, that have, drip by drip, piece by piece, diluted our monastic contemplative life and diminished its distinctive, specifying elements, at least in some of our monasteries? Do we realize that something has gone wrong?

Fr. Aidan Nichols, in his book *Christendom Awake*, suggests that “one of the strangest features of the decline in Religious life . . . is the tendency of its representatives to deny that anything is wrong at all.”⁶⁴ What has gone wrong? One explanation is that the Christian view of the human person’s nature and destiny is being insidiously and yet triumphantly replaced by that of secular humanism. There are many characteristic symptoms of this displacement. Let us look at one example: the loss of a sense of sin. Norman writes:

Large numbers of Christians today . . . cannot stomach the idea of judgement, of divine discrimination in the matter of human worth. And so the whole concept, once so central, has quietly slipped out of the received interpretation of the faith. Sermons are no longer preached on judgement, people no longer live in terror of hell. There is a bland and general assumption that somehow everyone will be saved. . . . This extraordinary change amounts to a dramatic secularisation at the very centre of Christian understanding of the purpose of life. For the change does not derive from any re-appraisal of biblical texts but from a simple acceptance of the Humanist view of human value.⁶⁵

If the whole concept of judgment has quietly slipped away, what does this do to our motivation for embracing a truly penitential life? What place do the penitential psalms have in our life? If what was formerly sin is often now seen as sickness, and if our own lives have been diluted by the “triumph of the therapeutic,”⁶⁶ where do we fit within the Order as a whole founded on Saint Dominic’s ardent and passionate cry, “My God, my mercy, what will become of sinners?”

The eclipse of the concept of judgment is but one of many features of the landscape of secularism. There are others: dismissal of the miraculous; demythologization of the Scriptures; domestication of transcendence; loss of a sense of the sacred; overemphasis on health and comfort; crises of

⁶⁴ Nichols, *Christendom Awake*, 143.

⁶⁵ Norman, *Secularisation*, 66–67.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 618.

authority; triumph of individualism; sense of entitlement; loss of a transformation perspective; eclecticism/religious pluralism; a sense of the sovereignty of humanity and its imagined needs, absent any concern for the demands of God; worship of the human body in place of God; the secularization of charity itself, which becomes “caring” or being necessarily “nice.” All of these combined result in the effective replacement of the theocentric focus of the classical world, with its attendant sense of the transcendent, by a this-world focus on the individual human person and their perceived needs.

Do any of the above-mentioned features ring true in regard to secular attitudes that may have invaded our cloisters? Not all of them, surely, but perhaps some of them? Let us single out another one, the loss of a transformation perspective. Charles Taylor defines a secular age as one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing has become possible. He claims that the heart of secularization is the decline in the transformation perspective. What effect might such a decline be having on our confidence in the power of the *Wôrd* to change us and draw us out of ourselves into the very life of God, even now? Absent a transformation perspective, there has emerged in modern persons the expectation of finding emotional satisfaction in the practice of religion. When we seek to engage in *lectio divina*, are we looking for an experience that is going to be emotionally satisfying? Do we soon give up if it is not?

Are the young women coming to our monasteries coming with a transformation perspective? Do they *want* to change, expect that they will have to change? Are they willing to have their individual lives, shaped perhaps by a culturally created need for “authenticity,”⁶⁷ break out of the “immanent frame”⁶⁸ that has structured their minds in order to be drawn out of themselves into the corporate world of the Bible, into the common life of the monastery, and through these into a life of divine *communio*? Are *we* willing? Do *we* want to change? Or have we become too comfortable, too shaped ourselves by modern individualism, by a too-secular humanism?

Another feature of the landscape of secularism that might directly affect a life of *lectio divina* is an altered sense of time. Charles Taylor writes:

⁶⁷ Taylor identifies and defines a culture of “authenticity” as “the understanding of life . . . that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (ibid., 475).

⁶⁸ At the beginning of his Chapter 15, entitled “The Immanent Frame,” Taylor explains that “this frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order to be contrasted to a ‘super-natural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one” (ibid., 542).

... the disciplines of our modern civilized order have led us to measure and organize time as never before in human history. Time has become a precious resource, not to be “wasted”. The result has been the creation of a tight, ordered time environment. This has enveloped us, until it comes to seem like nature. We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done. This time frame ... occludes all higher times, makes them even hard to conceive.⁶⁹

When we celebrate the liturgy or pray in secret, what kind of time frame are we acting within? Is a movement out of *chronos* into *kairos* still possible for us? Does a “tight, ordered time environment” lead to the “negation of worship” that the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann suggested is the true definition of secularism?⁷⁰

It is not a matter of pretending that we are not in the twenty-first century. But we do need to consider the possibility that our openness to the divine perspective, which we considered in the first part of this essay, is perhaps, all unawares, being occluded by the limited and limiting landscape of secularity, understood precisely as “an *unconscious* orientation of life and thought.”⁷¹ Taylor warns that “we are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand.”⁷² The secular landscape, with its dreadfully low ceiling, leaves one wandering about in a barren field, lost and, as Taylor suggests, with little sense of further purpose, a fading sense of mystery, no sense of grace or its power to lift one up into the very life of God.⁷³ Have we, even if ever so slightly, imbibed this loss of a sense of a further purpose, of mystery, of grace, of the very real possibility of participating, even now, in God’s own divine life? If so, what effect might this be having on the way we live our lives of *lectio divina*, our lives of worship? Do we need to reclaim a deep and pervasive silence that is the guardian of all the observances, to rediscover the desire, the fortitude, and the leisure, to “waste time” with God, to wander our way into the vineyard of the sacred text, to linger in the spaces between the lines and be truly available and receptive to the one Word of the Father?

We need not pretend that we are once again in the fourth or even the thirteenth century in such a way that our monasteries become cultural

⁶⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 118.

⁷¹ Norman, *Secularisation*, ix–x (emphasis added).

⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 387.

⁷³ See *ibid.*, 222–24.

ghettoes. But I would suggest that we might need to become less secular and more radically other-worldly and, further, that the Word Himself is our “Ladder” or Bridge in this process. The Word is the Truth Himself, the relentless Sower, Who searches us out, Who surely desires to wake us from our secular slumber and remind us of some very basic truths. For example: we are created; this creation is according to the Image Who is the Son; we live in a created order in a world with its own inner finalities. We are fallen and need to be forgiven and healed and elevated. This healing and elevating and restoring and perfecting of the Image in us can happen only through the grace of the Holy Spirit, which was poured out by our Savior as He hung upon the Cross and is made efficaciously available to us in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. The Spirit who groans within us as our bodies await redemption⁷⁴ is the same Spirit who inspires us to sacrifice our lives to God. This sacrifice, in union with the Person of the Son, is offered so that not just ourselves but others who might be lost will be found and brought home. As we immerse ourselves in the Truth, our lives should radiate the good news that there is another world, that the unavoidable suffering of this world is not the last word but can and should be embraced in union with the Suffering Servant Who heals us with His own wounds. We need to be more firmly set in those wounds, those recesses of the Bridge, Who is our Ladder into heaven. We need to trust that no matter what rung we find ourselves on, the efficacy of the Word can be relied on with total confidence.

Saint Paul affirms that all the baptized have died and that their life is hidden now with Christ in God.⁷⁵ By our monastic profession, this baptismal grace has been intensified in us and we have been freed by our vocation to live the whole of our lives as hidden with Christ in God.⁷⁶ It is through making His Word our home that we are enabled to set our hearts on what pertains to higher realms, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. The Word is the Ladder, the Bridge. He is First Truth speaking to us in order to draw us to rest in that Truth itself—the Truth and Love of Trinitarian communion. Our faith, nourished by our contact with the Sacred Scriptures, terminates in the *Res*, in God himself. Perhaps we need to reclaim a confidence in this possibility, which in turn necessitates a renewed understanding of our way of life as a life of “reading” in the sense of a perpetual and vigilant receptivity to the one Word Who fills our monastic day. This one Word Who is operative in the Liturgy of the Word in the celebration of the Eucharist, which prepares

⁷⁴ See Rom 8:23.

⁷⁵ See Col 3:3.

⁷⁶ See *Verbi Sponsa*, 1.

us to enter into His Sacrifice, is the same Word that we listen to together in other readings in choir and in the refectory, and it is the same Word that we toss back and forth to each other in the psalmody. It is the same Word that we read and ponder in secret in our cells and as we go about our sacrificial lives. Reading, listening, pondering in our cells, and seeking, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to incarnate the Word in our daily lives—these in turn intensify our receptivity and the alacrity of our response to the Word in the liturgy. Introits, collects, prefaces and prayers, antiphons, as well as the readings from the Scriptures and the Fathers, take on new depths, as we receive and ponder them in silence, and the beautiful integrity of the liturgy exerts an increasingly profound formative influence on our lives of prayer as wayfarers. And wayfarers we are. We do not yet behold the face of God but we have the Scripture of God to move us,⁷⁷ not backwards to the Egyptian desert, nor to medieval Europe, but forward—to paradise, to the celestial liturgy, to the beatific vision. It is, I am suggesting, precisely a renewed fidelity to *lectio divina* that can effect this movement, inasmuch as it is at the heart of our liturgical lives as Nuns of the Order of Preachers.

Earlier in this essay, when trying to make a point about the eschatological nature of our life, I used a quotation from one of Saint Ambrose's works on the life of virginity. In another work of Saint Ambrose, entitled *On Virginity*, we read "The Word of God moves swiftly; he is not won by the lukewarm, nor held by the negligent. Let your soul be attentive to his word; follow carefully the path God tells you to take, for he is swift in his passing."⁷⁸ We need to hear God's word in such a way that it educates our desires, possesses and transforms our very beings,⁷⁹ and thus our lives and actions as Nuns of the Order of Preachers. Let us beg the intercession of Our Lady of Grace and Saint Dominic—persons of silence with hearts and minds that welcomed the Word with freedom and joy. Our future might depend on it. N V

⁷⁷ See above, n. 1.

⁷⁸ Saint Ambrose, *On Virginity*, chap. 12; cited in *Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 1, 1243.

⁷⁹ "Keep God's word in this way. Let it enter into your very being, let it take possession of your desires and your whole way of life." Saint Bernard, *Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini*; cited in *Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 1, 169.