

THEOLOGY, PRAYER AND *THE DIVINE OFFICE*

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THEOLOGIANs MUST LEARN TO PRAY, because otherwise they will have no idea of what they are talking about. Theology is a communal love affair with the living God, and we can only do theology well if we attend to much of what prayer involves, such as the community of saints, liturgical time, and cultivating the virtues. Students and teachers of theology need to be *prayerful*.

*You must be made new in mind and spirit, and put on the new nature.
(Ephesians 4:23-24)*

Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness;
in your compassion blot out my offence.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin

Indeed you love truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom

A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit.
(Psalm 51:1-2, 6, 10-11)

My quoting biblical texts in this way might irritate some people. Scholars might complain that I have snatched verses out of historical context and just stitched them together without regard for their dating. I might also offend those concerned with Jewish-Christian issues, because my placing the 'New' Testament first might suggest that the quotation from Ephesians interprets and fulfils the Psalm, and thus imply an anti-Jewish imperialism. And worst of all, some theologians would complain that I am writing no more than a pious tract, indistinguishable from a sermon.



The September calendar image from Les Grandes Heures de Jean Duc de Berry

But of course other readers will recognise that they have *prayed* these scriptures. Indeed, if they are reading this article on a Friday—the day on which I wrote it—they may well have prayed them today, from *The Divine Office*. But, then again, they might have had a choice. I happen to have written the first version of this article on Friday 19 September, a Friday of Week 4 in the cycle of the Psalter.

On that day, I could also have celebrated St Januarius. Alternatively, I could have celebrated the dour and troubled St Emilie de Rodat, whose feast day also occurs then. She was the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Villefranche. Her celebration would have required an alternative Common. However, in what follows, I shall largely stick to the office for Friday of Week 4—its prayer will well illustrate the points I want to make.

But why might *The Divine Office* for Friday of Week 4 be of importance for *theology*? Why cite prayers from *The Divine Office* for a Friday morning in a discussion on the nature of theology? My conviction is that good, intellectually rigorous theology can only be done *within the context of a praying community*. Theology needs to be not just nourished by prayer, as if by an optional and private extra, but also *guided and judged* by prayer. More specifically, *The Divine Office* can play a quite distinctive and valuable role in fostering true knowledge of God.

In 1990 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed the role of the theologian in *Donum veritatis*, an 'instruction on the

ecclesial vocation of the theologian'. Startlingly, this document claims that theologians need not only academic skills (philology, geography, history, philosophy and so on), but also, and equally vitally, a life of prayer and a commitment to virtue. Imagine the universities of Bristol or Cambridge or Harvard putting into their theology prospectuses:

Candidates are required to have not only excellent secondary or high school qualifications, but also a commitment to prayer, virtue and holiness. Frequenting the sacraments is encouraged; sinners are especially welcome.

Let me cite a key paragraph of the 1990 Instruction:

Since the object of theology is the Truth which is the living God and His plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ, the theologian is called to deepen his own life of faith and continuously unite his scientific research with prayer. In this way, he will become more open to the 'supernatural sense of faith' upon which he depends, and it will appear to him as a sure rule for guiding his reflections and helping him assess the correctness of his conclusions.¹

There are three very specific claims being made here about prayer, all of which challenge the way theology is run, in British universities at least:

- € Prayer facilitates cohabitation with the 'object' of theological study—the triune God.
- € Prayer guides the study of theology.
- € Prayer helps theologians assess the truthfulness of their findings.

The 1990 Instruction says much about the third of these claims,² and on this issue I shall simply refer readers to the document. Here, I shall try to explore the first two claims, which the document leaves relatively underdeveloped.

¹ *Donum veritatis*, n. 8: the use of male pronouns is obviously unfortunate, and 'scientific' might better be replaced with 'scholarly'. The text may be consulted at various websites.

² See *Donum veritatis*, nn. 13-42.

Cohabiting with One's Beloved

He showed me the holy city of Jerusalem and it had all the radiant glory of God. ...

How blessed are those who love you!
They will rejoice in your peace.
Blessed are those who grieved
over all your afflictions,
for they will rejoice for you upon seeing all your glory,
and they will be made glad for ever.³

What does it mean to say that cohabitation with God through prayer is a prerequisite for doing theology? Students of theology need technical competence in a wide variety of fields. But they also need to know the 'object' of study, know God, through a kind of *cohabitation*.

At one level, the point being made here is not something peculiar to theology. Other disciplines, too, require the student to inhabit a tradition of enquiry which is a living tradition. Other disciplines too have their dogmas and practices which provide the regulation that enables people to pursue those disciplines in appropriate ways. The philosophers Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn have in different ways shown that successful scientists are those who have been trained and apprenticed in such a way that they eventually inhabit a 'paradigm' or outlook. You cannot be, say, a physicist without subscribing, at least implicitly, to certain convictions about the nature of truth, and acting accordingly when it comes to handling experiments and results.⁴ There is a close parallel here with theology's dependence on particular dogmas and on liturgical and ethical norms. Just as there are no non-traditioned theologians, so there are no non-traditioned scientists.

Hans-Georg Gadamer has developed a similar argument in the context of the liberal arts. For Gadamer, every reader always interprets texts within a particular framework of aesthetic, moral and philosophical presuppositions. The good reader, in Gadamer's view, is one who both questions the text's world and allows that textual world

³ From Morning Prayer for Friday of Week 4 in *The Divine Office: the Old Testament Canticle and the inscription printed above it* (Tobit 13: 14; Revelation 21: 10-11).

⁴ See Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, edited by Marjorie Grene (London: Routledge, 1969) and Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1970).



Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven, by Fra Angelico

to question his or her own presuppositions. But the questioning occurs in a situation of dependence. It only arises because the enquirer already inhabits a tradition, cohabits with the object of enquiry.⁵

But obviously the nature of this cohabitation will be distinctive when it comes to theology. The subject matter of theology is God, and thus the kind of cohabitation required for theology will surely involve prayer. According to the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, prayer 'is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with Him' (n.2565). This very simple statement is in no way undermined by the immense variety of prayers and traditions that we find in Christian history. Communing in God's presence is precisely what constitutes the living tradition, an ongoing love affair with the loved one of Eve, Sarah, Mary, Adam, Abraham, Joseph, Hildegard, Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa, Aquinas and Padre Pio, as well as of many ordinary everyday Christian men and women. We can only explore and understand Christian dogmas if we recognise that they

⁵ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975 [1960]).

come to us only because particular human beings lived in ways shaped by them—particular human beings forming a community, the 'body of Christ'.

The Divine Office is a quite special means by which Christians are continually drawn, together and universally, into ongoing participation in this 'body of Christ'. It is a four-week prayer cycle, engaging with the main seasons within the Church (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter), the special solemnities (such as the feasts of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Body and Blood of Christ, the Trinity), and the optional and non-optional feast days celebrating saints. It involves rites and ceremonies; it draws on prayers and poems that have been used for many years and also has more modern additions. It is a treasure house of liturgical beauty and living history.

The liturgy draws us into its own calendar, its own structuring of time. In so doing, it challenges the constructions of time and space imposed by civil regimes or by the economy. One might say that the liturgy continues the action of the incarnation: the Alpha and Omega of all history. And if theology is a reflection upon the Word made flesh, then theology cannot actually take place outside a liturgical context: the Eucharist, the transubstantiation of the human into union with the divine.

Catherine Pickstock has made this point very well in her book *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*.⁶ For Pickstock—though this is to summarise her argument very sweepingly—the liturgy consummates a style of communication going back to Plato's dialogues, to an essentially oral form of argument. Despite what critics have often said, Plato's categories are not static. Plato favours speaking (the medium of the liturgy) over writing because speaking is open-ended. It allows for engagement, improvisation, inflection and varying performance. The liturgy keeps us open to God, rather than trapping Him in the constructs of written language.

Pickstock's most original contribution comes in the second part of her book, where she argues that the liturgy challenges both modernity's and postmodernity's understandings of writing and orality, space and time. She argues that in the Eucharist, the sign (the bread and wine)

⁶ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). See, for example, p. xiii: 'Plato favours orality because of its temporality, open-endedness, and link with physical embodiment'.

and signified (Jesus Christ) are both coincidental and contrary. Christ's presence in the breaking of bread transforms not only the eucharistic elements or signs, but all creation. For Pickstock, the liturgy expresses a new configuration of time and space, a different world, one that shapes and forms the believer into a new creature.

Saints and Doctors

Another feature of this liturgical calendar is the celebration of saints' days. The calendar encourages us to a disciplined recollection of the different narrated lives that form our tradition, a tradition into which we are constantly being summoned. Saints Januarius and Emilie are two models of holiness among many thousands, both sung and unsung. Through our celebration of the saints we learn the parts that they took in the drama of salvation. In the praying of the *Benedictus* every morning and of the *Magnificat* every evening (the dramatic speeches of Zechariah and Mary), we take on the dramatic *personae* of the saints. As we become familiar with their different roles in the one drama of salvation, we are called to improvise, and thus to continue, the story of God's dealings with humanity. In ecclesial prayer, we act out this drama, through our own words and actions. There is a sense in which all the saints are *doctors* of the Church (*doctores ecclesiae*), teachers. They are exceptional in their learning and sanctity. They demonstrate a unity between the intellectual and the practical, between writings and teachings and life as it is lived. So many modern approaches to theology abandon the vision that they represent.

In ecclesial prayer, we act out the drama of God's dealings with humanity

Again, there are parallels here between theology and other academic disciplines. Within scientific communities and other communities of enquiry, respect is accorded to skilled and highly able practitioners who have inhabited the living tradition of enquiry. They have cohabited with the paradigm, with both heart and intellect, in such a way that they can be regarded as wise role models, people whose intuition, judgment and learning are especially valued.

It is not by chance that innovation within a tradition is usually brought about by those most schooled in it, and it is for this reason that the line between heresy and genuine doctrinal development is sometimes so thin. Heresy is at times advanced by saintly figures. Newman rightly says that it is 'almost a definition of heresy, that it fastens on some one [correct] statement as if the whole truth, to the



The Doctors of the Church, by Fra Filippo Lippi

denial of all others', thereby 'erring rather in what it rejects, than in what it maintains'.⁷ Skilled and able theological practitioners within the Church are seen as both saints and doctors. They are saints because excellence in theology is inseparable from holiness of life; they are doctors in both the root sense of teachers and the transferred modern sense of healers, because the role of the intellect is to minister truthfully to the ailing body of Christ.

We need to be careful here regarding the cult of saints, for all sorts of reasons. Who becomes saints, why and how, and the role of female saints, all raise difficult questions. But these are questions, not about sanctity in itself, but about how sanctity is recognised. It remains the case that theologians' quest for intellectual excellence is of a piece with their quest for holiness.

⁷ John Henry Newman, 'Sermon XV: The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine', in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 226.

The Nuptial Love Affair

Come and I will show you the bride that the Lamb has married.

He sends out his word to the earth
and swiftly runs his command.
He showers down snow white as wool,
he scatters hoar-frost like ashes.

He hurls down hailstones like crumbs.
The waters are frozen at his touch;
he sends forth his word and it melts them:
at the breath of his mouth the waters flow.⁸

So far my concern has been with how prayer helps us in our cohabitation with the triune God and with His community, the Church. But what does it mean for theology to be *guided* by prayer?

Scripture speaks of the marriage of the bride and the Lamb. This marriage has the dynamic of a love affair in all followers of Jesus, a love affair on which theological method is based. This dynamic is characterized by both joy and affliction (Tobit 13), and by both guilt and mercy (Psalm 51). We pray that a 'pure heart' be created within us so that we might be taught 'wisdom' (Psalm 51).

How can prayer be the guide and method for an intellectually rigorous theology? We might first note an important insight of Newman's, when he presents Mary as the model of the theologian. Her very life gives a clue to theological method. Mary,

... is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning ... reasoning after believing. And thus she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the gospel; to draw the line

⁸ From Morning Prayer for Friday of Week 4 in *The Divine Office*: the Psalm of Praise and the inscription printed above it (Psalm 147: 15-18; Revelation 21: 9).

between truth and heresy; to anticipate or remedy the various aberrations of wrong reason.⁹

Newman sees Mary as the primary theologian. Mary's responsiveness to God displays the theologian's organic dependency on the Church; her co-creative activity with God serves as a model for theological creativity. The theologian is accountable to the living tradition, and guided by the multiple impulses within this tradition, never fully explored, as it interacts with contemporary culture.



Detail from the Ghent Altarpiece, by Jan van Eyck

⁹ Newman, 'Sermon XV', 211-212. The theme recurs at the very end (n.42) of *Donum veritatis*, although only by way of allusion. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today* (Slough: St Paul, 1977), 33-41.

Let me take one further feature of the Office for Friday of Week 4, one that illustrates how the theologian is *guided* by prayer, how God's love is the dynamism that dictates theological method. The Office's use of Scripture can help us think about our own use (or misuse) of Scripture in theology. If theology's method is dictated by the dynamism of love, then we need to think about how we read the Bible in a way guided by love—which means not necessarily guided by a particular method or system.

An important aspect of *The Divine Office* is its intriguing deployment of Scripture, its juxtaposition of texts from the Old and New Testaments, and from the tradition. Implicitly, *The Divine Office* is challenging what pass today for scholarly approaches to the Bible. In the first place, it is reminding us that Scripture is always mediated by tradition, indeed that Scripture itself represents a historical tradition. In Morning Prayer for Friday of Week 4 we have Ephesians (4:23-24) and Revelation (21:10-11 and 21:9) guiding our prayerful reading of the Psalms (51, 147) and the Old Testament Canticle (Tobit 13). And the effect is reciprocal: the Old Testament texts guide our reading of the New Testament passages. Moreover, had we instead used the Common of Pastors celebrating St Januarius, or the Common of Women Saints celebrating St Emilie, the co-mediation would not have been simply scriptural: there would also have been spiritual writers from varying moments within the tradition placed before the psalmody. Today it would have been Hesychius; but it could equally be Cassiodorus, Irenaeus, Augustine or Athanasius (sadly and shamefully, these writers are always men). In the English translation of *The Divine Office*, the poets Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Donne are also allowed to sing in this sublime choir.

The reciprocities extend also to the saints themselves. St Emilie or St Januarius would serve as a yet further mediator of the Scriptures; in turn, new scriptural significances come to light in and through the witness of their lives. The point is well reflected in the scripture reading for St Januarius' Common:

Remember your leaders, who preached the word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcomes of their lives, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever. Do not let yourself be led astray by all sorts of strange doctrines. (Hebrews 13: 7-9a)



The saints reproduce, in very different lives and contexts, the reality of Jesus Christ in the world. There are endless possibilities here for imitation. Reading the Scriptures as Scripture is a profoundly ecclesial, and dynamic, activity.

Scripture as the Church's Book

Reading and praying with Scripture requires us to take into account how it has been read and used in the life of the Church over two thousand years. The point is not that we should slavishly reproduce ancient procedures and methods, but rather that we should allow those past readings to call us into question, to change us, and to incorporate what might be useful and illuminating into our current practices. Stephen E. Fowl writes that, with a few notable exceptions, 'modern biblical scholars have paid little attention to premodern biblical interpretation' except to 'treat it as a form of error'.¹⁰

While there is certainly now a move away from a univocal notion of meaning within biblical texts (the premise of historical-critical exegesis), Fowl observes that the current challenge to historical-critical forms of reading in general comes from those who drink from postmodern, rather than premodern, wells. One very significant exception, however, is the great Catholic scholar Henri de Lubac, who pioneered a recovery of the patristic and medieval tradition precisely as a source of richer engagement with Scripture than that offered by the modern historicist perspective.¹¹ David Steinmetz develops his ideas by offering an argument on epistemological grounds for 'the superiority of

¹⁰ See Fowl's Introduction to the collection he edited, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), xvii.

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, *The Sources of Revelation*, translated by L. O'Neill (New York: Herder, 1968), speaks of the 'spiritual understanding' of Scripture (chapter one). Fowl's collection includes an excerpt from this work.

pre-critical exegesis'. Steinmetz argues that medieval exegetes steered a sober middle course between extreme subjectivism (such as some literary theory has spawned, whereby the meaning of the text is entirely a function of the reading community) and historical-critical positivism (which ties the text purely to the author's intention). While medieval exegesis is not without its faults and problems, it at least rescues the Bible from the limitations of modern interpretation, for it holds,

... that the meaning of Scripture in the mind of the prophet who first uttered it is only one of its possible meanings and may not, in certain circumstances, even be its primary or most important meaning.

Steinmetz concludes:

The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can be endlessly deferred.¹²

The historical-critical method still dominant in theology faculties today encourages positivist readings of Scripture. If we return, critically, to the allegorical, moral and typological interpretations of earlier times, we might find many new things to say.

Scripture is also mediated to us through the lives of the saints, the lives of virtue that it stimulates. This point has been recognised by ecclesial liberals and post-liberals alike. Liberals write of the oppressed as a source of revelation. One might cite the Brazilian Leonardo Boff, who uses the Virgin Mary as an icon both of women and of liberation, thereby combining feminist and liberationist hermeneutics. But 'post-liberals' too, such as George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, require that the Bible interpret the world. The Bible has to be 'performed' or 'narrated': its meaning has to unfold through the practices of the Church. There is obviously an argument between these

¹² 'The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis', in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 26-38, here 27, 37.

two sets of theologians: post-liberals commonly insist, against their perception of liberals, that the Bible interprets the world and should not be used simply as a support for various political causes. But aside from their differences of opinion, both schools share the conviction that as the Bible is read or enacted in new and different contexts, new significances emerge. As a result, the living Bible escapes the constraints of historical criticism. It is significant that these contemporary intellectual strategies have emerged within the academy as a result of close engagement with ecclesial practices.

The ideas about prayer that I have been discussing here have profound implications for biblical study within university theology departments. My own limited biblical studies as a student were formed exclusively within the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon historical-critical tradition. This tradition still largely dominates in many countries—though by no means uniformly, and there are many hopeful signs of change. What I would suggest is that the dominance of historical-critical biblical studies is radically called into question by a theology whose methods are generated by prayer.

Prayer is vital to theology, and this point raises all sorts of challenges to the current practice of theology in the secular university. Prayer is the lifeline also for those who would not normally think of themselves as theologians at all. But then, by virtue of their praying, they have in fact—in the only sense of the word that really matters—become theologians after all.

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