

LECTIO DIVINA: MEDIEVAL READING FOR THE MODERN CLASSROOM

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Classical, Christian schools pride themselves on the quality and density of their book lists for literature and humanities classes—and rightly so. In order to shape our students into godly human beings, we have them read the greatest books of the western tradition. We want them steeped in the best that has been thought, said, and done, so that they grow into fully-formed human beings.

But the classical, Christian vision of education must extend beyond book lists. A classical curriculum will either shape our students' characters through the grace of the Spirit, or turn them into insufferable, well-educated narcissists. To avoid the latter, our approach to the books we teach must train students in habits of humility, charity, and repentance. For most of us, this means abandoning our usual methods and attitudes of reading and learning to approach our books in a more Christian way. And the most Christian, most human method of reading that I have found is the medieval method of *lectio divina*.

THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN READING

Before considering *lectio divina*, we must first understand the problems with how most of us read. Everyone reading this article is a modern reader, to

some degree. Our reading habits betray modernist assumptions about reality and reveal why modern reading is not consonant with the goals of classical, Christian education. There are three key problems with modern reading:

1. Reading as data accumulation. In modern reading, the reader sees a book as a repository of information that the reader needs to put in his brain. The reader must transfer the data from the pages of the book to the hard-drive of his mind. His eyes scan the pages, his brain processes the words, and then stores them in his memory. The modern reader uses computer metaphors to describe his reading because reading is fundamentally a process of data transfer, not an activity to shape his soul.

2. The arrogant reader. Modern readers judge a book within the first few paragraphs. More charitable readers might make it through a few chapters, but ultimately, if the book doesn't justify itself to the reader, he condemns it as useless. The modern reader assumes that he stands as judge over the book. The book has to satisfy him, because it exists solely to benefit *him*. And for most modern readers, if the book isn't immediately accessible and appealing, it's trash.

3. The uncharitable reader. Modern reading also

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shows a great lack of love for one's neighbor. Instead of reading for moral self-improvement so we can better serve our neighbors, we read to acquire skills that make us more marketable. We read to give ourselves an edge over our neighbor. Modern reading also fails to love the author as a neighbor. Writing is really hard work; writing a great book that will be passed on for generations is even harder work. When generations of humans have protected such books—sometimes dying to preserve them—and we dismiss them as useless, what are we saying about the author and his effort and his work? What are we saying about all the people who came before us? Do we really think our ten minutes of superficial reading can trump the collected wisdom of generations of our ancestors?

If we teach students to read books with this approach, we teach them habits that encourage narcissism, uncritical judgment, and unloving hearts. Thankfully, the past that modernism so quickly rejects offers a wiser, more human way to read, a way of reading that cultivates humility and charity in the pursuit of wisdom and virtue.

In the early twelfth century, an Augustinian monk named Hugh of St. Victor penned a short book defining all the areas of knowledge important to mankind and laying out rules for ordered progress in these areas of knowledge. Hugh's *Didascalicon*¹ contains much wisdom for classical teachers, but (for the purposes of this article) the most significant part is Hugh's discussion of the proper way to read.

Hugh summarizes the medieval method of *lectio divina*, an ancient monastic method of reading Scripture, and then applies this method to the reading of any kind of book. Hugh's discussion of the purpose and methods of medieval reading provide a way of reading that is truly Christian.

THE PURPOSE OF MEDIEVAL READING

In medieval paintings of the twelfth century, objects aren't illuminated by external sources of light. Instead, they seem to emanate their own inner light. Medieval writers apply this same concept to books, and their metaphors for reading reveal the ultimate purpose for reading. When a reader reads, the pages emanate the inner light of the book's wisdom. The act of reading causes the book to "glow" in the reader's mind. As he continues to read, this light of wisdom illuminates the darkness of the reader's sinful soul and reveals his need for God's grace².

The medieval reader doesn't judge the book, because he knows he can't. He has a darkened soul and can't pass judgment. His heart contains greater flaws than any that exist in the book. So, the reader needs the book, needs its light to reveal his weaknesses and flaws and his need for grace. In the medieval mind, reading was one of the ways that God made his grace known. Reading brings light back into the world from which sin banned it. The act of reading burns away the sinful mist from the reader's perception, and hopefully ignites the soul of the reader as the book's wisdom enters his eye—like one candle igniting another candle's wick.

So, the purpose of medieval reading was twofold: 1) to give knowledge of the reader's true, wretched self; and 2) to ignite the reader's dark soul with hope and the light of wisdom³. This is difficult, demanding work, as other medieval metaphors imply: reading was a "stationary pilgrimage" (*peregrinatio in stabilitate*) that stirred up zeal for Christ through physical discipline⁴; the reader was a "holy mumblor" who would mutter repeatedly the brightest parts of the book, tasting their sounds and rhythms until he had gotten them by heart⁵.

The purpose of medieval reading—to illumine a darkened soul by the light of wisdom—makes reading a much more human, much more Christian activity than the data accumulation of modern reading. A brief

exploration of the methods involved in medieval reading will help us find ways to implement it in our classrooms.

THE METHODS OF MEDIEVAL READING

There are three important aspects to medieval reading: 1) memory, 2) *lectio*, and 3) *meditatio*. Of these three, only *lectio* and *meditatio* are methods: memory training is a prerequisite to reading.

Memory

Before any student was set free in the library to read on his own, he first had to memorize the entire story of Scripture. He had to be thoroughly familiar with all the significant themes, characters, events, symbols, actions, and truths about how God saves his people—the whole story of salvation. He learned this from reading Scripture with a teacher to guide him and to help him memorize what he learned.

The student not only memorized all of these details, but also organized them systematically into some kind of “memory house” or “memory ark,” as Hugh describes it⁶. This systematic organization provided the reader immediate access to all his Scriptural knowledge. The memory house was a prerequisite for the medieval reader, because he wanted to be transformed by Scripture and his reading. He didn’t want to manipulate Scripture, but to be *manipulated* by Scripture, to be pressed and pulled into the right shape.

The medieval reader understood the power of books, and wanted to ensure that his reading moved him in a Godward direction. The two gravest dangers for a young reader were pride and error. Reading Plato could give him a wrong, even heretical, idea. Then pride would encourage him to hold fast to his wrong idea, to love his interpretation more than the truth⁷. The memory house protected the student by providing a point of reference by which the student could evaluate everything else he read. It checked and corrected both his reading and

his heart.⁸

Lectio

Once memory training was over, the student started reading in a systematic way, usually following a book list assigned by a superior. Then reading proper began with *lectio*, a studied effort to understand the primary meaning of the text itself. The reader sought to grasp the immediate, literal, historical, primary, contextual meaning of the text. He postponed analysis and criticism until he understood what the text was really saying⁹. He loved the author as his neighbor, letting him speak his piece without interruption.

When he understood the primary meaning of the text, the reader then sought to relate everything on the page to what was in his memory house. The act of *lectio* wasn’t complete until he found some way to relate what he had just read to what he already knew. He would evaluate the truth and goodness of what he had read and would look for echoes of Scriptural themes and images. Lastly, the reader sought to place *himself* in proper relationship to his new reading. He would ask, “What does this mean for me? What darkness of my soul had this brought to light? What is this book requiring that I change in myself?”¹⁰ Answers to these questions would lead to confession and repentance.

Meditatio

Having understood the primary meaning of the text, relating it to his memory house, and relating himself to his reading, the medieval reader then began *meditatio*, the arduous work of meditating on the text until it ignited his soul and enflamed his love.

The reader began *meditatio* by rereading important passages aloud to contemplate their truth further. He would mumble them, tasting them in his mouth. He would “eat” these passages, in order to make them part of himself. He would continue to think through their implications, combining his thinking with prayer. He

would pray and think about what Scripture said about these passages, what they meant for his darkened soul, and what it meant for all the other knowledge he had.

And as he thought and prayed, his mind would be illuminated. He would see new truth, which would lead to a further truth, and to a further truth. Suddenly, all of his knowledge would shift. Truth would lead to more truth in a crescendo of revelations that would leave the reader beside himself with delight. Reading would become worship, as the reader's darkened soul was ignited by the text, his soul set on fire with the beauty of Christ's goodness and truth¹¹.

HOW TO TEACH OUR STUDENTS TO READ (AGAIN)

It is clear that medieval reading is far more conducive to the goals of classical, Christian education than the data accumulation model of modern reading. So how do we bring medieval methods of reading into a modern classroom?

First of all, we must begin where the medievals began: by building a memory house of Scriptural knowledge. Grammar-level students must be taught the entire *story* of Scripture as a comprehensive whole, not as individual, disconnected stories. They should learn the main story-arch of God's redemptive history, memorizing the main characters, themes, periods, movements, and doctrines essential to that story. Teachers should train students to access any of this knowledge at any time. Lastly, they must be taught how to find their place in this story. They must be taught how to apply the story of Scripture to their everyday experience, seeing how *all* of Scripture is useful for teaching them how to live obedient lives.

Teaching students to memorize all of Scripture may seem like a daunting task given all the other curricular requirements of a grammar school. But grammar students have prodigious, eager memories and they love stories—they are perfectly suited for this task. Books like Vaughan Roberts' *God's Big Picture* or Graeme

Goldworthy's *According to Plan*¹² are great resources to help teachers organize these "memory houses" of Scripture.

Lectio requires us to read the entire text humbly, charitably, and in the light of Scripture. First, students should be reading the best possible books they are capable of. Their reading lists should consist of the best that has been written, which means they should systematically read through the classic books that have shaped the western tradition. Their teachers should instruct them how to read these books with humility and charity. They should be taught to postpone their criticism until they clearly understand the author's message. Then they should evaluate the book not in terms of their personal biases and preferences, but in the light of Scriptural standards of truth, beauty, and goodness. Remembering his darkened soul and need for grace, the student should learn to let his books *read him*, critique him, and call him to repentance.

The *meditatio* aspect of reading encourages us to revisit important passages of books *after we've finished teaching them*. After helping our students understand the book in the light of Scripture through *lectio*, we then need to revisit key passages and meditate on them. Writing, memorization, debate, and Socratic dialogue are all useful tools for *meditatio*. Most importantly, teachers and students together should pray for God to illumine the passage and help them understand it in a way that increases their love for Christ, their neighbor, and their world. The goal of *meditatio* is to enflame students with a desire to image Christ in the world.

CONCLUSION

Stratford Caldecott once asked, "What kind of education would enable a child to progress in the rational understanding of the world without losing his poetic and artistic appreciation of it?" The same question could be asked about how we teach our students to read: What kind of reading enables children to grow in their

knowledge of the truth without sacrificing their love for goodness and beauty?

The medieval method of reading provides the best answer. Students trained in *lectio divina* will be trained in habits of humility, charity, and diligence, and will have ordered loves for God, their neighbor, and their world. They will be obedient worshipers of God who faithfully image their Savior to a fallen world—exactly the type of student we want to graduate from our schools.

NOTES

1. Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia UP, 1968). Hugh's discussion of reading is mostly in Books 3 and 6, but any classical educator would benefit from a careful study of this entire work.

2. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 19-21.

3. "The wisdom Hugh seeks is Christ himself. Learning and, specifically, reading, are both simply forms of a search for Christ the Remedy, Christ the Example and Form which fallen humanity, which has lost it, hopes to recover." Illich, 10.

4. Illich, 23-24.

5. Illich, 54-57.

6. Illich, 35-50.

7. "Truly, the judicious student ought to be sure that, before he makes his way through extensive volumes, he is so instructed in the particulars that bear upon his task and upon his profession of the true faith, that he may safely be able to build onto his structure whatever he afterwards finds." Hugh, 142.

8. Augustine also warns about this dangerous type of misreading (*De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk 1), and Alan Jacobs offers a theological analysis of it in *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 14-25.

9. "The wise student, therefore, gladly hears all, reads all, and looks down upon no writing, no person, no teaching. From all indifferently he seeks what he sees he lacks, and he considers not how much he knows, but of how much he is ignorant." Hugh, 95.

10. Illich, 42-50.

11. Illich, 51-63.

12. Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991).

13. Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012), 11.