THE CASSIODORUS NECESSITY: KEEPING THE FAITH ALIVE THROUGH CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

by Richard Hughes Gibson, Wheaton College

We are sustained by the saints and trail our thoughts behind the truths of others.

—Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*

In these books, I commend not my own teaching but the words of the ancients, which are rightly praised and gloriously proclaimed to future generations.

—Cassiodorus, *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum*

There has been much talk in the last few years about the "options" before Christian communities amidst the changing cultural and political landscape of the West. The instigator of these discussions is, of course, Rod Dreher, promulgator of the Benedict Option. The BenOp urges traditionalist Christians to make a "strategic withdrawal" from mainstream society in order to preserve their distinctive way of life—in a manner analogous, Dreher contends, to Saint Benedict's establishment of the monastery at Monte Cassino as the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the early sixth century. In response to Dreher's proposal, numerous commentators have offered options of their own, including a Dominican Option; a Francis Option, the title a nod to both the medieval saint and the current pontiff; two Gregory Options, one modeled after the fifth-century bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great, the other after the archbishop of Constantinople a century earlier, Gregory of Nazianzus; and two options named for Protestant heroes—the English reformer William Wilberforce and the Dutch neo-Calvinist statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper. Shifting the terms slightly, James K. A. Smith has countered Dreher's option with an Augustinian Call to "stay in the mix of things."

My title might seem like an attempt to outmaneuver all of these proposals. But the "necessity" of which I write is not another entry in this debate. Rather, it is the intellectual culture that promotes the kind of thinking that the debate involves. Notice that all the schemes hinge on a common assumption: that finding a way forward in our times should begin by recalling the examples of the saints, be they ancient or modern.

All of these programs display what Robert Louis Wilken, in his superb 2003 book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, argues is "one of the most distinctive features of Christian intellectual life": "a kind of quiet confidence in the faithfulness and integrity of those who have gone before." As Wilken further observes, "memory is essential for Christian thinking," for Christian thinking begins with memory—"with what has been received." The

Richard Hughes Gibson *is an associate professor of English at Wheaton College. He is the author or co-author of three books, including, with James Beitler,* Charitable Writing: Cultivating Virtue Through Our Words *(IVP, December 2020).* *This article was first published at Plough.com and is reprinted by permission.*

deposit begins with Scripture, of course, but it doesn't end there. Our inheritance also includes teachings of "those who have gone before" about "how to use such words as *God, Spirit, hope, grace, sin, forgiveness*." Each of the options discussed above is just such an effort to sift the church's history for guidance. If Wilken is right about how Christians think, as I believe he is, then we can say that the option-makers are doing what Christians have always done when they would think deeply about a problem—"beginning with what has been received."

Before "what has been received" can be pondered, though, it must first come into our hands. That is, it must be written down, drawn up, passed around, and taken to heart. This is what I'm calling the "Cassiodorus Necessity," the equally vital labors of custodians to transmit Christian intellectual culture and those of the rising generation to receive it. Transmission is rarely glamorous work. It's often conducted in quiet corners by a lone novice reading a book, writing an essay, or translating a passage. It happens when a librarian catalogues a collection. It occurs when a teacher gathers with students around a table for conversation. It's easy to take for granted.

Yet in periods of crisis like our own, our intellectual supply lines become visible. We are reminded that they are fragile like us, and that their maintenance demands investment—of money certainly, but equally importantly of space and time, the space and time of learning. *In The Year of Our Lord 1943*, Alan Jacobs reminds us that in the midst of World War II a number of leading Christian intellectuals—Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Simone Weil—dedicated themselves to the task of imagining education's future. They wondered: What kind of schooling will the citizens of postwar Western societies require? What role might the Christian tradition play in their education? They, too, were asking how "what has been received" might be passed on to the rising generation. The pandemic has made this question a pressing one once again, given its massive disruption of the business of education, Christian or otherwise.

Whether the mildest or bleakest of the recent financial forecasts prove true, our charge remains the same—passing down the resources of Christian thinking. This is an ideal moment to use our memories as Christians to consider how past generations have handled this vital work. Now is a time to remember our roots.

Cassiodorus, a contemporary of Benedict's, was there at the beginning. He was among the first to recognize that Christianity had developed an intellectual culture worthy of transmission. He perceived the vital importance of study to the Christian life. He saw, moreover, that to engage with sacred texts, to pursue the knowledge of God, Christians must dedicate themselves to a panoply of arts and sciences. Writing in a period of turmoil even greater than our own, he cast a vision for education that has had a quiet influence down through the centuries.

Claude Monet, *The Pointe of Heve* (Public domain)

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator was born around AD 485, a time of palace intrigues, half-hearted alliances, a child emperor, scheming foreign powers, and upstart Germanic kings—in short, the last gasp of the Western Roman Empire. His father had risen to the highest ranks of the recently established Ostrogothic court, and Cassiodorus would follow him into civil service. On the strength of his rhetorical skills, he would hold a series of high offices, making him, in one scholar's apt phrasing, "the chief administrator, public relations officer, and minister of culture" for three Ostrogothic kings.

With the collapse of that kingdom in the late 530s,

Cassiodorus retired from public life and dedicated himself to *conversio*, meaning a deliberate turning toward God through prayer and study. In the mid to late 550s, Cassiodorus returned to his ancestral property at Squillace, in the toe of the Italian boot, and founded a monastic community. He named it the Vivarium—meaning "place for a living thing"– after the fishpond nearby.

Founding a monastery was not an unusual behavior for elites at this point. What made the Vivarium special was that Cassiodorus consciously designed it as a seat of Christian intellectual culture. Walking its grounds was a bit like touring a Christian liberal arts college—over here was the classical library, over here the copy center, over here the enormous biblical commentaries, over here someone was annotating a book, over here someone was doing math homework. One recent writer has dubbed it "a monastic research foundation." For good measure, Cassiodorus also assembled a team of skilled book binders so that he could "clothe the loveliness of the Sacred Letters" with suitable "outer grace."

Our knowledge of the Vivarium derives from the two-volume work that Cassiodorus wrote on the enterprise, the *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum* (meaning, roughly, an "Introduction to Divine and Secular Literature"). The work is sometimes referred to as an "annotated bibliography," which is accurate insofar as it contains the author's detailed notes on a host of titles from an impressive range of subjects, including orthography, rhetoric, astronomy, mathematics, and, above all, Scripture.

That description, however, sells short what Cassiodorus attempted to do, both in the document and in the community it was meant to guide after its patron's death. In his 1979 biography of Cassiodorus, the classicist James O'Donnell well explains the distinctiveness of the project: "Cassiodorus was not merely preparing convenient handbooks, for he was in his own eyes saving, preserving, expanding, and exalting his idea of Christian intellectual culture. Moreover, his enterprise was comprehensive, in the sense that it sought to provide a complete, well-rounded education for the Christian scholar, concerning itself with all the details of the educational advancement of everyone in the monastery, down to the least literate."

In the *Institutiones*, the reader watches Cassiodorus plot out a life's reading—not only the texts but also the order in which they ought to be consumed and to what end. The work is best understood as a curriculum, a course of study, which the reader is invited to run with fellow community members in the corporate pursuit of the knowledge of God.

Given the turbulence of his times, one might assume that Cassiodorus envisioned the Vivarium primarily as a storehouse for high-priority cultural goods threatened by the proverbial barbarians at the gates. And the project has indeed often been portrayed as just such an effort to tuck away a bit of civilization as the Dark Ages descended. The trouble with this view is that Cassiodorus doesn't seem to have shared it. The only mention of political disorder that we get in the *Institutiones* appears at the beginning when the author explains that the "continual wars and raging battles in the Kingdom of Italy" thwarted an earlier initiative to found "Christian schools" in Rome. The motivation for that endeavor, now extended to the Vivarium, is explained in the *Institutiones*' opening sentence: "When I became aware of the fervent desire for secular learning, through which a great multitude hope to obtain worldly wisdom, I was deeply grieved, I must confess; for while secular authors without a doubt have a powerful and widespread tradition, the Holy Scripture wanted for public teachers."

The Vivarium's catalyst thus wasn't looming barbarism but the educational establishment—the tried-and-true ways of Roman schooling. This was the tradition of liberal learning that reached back centuries and whose textbooks conveyed the teachings of Cicero, Quintilian, and Aristotle, among other giants of the Greco-Roman past. Above these, Cassiodorus placed Scripture, which he describes repeatedly in the *Institutiones* and other writings as the highest source of truth. In this regard, he was echoing the patristic writers whose volumes lined his shelves. Early

Christian thinkers "turn always to the Bible as the source of their ideas. No matter how rigorous or abstruse their thinking," Wilken writes, "Christian thinkers always began with specific biblical texts."

This program may have the look of a sixth-century edition of the culture wars. But in fact the sort of learned pagan rivals whom Augustine addressed more than a hundred years earlier in the *City of God Against the Pagans* had long since died out. Cassiodorus lived in a Christianized Italy. That fact explains his mission: seeing the endurance of the pagan tradition of learning, he lamented Christians' neglect of their own. In the Vivarium, Cassiodorus expressed his conviction that Christianity had developed a distinctive intellectual culture. The community was an argument that this intellectual tradition could provide the basis for education. He wasn't simply laying up intellectual goods for the future; the Vivarium was his attempt to widen their circulation.

The first book of the *Institutiones* begins to chart the course of this sacred education through traditional Christian writings. Cassiodorus makes clear that Scripture is the *sine qua non* of this education, but it is far from the lone material in the curriculum. On Cassiodorus's account, Scripture should be the gravitational center of Christian education—but not its limit. To read Scripture well, the teacher counsels the study of its greatest commentators, a line-up that includes Augustine, Ambrose, Athanasius, and Jerome. (On the latter's authority, he even makes room for the good bits of Origen.) But Scripture study demanded more than just help navigating its themes, images, allusions, and theologically and linguistically difficult passages. One also needed to study geography. One needed to learn church history. Copying Scripture—one of the Vivarium's routine tasks—demanded that monks gain a thorough knowledge of orthography. Editing the Bible required learning from figures like Jerome and Eastern scholars about its original languages as well as the methods of textual criticism. Across the *Institutiones*, Cassiodorus sets one book after another in orbit around the sacred writings, resulting in a sprawling solar system of texts.

The orbitals were not exclusively Christian, however, and in this regard Cassiodorus was an innovator. The second book of the *Institutiones* promotes the material advertised in the second half of its full title: "Secular Letters," that is, the old pagan teaching on subjects like rhetoric and logic. This inheritance had often been a matter of ambivalence—and in some cases outright worry—among early Christian thinkers, who were themselves trained in it and whose rhetorically sophisticated writings benefit from its influence. Cassiodorus was a product of this tradition too, and as we have seen he had his concerns about the old "secular" learning as an institution separate from sacred study. But he saw more clearly than many of his predecessors that the ancient liberal arts tradition could serve the project of Christian learning.

The *Institutiones* is thus peppered with sentences like this: "These subjects are certainly useful to know, and (as our fathers believed) they should not be rejected since these subjects appear in the Sacred Letters, the origin, as it were, of universal and complete wisdom." In another section, he speaks of calling "back to the service of truth" the insights that the pagan writers "attained from the exercise of their cunning," the sentence containing a clever play on the Latin words for truth, *veritas*, and cunning, *versutia*. Cassiodorus makes the case that liberal arts are "useful" (a keyword in this text) on their own—astronomy, for example, in reckoning the "right time for sailing, for plowing, the dog-star of summer, and the dangerous rains of autumn." Yet his strongest pitch for them lies in their potential as an aid to sacred study.

The application may seem obvious in the case of the trivium—the ancient language arts, if you will—of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (also known as dialectic), since Cassiodorus's educational program places such emphasis on the reading of a complex core book. Scripture, he points out repeatedly, is full of rhetorical effects, as are the writings of its commentators; one needs to be a skilled reader to get the most out of the tradition. But what

about the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy? Cassiodorus presents these studies as a kind of higher learning: "Our holy Fathers properly persuaded men of a scholarly disposition to read these sciences since they turn our appetite from carnal things and make us desire what with the Lord's aid we can see with the heart alone."

Cassiodorus is sometimes chided by modern scholars for not sufficiently valuing the liberal arts in their own right, given his stated wish to enlist them in the work of grappling with Scripture. That critique seems to miss the mark in multiple respects, but it is especially problematic in regard to the quadrivium. In his discussion of these disciplines, Cassiodorus channels the ancient belief that studying mathematics, music, and the stars elevated the mind. Through these studies one doesn't just gain useful knowledge; one contemplates the deep order of the cosmos, which in the Christian understanding was instituted by God.

Fittingly, as Book II ends, the language of wonder and awe becomes increasingly pronounced. Having ascended to the stars, the author's last challenge to the student is to exercise the mental powers gained through liberal learning to contemplate God: "let us consider, with great admiration and awe, as far the human mind can stretch, how the holy Trinity, distinct in persons but inseparably connected and consubstantial in nature, operates within the universe its creation and is everywhere entire."

One writer has argued that the underlying rationale for this program is found in Psalm 19, which opens with the famous declaration that "the heavens declare the glory of God." The argument is a compelling one, as Cassiodorus was steeped in the Psalms, and the book enjoys pride of place in his curriculum. Yet Cassiodorus's pitch for the liberal arts seems to show more strongly the influence of Matthew 22:37: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Cultivating the mind, on Cassiodorus's account, should fuel the desire for God. For those capable of "advanced" study, the path winds through Scripture and the liberal arts. For those capable of only rudimentary reading, Scripture is sufficient. Illiterate brothers, meanwhile, are to be trained in the basics of the faith. The "necessity" of sacred and secular learning is not, as Cassiodorus presents it, merely to salvage intellectual culture. The work of the study has a far more important objective: it is to draw the scholar closer to the living God.

The Cassiodorus Necessity is not only the intergenerational work of transmitting Christian intellectual culture. Cassiodorus's program shows that that work isn't limited to preserving Scripture and the writings of a few august theologians and church historians. It's not just the work of passing down a canon. What Cassiodorus realized was that studying Scripture and pursuing the knowledge of God required the best intellectual equipment available—whether taken from Christian or secular sources. Thus, it was necessary to transmit Cassiodorus's libraries of both Christian classics and the pagan classics. It was necessary to be trained in how to read Scripture and trace the movements of the stars. Christian intellectual culture, on Cassiodorus's telling, is a grand investigation of the Christian God, occurring through multiple channels, and resting only when that God is finally and blissfully beheld face-to-face.

What does that look like in practice now? One response is to attempt as direct a translation of Cassiodorus's curriculum as possible. The classical Christian school movement is Cassiodorus's descendant in this regard, its practitioners maintaining strong ties to disciplines of the ancient liberal arts tradition that he helped to preserve. Yet the *Institutiones* doesn't just present a structure; it also models an adventurous spirit.

This ancient Roman was participating in the creation of a new thing. He was putting pieces—even traditions—together in a fresh way. Cassiodorus recognized the utility of such a well-rounded liberal arts education. His own career provided ready evidence of the heights to which such an education could take a person with connections.

But the goal of the learning conducted near that fishpond in southern Italy was not worldly success. It was, in the Christian mind at least, something far better. Cassiodorus urges us to immerse ourselves in our studies, to dedicate ourselves to "what we have received," and to range across and ascend ever higher within the disciplines—sacred and secular—because through these efforts we increase the avenues through which to seek the face of God. On this model, our task in the years ahead is not simply to deliver a cargo to future generations; it is to keep the wide-ranging investigations open. We should preserve our long-running practices. Yet we should also look for new lines of inquiry. For as Cassiodorus taught his monks at the Vivarium, God's lurking places are manifold.

No one knows how the landscape of Christian education, from primary schooling to graduate study, will change in the coming years. But it is not at all difficult to imagine that economic pressures on students and schools will create a new calculus for evaluating the worth—and measuring the success—of majors, departments, divisions, even educational visions. The kinds of study that Cassiodorus advocates in both books of the *Institutiones* may begin to look like risky investments. They are slow. They require much attention. Their results are hard to quantify. The fulfillment of the Cassiodorus Necessity may demand that quite a few patrons like Cassiodorus step forward to support institutions invested in distinctly Christian learning. Our present circumstances already demand fresh thinking about how to do the essential work of preserving, transmitting, and joining the Christian intellectual tradition. Now is a time to return to the sources. As we do, we should consider not just what the next generation needs to learn but what the point of Christian education really is.