



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **Monks and Learning**

by Father Laurence Kriegshauser, OSB

*[The Latin Monastic Breviary contained a prayer for monks to say before each Hour of the Divine Office. It ended, “Lord, in union with that divine intention by which on earth you yourself paid God the tribute of your praise, I pay you the tribute of these Hours.” Father Laurence examines the place of learning in the life of a monk and in particular in his own life, and then applies this to the praying of the Psalms. Ed.]*

“*And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche*” (Chaucer)

Insofar as monks seek God, they seek to know him better and to understand his plan for the world and for mankind in particular in order to conform their lives to it. The first monks in Egypt tended to be uneducated, even illiterate, but they fed on the word of God in the Scriptures, much of which they committed to memory in order to recite over and over until the Scripture began to change them and form them in Christ, the Word of God. It was rare for an individual to possess a Bible, but through listening to the recited word and repeating it the monk could come to a deep experiential insight into the mystery of God. As educated men and women took up monastic life they were able to study the Scriptures more deeply along with the commentaries written on them by Church Fathers. Such learning facilitated a deepening union with God and a corresponding understanding of the practical methods by which union with God was attained including an awareness of pitfalls on the road to sanctity.

Medieval monks were much occupied in transcribing the Scriptures and the great works of the Fathers so that they would be available for posterity. Like the early Fathers they came to see the importance of transcribing also the best works of the Greek and Latin thinkers before Christ, since much truth about God could be known through the world he created (cf. Rom 1:19-20), and the philosophical language developed by these thinkers proved to be useful in furthering an understanding of the truths of revelation. In other words God could be known both through the Scriptures and through the world he had made. As Thomas Browne put it in *Religio Medici* (1643), “There are two books from which I collect my Divinity, besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans’d unto the eyes of all...” Secular writings could reveal truths about God and his world, and the occupation of the theologian was to reconcile the truths learned from the two “books” into a fuller synthesis. Since God is infinite and his world inexhaustible such a search for the fullness of truth about God will be ongoing and never complete.

In more recent centuries some monasteries made study their primary work. The Congregation of the Maurists in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, in particular, took on the task of editing and publishing the works of the Fathers of the early Church, thus providing an invaluable service to the Church, which grows and develops only by mining the inexhaustible riches of the message of Christ pondered and handed on by holy men and women down the ages.

The English Benedictine Congregation, revived in 1607, has had its share of scholars. Dom Augustine Baker (d. 1641) was a master of contemplative prayer. Dom



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



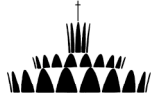
Cuthbert Butler of Downside in the first part of the 20th century edited the Rule of Saint Benedict, pointing out many allusions in the Rule to early Church fathers; he also wrote several works on Benedictine monasticism and prayer. Dom Justin McCann of Ampleforth in the next generation edited and published the Rule of Saint Benedict, as well as the works of several classical spiritual writers and also wrote on monasticism. Dom Columba Cary-Elwes, founding prior of Saint Louis Priory, was learned in the Spanish mystics and in modern ecumenical writers and wrote several books. Dom Henry Wansbrough of Ampleforth is a scriptural scholar and the principal editor of the *New Jerusalem Bible*. The list of monk-scholars of our Congregation could be extended.

The Holy Father has endorsed in our day the contribution of study to the life of the Church. Study is an expression of the unquenchable desire for an ever-deeper knowledge of God, the source of light and all human truth. Consequently, a commitment to study does not isolate consecrated persons in an abstract intellectualism, or confine them within a suffocating narcissism; rather, it is an incentive to dialogue and cooperation, a training in the capacity for judgment, a stimulus to contemplation and prayer in the constant quest for the presence and activity of God in the complex reality of today's world. (*Vita Consecrata*)

But scholarship is not the principal work of our Congregation, which has lived out its monasticism in the context of schools and parish work. Saint Louis Abbey is no exception. Once young monks have completed their monastic and (where applicable) priestly studies, they are employed full time in one of these two works. The love of learning continues to inspire them as they seek a deeper understanding of their faith and of the particular subjects they teach or the pastoral work they do, but such study must be undertaken in the "interstices" between monastic prayer and community times and work activities. Here each monk finds his own formula for continued learning. In this essay I can only speak of my own experience of the pursuit of learning in an active and busy monastery.

On returning from my four years of theology at Fribourg University in Switzerland I vowed that I would spend an hour a day continuing to read theology. The first weeks of full-time teaching in the school quickly put an end to that resolve. If any time was left at the end of the day after preparing classes and correcting homework, and later fulfilling roles like those of organist, choir master and subprior in the monastery, I was too fatigued to "change gears" and delve into scholarship. But soon I was asked to teach the Rule of Benedict to candidates. It so happened that a great French scholar, Father Adalbert deVogüé had just published his magisterial seven-volume commentary on the Rule and his three-volume commentary on the Rule of the Master, a document now widely recognized to have been a major source for Benedict's Rule. Having attended classes in French at Fribourg, I was able to read these works in French, although it took me several years to complete them. I would read a page or so at a time in the "interstices" and gradually achieved a sort of mastery of deVogüé's works.

At the same time I felt the desire to deepen my understanding of the Scriptures and began to read commentaries on various books of the Bible. One commentary could occupy me for one to three years, and I took notes on the books in my Jerusalem Bible where even now I find them useful when I have to preach on a certain passage. In this way I read Vincent Taylor's commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Raymond Brown on



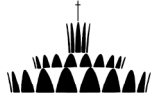
## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



John, John Meier on Matthew, E. A. Speiser on Genesis, Walter Eichrodt on Ezekiel, C. K. Barrett on Second Corinthians, Brendan Byrne on Romans, John McKenzie on Second Isaiah, Eduard Lohse on Colossians, Robert Karris on the Pastoral Epistles, Hans-Joachim Kraus on the Psalms, and several shorter commentaries in the Cambridge Bible Commentary series. (The latter were especially helpful when I was teaching Old Testament in the Junior School; I only really learned the Old Testament when I had to teach it.) These works have nourished my understanding of the divine plan as found in the Scriptures, and I have been able to share what I have gained from them with students, young monks, and the faithful at Mass. Always there is a kind of tension between the desire for further study and the demands of charity and service in our life—a tension difficult but fruitful. In the area of learning I remain an “amateur,” a word that means, as Father Austin Rennick used to point out, one who pursues an activity out of “love,” but the time to produce works of scholarship has not been available in this young community with too much work to be done.

In recent years my study has focused on the Psalms, the staple of our common prayer, the Divine Office. In *Mediator Dei*, a little known encyclical of 1947, Pope Pius XII revived the ancient understanding of the liturgy of the Church as the prayer of Christ himself to his heavenly Father. He wrote that the principal prayer of the Psalms and of the Mass is Christ himself who gathers us to himself as members of his body to offer his prayer to the Father with him. Such an understanding of the liturgy, which we celebrate together six times a day (Vigils, Lauds, Sext, Vespers, Compline, and Eucharist), revolutionizes our way of praying. In the words of Saint Augustine, when we pray the Psalms “we hear Christ’s voice in us and our voice in him.” The “learning” I am engaged in at present is a study of how the Psalms express the mind and heart of the risen Christ praying for all mankind in the presence of his Father, and how I and the Church enter into that prayer and make it our own. Little is written about this method of praying the Psalms which is nonetheless advocated by the Church. My present study consists in reading the most current research on the original meaning of the Psalms in their Old Testament context and then reflecting on how in the mouth of Christ these pre-Christian prayers become the prayer of the Church. Much of this research is written in German, another language I picked up at Fribourg (out of *pietas* for my roots). I was fortunate to have learned Latin and Greek at Saint Louis University High School and Hebrew at Fribourg.

What follows is a Christian approach to the Psalms as I have gleaned it from my study. How is a Christian to pray a line like “He led them through the deep as through a desert”? The verse is praising God for guiding his people through the Red Sea as they fled from the Egyptians. While I may praise God for that event, it is somewhat remote from me. If I recall that the risen Christ is praying this psalm now to his Father in his Church, I ask myself what is it that Christ is praising God for, what “exodus” does he have in mind? Clearly the great liberating event in human history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the event which broke the stranglehold of evil over the human race and created a new people free from sin. God’s people are those who have been liberated from sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is for this deed that Christ praises his Father. Yes, the Son of God praises the Father for liberating the human race in his own Passion and death. “He led them through the deep” becomes a glorious metaphor for our redemption from sin and death. The “deep” or ocean in Hebrew thought



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY

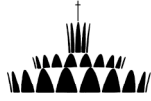


was always a place of chaos and death. God created the world through his spirit hovering over the chaotic waters. Jesus demonstrated his divinity by calming the sea and walking on the waters. For God to lead his people through the deep as if it were dry ground is to save them from the clutches of death. Thus the Exodus from Egypt becomes a symbol for our liberation from sin, and indeed becomes the most powerful way of expressing that mystery because it gives concrete and historical form to an event which is primarily spiritual.

We can speak of God's salvation only in metaphors, and I might add as an aside that my study of English as an undergraduate at Notre Dame prepared me for an appreciation of the Psalms as poetry. The Old Testament has provided the metaphors which will be used to express the fullness of salvation in Christ. When we pray the verse of Psalm 106 cited above, we join Christ and all his saints and angels and the rest of the Church on earth, his Mystical Body, in exulting over the definitive triumph of Christ. Insofar as we praise the Father for this event we are simultaneously asking that all persons on earth, especially those farthest from God, may be incorporated into the holy people thus saved. We are asking that the Exodus from sin be extended to all sinners on earth.

How about this verse: "Alas that I abide a stranger in Meshech, dwell among the tents of Kedar"? How does Christ pray that verse? Christ dwells with his Father in heaven, but his body, ourselves, is still on earth. Christ prays with longing to his Father for all who are not yet one with God: all those who are enduring terrible suffering or loneliness, who live in ignorance of their loving God and Savior, who have rejected God. Christ suffers in them, and in us insofar as we do not see God, do not yet live in our heavenly homeland. Christ laments his distance from the Father in these human beings. When we pray this prayer in him we join him in asking the Father to extend the victory of his Son to these men and women of our time, perhaps thinking also of the souls in purgatory expiating their sins. From a poetic point of view this verse is a good example of parallelism: the second half mirrors the first half in meaning but with different words. This common technique in the psalter reinforces an idea by saying it a second time yet achieves variety by varying the concepts slightly. All we need to know is that Meshech and Kedar are desert places near Israel; being a "stranger" and "dwelling in the tents" of nomads are different ways of underlining the psalmist's sense of being exiled from home, as indeed all of us Christians are until we reach heaven.

A more difficult kind of verse to pray is one like the following: "O God, that you would slay the wicked! Men of blood, keep far away from me!" Isn't the Christian supposed to pray *for* his enemies, not against them? How can Christ pray such a verse? We must recall that Christ loves his Father, that he is passionately attached to the good of every person, wants every person to be joined to God, his ultimate Good. It is not a matter of indifference to him that men and women are torn from union with him by other human beings. Such a passion against evildoers was expressed by him on more than one occasion; for example, he said of those who would separate his children from him: "Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck" (Matt 18:6). Does he wish the evildoer to die, he who said, "I take pleasure not in the death of a wicked man, but in his turning back from sin in order to have life"? Putting



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY

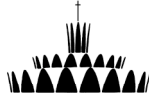


these truths and sentiments together, we can pray the verse from Psalm 139 with a heartfelt desire that God would “slay” the wickedness in men’s hearts so that they might find him and live. Since evil is perpetrated by a person, we can even ask God to slay the person *insofar as he is wedded to his sin*, remembering that in this life no one, not a Hitler or Stalin, is totally identified with evil: he remains basically good and capable of conversion by the grace of God. The psalms give us a legitimate outlet for our passion against evil, against exploitation of the innocent, abuse of children, the greed that leaves millions starving.

Praying the psalms in this way requires practice, meditation, and a certain amount of conversion. It might be a long time before we feel comfortable praying with Christ before the Father’s throne; we have to learn that he loves us in our mediocrity. As our faith in the lordship of Christ, that is, in his victory over all that can hurt us and even over our own sin, deepens and becomes stronger, we become more aware of him praying in us and ourselves praying in him. It is his prayer we offer to the Father, his prayer that is always heard, his prayer that energizes our prayer and teaches us how to pray. Praying the Divine Office is largely a matter of getting out of the way and listening to the ongoing prayer of Christ to the Father in us. Careful “tuning in” to the Psalms as the prayer of Christ can slowly give us the “mind of Christ.” His longings, his petitions, his joys and sorrows as he looks out over his children on their painful pilgrimage in this world become our longings and petitions, our joys and sorrows. When we pray the Psalms in Christ we sense that we are part of a vast temple made of many “living stones” (1 Peter 2:4-5) calling on the Father to extend the kingdom of his Son to every creature. We know that our prayer is heard because it is the prayer of Christ, who said, “Whatever you ask for in my name I will do” (John 14:13). How can the Father refuse anything to his beloved Son? When we pray, the world is being redeemed, or as the prayer says, “the work of our redemption is accomplished,” even though we may not see the effects of our prayer.

For this reason the Divine Office, what Saint Benedict called the “Work of God” to which nothing should be preferred in the monastery, and which includes the Eucharist, is truly for us as monks the most important work we do, more effective than teaching and preaching and counseling and every other good apostolic work. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of His Body the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can match its claim to efficacy nor equal the degree of it” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #7).

Another consequence of praying the Office in Christ is conversion. We cannot “put on the mind of Christ” without slowly becoming aware how much our attitudes diverge from his, how far we are from loving our neighbors as he loves them, which is what he commanded us to do (John 15:12). Praying in Christ is like “dressing up” in Christ, according to C. S. Lewis, like an actor putting on a costume and becoming his character. We cannot do this regularly on a daily basis without beginning to catch some of Christ’s attitudes, that is, we begin to change. And the change is painful because we are being weaned away from various kinds of egoism, of attachment to self. In fact, to pray in Christ is to ascend the cross with him, where we “crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). It is to share in his Passion, his “loud cry and tears”



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



(Heb 5:7). It is not a comfortable place, but the monk is happy to be there because he knows that the cross is the only way to glory and to a share in the resurrection that followed the cross.

Praying in Christ, we naturally draw into our intercession all the cares of the world, near and far. We pray urgently for peace, for the hungry, for the unity of Christians, for missionary work and evangelization, for the imprisoned, the desperate, the dying. We pray for the pope and bishops and political leaders. Closer to home we bring into our prayer our friends or relations who are sick or who have other special needs at this time. We pray finally for one another and for ourselves, for our conversion to a deeper union with Christ. All of these intentions can be in mind as we say a verse like “God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved” (Psalm 80). Applying the “us” to specific intentions and needs, we can be sure that those for whom we pray will be helped, not by our holiness but by our “wielding” the prayer of Christ on their behalf.

A final example. “And while they dance they will sing: ‘In you all find their home.’” Imagine Christ delighting in the joy of his people as they gather with him before his Father, united in the Holy Spirit, and as they express their joy in exuberant song and dance. The “you” of the psalm (Psalm 87) is Mount Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem and specifically the temple were built. This temple was the “dwelling place” of God on earth. Solomon had built it to house the ark of the covenant, above which Yahweh was conceived to be seated over the wings of the golden cherubs, two winged animals placed on the ark to serve as God’s throne. Already in the Old Testament God had disclosed his design of dwelling among his creatures. At the death of Christ this temple of stone was replaced by the Body of the risen Christ as the definitive dwelling place of God in the flesh. In this Christ “all find their home,” because every human being is called to union with him through faith and baptism. Christ rejoices that his children from every nation have found their true home in God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This article began as a discussion of the place of learning in the life of the monk. Monastic study is subordinate to the monk’s principal aim: to grow in love of God and neighbor so as to live with God in heaven. It is not primarily speculative or academic but experiential and sapiential. It serves the spiritual life of the monk and the Christians to whom he may minister. I hope that this disquisition on praying the Psalms in union with Christ will be of practical help to those who read this book. May it, and the Psalms themselves, lead you deeper into the heart of the Son of God.