A Spirituality of Study

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Ministers today need to recover a sense of study as an ongoing spiritual exercise that keeps the mind and heart connected. Study is not something to be endured for certification; rather, it is a virtue of an authentic Christian way of life.

As a young pastoral associate, weary from years of academic formation and struggling to keep up with the pressures of daily life in the parish, I simply had no time or desire for study. I used to take refuge from study in the fact that, as a Franciscan friar, I am the spiritual son of a man who considered himself ignorant and unlettered. But in time I came to discover that Francis was not completely unlettered, and he certainly was not ignorant. He spoke French (the business language of his day) and wrote in Latin (the academic language of his day). He was also the first person to write in an Italian dialect. In whatever language, his writings prove that while he was probably never a good student in academic circles, he was certainly a good student of life and studied human nature with care. Some would say that it was his study of human nature that led him to be so cautious of academic study. What was the source of his concern?

It is interesting to note that the first Franciscans did not share Francis’s fear of education. Clare of Assisi, for example, had a very good grasp of Latin and knowledge of the great spiritual writers of the past. Despite Francis’s being contrary to academic pursuits, Alexander of Hales, Roger Bacon, and many other scholars were attracted to his way of life. The most famous Franciscan scholar of the early

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days is Anthony of Padua. He received Francis’s permission not only to pursue his studies but also to teach other friars in Padua as long as in the study he did “not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion.” He and others like Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus attest to that fact that academic and scientific study can be and should be a spiritual exercise. That was at the heart of Francis’s concern.

Today, however, it seems that many Christian ministers both lay and ordained resonate more with Francis’s initial distaste for and concern about study. They can find the need for serious theological education and ongoing study as part of ministry as detrimental to faith and spirituality rather than in service of them. At times in the past few centuries, the church was wary of the empirical and social sciences to the point where many Christians have forgotten that theology and spirituality are also sciences! On the other hand, the church has also been perceived to be overly concerned with the need for intellect to fathom the contents of faith and morals in a way that reduces holy teaching to a mental exercise in the classroom.

There are many ministers today who fall into this trap of disconnecting the mind from the heart, of losing the understanding of study as a spiritual exercise witnessed by the early followers of Francis. Some ministers are surprised to discover that prayer involves the mind as well as the heart. Others consider faith to be governed only by the heart and would prefer to compartmentalize it as an emotional experience rather than involving the intellect as well.

The Christian vision of faith and the world in which that faith is lived cannot simply be a matter of the heart alone. Without the brain, the heart is useless to see God in our lives. As Robert Frost claims, “My two eyes make one in sight.” Two eyes are needed to make “wholesight.” A few years ago my mother lost her left field of vision. My family had to deal with her adjusting to a new way of seeing, and I have had occasion to reflect on just how important it is not only to see with both eyes but to have both fields of vision in each eye in order to have complete vision of our surroundings. If this is true for our concrete and physical vision, it is also true for our abstract and spiritual vision. Those Christians who would like to relegate faith and spirituality to the heart alone have lost their left field of vision. My mother’s misfortune with her sight has taught me that we need both our eyes to have two fields of vision controlled by both sides of our brains. Wholesight or holy sight is the task of two eyes, not one. It is the vision of a knowledge-hungry mind and a Spirit-thirsty heart.

A Knowledge-Hungry Mind

Would that every pastoral minister had the knowledge-hungry mind of a child, who studies the world around her in order to learn not only how to deal with it, but hopefully to thrive in it. Knowledge has grown in people’s minds
little by little from day one of our existence, both as individuals and as collective humanity. But what of this knowledge? Do we truly possess it or does it possess us? Knowledge comes from a place of passion, not neutrality. The mind is just as passionate as the heart. The mind is passionate about truth. Unfortunately, most of us feed it facts instead of truth. The story of the temptation in the Garden in Genesis (3:1-8) points this out.

**Curiositas and the Desire for Power**

“Is it true that God told you not to eat of the trees in the Garden?” asks the Serpent of Eve. In the Genesis story the Serpent tempts Eve and, through her, Adam. They are tempted to take the fruit off a tree and eat it. In reality, it is not the fruit that is tempting. They knew the truth about the fruit in the Garden; Adam and Eve had all the fruit they wanted. However, the Serpent promised something more: knowledge—specifically the knowledge of good and evil. Furthermore, with this knowledge they would be like God, or at least that is what the Serpent tells them. The Genesis account points out two of the three sources of knowledge: curiosity and power. The desire to know the difference between good and evil is motivated by curiosity. The desire to be like God is motivated by power.

Curiosity and power are not necessarily wrong. Where would we be today if someone in the past did not get curious about the power of gas in locomotion? Curiositas, as Thomas Aquinas called it, is a powerful motivator in the area of study and the sciences. However, Aquinas cautioned against it, calling it a vice. Curiositas translates as “curiosity,” “inquisitiveness,” and “studiousness.” To the delight of many ministers seeking refuge from the discipline of study, it is best to heed Aquinas’s warning and avoid the vice of curiositas.

Indeed Aquinas claims that study can fall into the vice of curiositas in four ways. For the minister this would mean first studying things that are extraneous to one’s ministry. This type of study can be a waste of time and can keep one from studying those things that will enhance one’s ministry or calling in life. Second, study is a vice when it seeks knowledge through improper channels like cheating or plagiarism, rather than honest scholarship and effort. Study is also a vice when it seeks to know nature without gratefully taking into account its creator. Finally, study is a vice when one seeks to know things beyond one’s capacity or without preparing for it—like wanting to be ordained a priest or a deacon on the spot without having to go through seminary study.

Knowledge in our tradition is meant to be an act of love producing fruit that is life-giving.
Before pastoral ministers try to hide behind the insistence that study is a vice, let me stress that it is only a vice when it is motivated simply by curiosity and the desire for power. As I mentioned above, there are three and not two sources of knowledge. When Adam and Eve took the mango, the apple, or whatever fruit it was, they made the biggest epistemological error of all time. They reached for a knowledge that did not trust or include God. They were motivated simply by curiositas and the desire for power; they were not motivated by the third source of knowledge, which is love. It is only love that turns study into a virtue and makes it fruitful. It is interesting to note that, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, knowledge is often tied to fruitful lovemaking. The verb “to know” is used in genealogies as the reason a child was conceived and brought into the world. Abraham knew Sara, and she brought forth Isaac. Mary could not conceive, so she thought, because she did not know man.

Knowledge in our tradition is meant to be an act of love producing fruit that is life-giving. In order for study to be a virtue, ministers and all Christians need to remember this concept of knowledge. For study without love is not only tedious and mind-numbing; it can be a vice that seeks to possess knowledge without truly knowing. It fills our heads with facts that get nowhere near truth and certainly do not make an impact on how we live and minister.

**Truth: Not Just the Facts**

Before looking at love as a source of knowledge, let me stop to consider the difference between facts and truth. Fact comes from the Latin verb facere, “to make or manufacture.” Facts, then, are manufactured reality; they are what we make of reality on our own. But we must never forget that our reality is God’s creation. In his writings Bonaventure insists that creation is the mirror in which we can see, feel, hear, taste, and smell God, and not just things around us. Bonaventure, in fact, encourages all sciences to use the physical senses as well reason to study the reality in which we live, not to gather up a bunch of facts but to get at truth.

“What is truth?” Pilate asked our Lord. Pilate saw Jesus as a problem to be solved, as a case to be tried. In trying to understand Jesus, he sought to place Jesus into a neat category, and so he asked, “Are you a king?” Jesus, however, refused to be pigeonholed as a fact; simply being who he was challenged all Pilate’s categories. Pilate asked, “What is truth?” but in reality he only wanted facts. He wanted to know, “Are you or are you not what people say you are?” His desire to limit Jesus to a category did not allow him to see that truth was staring him in the face. It did not allow him to enter a relationship with truth. For Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.”

So what is truth as opposed to facts? The English word truth comes from the Germanic word troth, which means “to pledge; to engage.” Troth is the root of the English words truth and betrothal. If we want to understand study as a means of
spiritual growth, we need to understand study as the process by which we court and are courted by truth in order to be betrothed to truth in a life-giving relationship. Ultimately truth requires the knower to become interdependent with the known, for truth is personal, relational, and communal. Truth is not something to be mastered; it demands that we participate in it and not simply observe it.

In order then for study to be a means of spiritual growth, we need to remember that study is not merely collecting facts and figures to be spouted out in a homily, a retreat talk, or in some other ministerial project. Facts are important, but they are not ends in themselves. They need to lead us to Truth. For all Christians, study is the prerogative of a Spirit-thirsty heart; it is the entering into a life-giving relationship with Truth. And Truth is a person to be loved: Jesus the Christ.

### Adequatio and Relational Learning

This type of study demands what Aquinas calls *adequatio*. *Adequatio* is the inner capacity that a knower needs in order to receive the known in such a way as to produce knowledge. This capacity is found in the totality of the sense organs and in extrasensory realities like intuition, emotion, empathy, and faith. Of course, the human person is more than a collection of instruments of cognition; the person is “one instrument” in community with other persons.

The monastic tradition within Christianity did much to preserve and promote study within Christianity. In fact, many of the ancient colleges and universities of Europe began in monasteries and cathedral schools. Monastic influence is still felt in education today. The monks had a threefold way of education. They began with the reading of sacred texts, reflecting on their findings in prayer, and living them in community. Most sciences today have their own “sacred” texts that their students need to read, reflect on, and analyze if they are truly to come to know them. Schools today, despite the reality of off-campus learning, still hold onto the value of learning in the community of the classroom. For pastoral ministers, especially, there is more to learning than simply reading and analyzing texts and doing experimental projects. Ministers need to work together and share ideas and concepts with each other if they are to learn. Study needs to be relational if it is to become knowledge.

Today’s educational institutions will fail pastoral ministers if they overemphasize the text and analysis to the detriment of community. In such a system, ministers become nothing more than observers who probe and prod subjects without really participating, reflecting, and relating to them. Ministers need to understand that observing and relating are two sides of the same coin called study. As we study with the full range of our human instruments, we find that in knowing we are also known.
Study as a Means of Spiritual Growth

Study, then, if it is to be a means of spiritual growth, needs to regard truth as personal, relational, and communal. It needs to seek to enter into a personal relationship with the topic being studied, be that christology, church history, biblical theology, or whatever other field of study might be taken up by a minister. This type of study gives voice to the topic of study and allows it to speak its truth to the knower who will listen to it, relate to it, and enter into communion with it—and in the case of pastoral ministers, take it to the community they serve. This type of study is built on the dialogue, relationship, and the mutual transformation of the knower and the known.

If we have learned anything from Jesus and the heroes of our faith, it is that there has to be mutuality in truth. Pilate sought to know Jesus, but simply out of curiosity and the need for power over him. What Pilate did not do was love Jesus. If he had, he would have known him and been known by him. True knowledge is defined by love. It might have its process in curiosity and power, but it is fruitful and life-giving only in love. Ministers who seek to know must have a passion for the known out of a loving commitment to their community.

This is where we return to our original metaphor of “wholesight.” Wholesight or holy sight needs two eyes. We have been talking about the knowledge-hungry mind as if mind were synonymous with the brain. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, the mind is much more than the gray matter inside our skulls. The mind is synonymous with thinking, memory, attitudes, inclinations, desires, sentiments, soul, etc. Mind, heart, body, soul, and spirit are united as a whole.

A Spirit-Thirsty Heart

Thus, the knowledge-hungry mind is intimately united to the Spirit-thirsty heart. For Aquinas, study born out of misguided curiosity, and the desire for power is a vice. These are vices that seek to master a subject and to try to know outside of God and outside the vocation to which God has called one. This type of study is nothing more than cerebral activity. It is dualistic and disjointed. This curiositas needs to be overcome by studiositas. Studiositas is the virtue that seeks to know and be known. It is entering into relationship with the known, and the relationship cannot simply be cerebral. It is a passion for knowledge that is born out of love, a love for God, a love for the vocation to which God has called one, a love for the community in which one serves, and a love for what is known. Passion for knowledge comes from our Spirit-thirsty hearts.

The virtue of study, studiositas, can be translated as “studiousness” or “diligent study”; it is translated as “devotion to learning” by the Blackfriars’ edition of the Summa (see Cole’s discussion). This is an attitude that we must have and that we
must seek to infuse into our parishioners and others if we want them to keep learning and growing in our faith. *Studiositas* must be a way of life for all the faithful.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls Catholic Christians to a devotion to learning, which sees life as our university. In this university, we are helped by studying various texts. Article 2705 enumerates various texts or books, but basically they come down to the three books that Bonaventure insists are the only books we need to come to know God. These are the book of the Scriptures, which includes both Old and New Testaments and the writings of the great scholars and saints of our tradition and contemporary theology; the book of creation, which includes all that the sciences teach us about physics, astronomy, geology, etc.; and the book of history, which includes my life, the life of my community, culture, church, nation, and the life of those who have come before us and will come after us.

In his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure explains how these books must be studied (2, 12). First, the student must be fully aware that knowledge of the particular comes from sensible experience, corresponding to the physical senses sharpened through purgation. Second, knowledge of the universal is acquired by reflecting upon ourselves. This knowledge comes from illumination, which is the result of the immediate cooperation of God. Finally, by reading these three books we can arrive at the understanding of things superior to ourselves, of the totally other, God. This kind of knowledge can be obtained by the Spirit-thirsty heart through the eye of contemplation that is perfect only when one is in union with God. Study, then, is helpful to spiritual growth in that through it the “human mind is purified, illumined, and brought to the contemplation of heavenly things.”

Thus if we are to enter into relationship with the Truth, the Way, and the Life, all study needs to remind us of our dependence on God and the Christ. As Christians, the study of the world around us must call us back to our Christian vocation, which is to bring the Good News of salvation to all Creation. Let us join with Bonaventure, who in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum (The Soul’s Journey into God)* encouraged the Christian scholar to prayer in Christ crucified. Paraphrasing his prologue, no. 4, let us all—whether lay or ordained minister:

*Read with unction,*
_speculate with devotion,*
_investigate with admiration,*
_analyze with exultation,*
_toil with piety,*
_know with love,*
_understand with humility,*
_study with divine grace,*
_reflect with divinely inspired wisdom.*
References


