

From Curiosity to Studiousness: Catechizing the Appetite for Learning<sup>1</sup>  
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Learning requires both knowledge and the skills of thought. To have the former without the latter is to be a storage device, capable of being called upon for information but not for thought. That is not learning; it is at best recall and display, activities better performed by computers than human beings. To have the latter without the former is to be capable of distinction, argument, and synthesis, which are the paradigmatic intellectual skills; but to have nothing to which to apply them. That also is not learning; it tends toward sophistry. The learned, ideally, have intimate acquaintance with and love for a body of knowledge, coupled with the ability to think about it, view and present it from different angles, ornament and develop it, and in those and other ways return its embrace. The learned are active lovers of what they know, and like all lovers they need at once to know the bodies of their beloveds and how best to return the embrace given. The appetite for learning, in this full and nuanced sense of the word, needs catechizing, which is to say instruction, direction, and formation. Christians have, or should have, rather particular ideas about all this: about, that is, the nature and value of learning, and about how the appetite for it should be kindled and directed. Those ideas, or some of them, are the topic of this essay; they run counter to a good many of the orthodoxies about the same matter abroad in our academies, whether schools, colleges, or universities.

*Christian ambivalence about learning*

The first of these particularly Christian views about learning and the shaping of appetite for it is a deep ambivalence about the entire enterprise. Some Christians have thought, and some still think, that the best thing to do with appetites for learning is to catechize them out of existence because they are a distraction from or an irrelevance to the Christian life. Such views are possible for Christians because it is evident that being an active member of Christ's body—being, that is, baptized in the triune name and becoming sanctified by participating in the spousal love the Church returns to Jesus—and being learned have no intrinsic connection. Witness the fact that the vast majority of Christians during the last two millennia have been illiterate and without any of the other particular intellectual skills valued and taught by schools, colleges, and universities, Christian or not. It is still the case that a significant proportion of Christians worldwide cannot read and write in any language. They were, and are, in the Lord's eyes, no worse for that; many among them are saints. Learning, then, whether wanting it or having it, is not among the necessary conditions for entering the company of the saints. That is sufficiently obvious that it does not need to be argued.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a descendant of a lecture given at a conference on 'Teaching, Learning, and Christian Practices,' hosted and sponsored by the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on 29 October 2009. I have removed from it most traces of its oral origins, and expanded it in various ways. I am grateful to David Smith and Jamie Smith for the invitation to participate in that meeting, and for the many useful questions and comments I received when the lecture was delivered.

But I mean more. I mean also that learning as we now ordinarily understand is as likely to be a hindrance as a help to living virtuously as a Christian and coming to a fuller understanding of the Christian calling. This is because those who seek learning, and even more those who become virtuosos of learning, are very likely to consider the learning they have their own accomplishment, and to judge it more important than any other. Such views and attitudes are sinful: they oppose the Christian life in profound ways, and they are the special temptation and characteristic deformity of the learned. That is one side of Christian ambivalence about learning. When unchecked, it can lead to a deep anti-intellectualism.

There is, however, another side. This is evident in the deep and abiding interest the Church, construed broadly, has taken in the intellectual life and formation of some among its members as scholars and thinkers. The Catholic Church, for example, honors its intellectual exemplars as *doctores ecclesiae*, and takes them to be among the most accomplished and subtle thinkers and writers to have graced the human race. From the great thinkers of late antiquity in the Latin West (Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine), to the medieval monastics and scholastics (Bernard, Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus), to the Reformers (Calvin, Luther), the Church has acknowledged, needed, supported (sometimes), and learned from its learned and thoughtful members. Why this positive evaluation of learning? First, and perhaps most fundamentally, because the Church understands itself to have been entrusted with a revelation that it does not fully understand; seeking to understand it more fully involves seeking and finding both knowledge and the tools of thought, which is to say that it requires learning. The Church has, then, found ways to provide at least some of its members the learning necessary to further its understanding of the Gospel. In addition to this fundamental cause for a positive evaluation of at least some kinds of learning, the Church also has occasional concerns that have the same result. These include: a need to make the Gospel comprehensible to pagans; a need to apprehend and understand the order and beauty of creation (as well as the damage and loss that order has undergone); and a sheer delight in thinking, understood, sometimes, as *vestigium Domini*, a trace of the Lord in us. When unchecked, this side of Christian ambivalence about learning can lead to a single-minded idolatry of the intellect, and to institutions (like our universities) whose structure makes that idolatry evident without check and without shame.

Christians must live with this ambivalence. It is like the ambivalence we have toward death, which is at once an artifact of sin wearing its unacceptability on its sleeve, and the gateway to eternal life through which we are eager to pass. To attend to only one of these two aspects of death's nature is to abandon a properly Christian understanding of it and to replace it with something less. In the case of learning, the quick and easy way to thread the needle is to say that the body as a whole has needs not shared by its every member. That there need to be learned Christians does not mean that every Christian needs to be learned; much less does it mean that being learned has anything properly to do with being a Christian. This, so far as it goes, is true and important.

But something more always needs to be said, something particular to a specific and contingent situation. When anti-intellectualism is everywhere and the book-pyres are burning, Christians may need to emphasize the goods proper to learning, and to provide institutions in which these goods can be cultivated. When idolatry of the intellect is everywhere and the smothering weight of learning seems in danger of extinguishing the

fires of piety—when admission to a good university is cause for greater celebration in Christian families than baptism or first communion—then Christians may need to emphasize the dangers proper to learning, and to withdraw from or adopt a stance of critique toward the regnant institutional forms and practices of learning. Our situation is, at least for the American and European middle classes, more like the latter than the former, which is why I began with emphasis on Christian ambivalence about learning, and why I turn now to emphasizing the various ways in which learning and what must be done to seek it are incompatible with or otherwise detrimental to living as a Christian. One of the directions in which Christians must catechize the appetite for learning in a time like ours is toward radical redirection, so radical that it may look like extinction: to understand to seek learning as Christians do, is very different from understanding and seeking it as pagan academicians do—sufficiently different that we approach equivocation in calling both 'learning'.

Christianity, then, is not gnosticism: we Christians do not deal in distinctions between esoteric and exoteric learning;<sup>2</sup> we do not elevate learning to the status of a condition necessary for salvation, as is evident by the fact that we are, for the most part, happy to baptize and communicate those with deep mental handicaps;<sup>3</sup> we see clearly that the pursuit and attainment of learning has nothing, by itself, to do with the pursuit and attainment of virtue, and may often be negatively correlated with it;<sup>4</sup> and we acknowledge that becoming learned often comports well with and actively informs vices that stand in opposition to the Christian life. This last is especially true in a culture such as ours where the proper telos of learning is not virtue or contemplation but, rather, material success and the attainment of power. For all these reasons, we are, or should be, reserved in our enthusiasm for the pursuit of learning. That we do not always manage such reserve but become instead cheerleaders for a kind of education (a bloodless word) that pressure-cooks the vices to a well-done turn shows the extent to which we have become subject to what a blood-soaked pagan world teaches us rather than maintaining the capacity to braid love for that world together with a clear-sighted critique of it. The pastoral office of love for a bleeding world cannot be maintained without the prophetic office of teaching that world what it should be about, and this is as true of our thinking about the practices of teaching and learning as of anything else. We too often forget it.

So much for the critique, the prophetic office. It needs to be held together with the affirmation, the pastoral office. What, in more detail, can we say about why we

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<sup>2</sup> The closest the tradition comes to affirming an esoteric-exoteric as valuable is in its treatment of the *oikonomia* (Latin: *dispensatio*). On this, see my discussion in *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2004), chs. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Not all Christians agree about this, of course, and there is a large recent literature on the place the mentally handicapped do and should have in Christian worship. See, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1999), especially chs. 10-12; David H. Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 2005); Nancy Eisland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Kentucky: Abingdon Press, 1994); Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman puts this point lyrically: "Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then you may hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man." Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), fifth discourse, section 9, p. 91.

Christians should affirm the good of the intellectual life, the passion for learning? And how might these reasons help us to understand more fully how we should catechize and nurture the appetite motivating that life?

The first and fundamental assumption informing the Christian conviction that the intellectual life is important and beautiful, and that the Church has a strong interest in fostering it, is that everything that is is good. All things other than God, the triune Lord, are creatures, which is to say that they were brought into being by him out of nothing, and are sustained in being from moment to moment by him. This is an axiom of Christian thought, a claim central to its grammar and syntax. It means that every creature is good exactly to the extent that it exists: being and goodness are exchangeable or convertible. If this is right, and for the purposes of this essay I assume without argument that it is,<sup>5</sup> then what follows from it is, among other things, that knowledge of almost any kind about any aspect at all of the created order is good and needed by the Church. To know and think about anything—a theorem in mathematics, the features of a galaxy thousands of light years from here, the face of your beloved, the grammar of Sanskrit—is to know something of what the Lord has made, which is to say that it is to know a good. To know something is to become intimate with it; and since to become intimate with a good is itself a good, the conclusion is, unavoidable and delightful in itself, that all knowledge and all thinking are goods. That is why the Church is interested in learning. It is not that every Christian, every member of Christ's body should seek learning; neither is it that seeking learning is the Church's principal task (that is worship of the one who makes learning possible); but it is the case that in becoming learned the Lord's gesture of love in bringing what is knowable and thinkable into existence is returned in an intimate way.

### *Two kinds of appetite for learning*

But, the appetite for learning is not all of one kind. It, like all appetites, needs to be formed by catechesis before it can become effective. And that catechesis, that process of formation, can go well or badly: we can become good knowers or bad ones, and which we become depends very largely upon how the process of formation goes. Awareness of this led the Church to attend closely to the various ways in which the appetite for learning may be formed, and to discriminate better from worse instances of that catechized and formed appetite.

For example, late-antique Christian thinkers writing in Latin distinguished two kinds of catechized intellectual appetite, calling one *curiositas*, which I suppose has to be Englished as 'curiosity,' even though it is more than a little misleading to do so; and calling the other *studiositas*, which I render as 'studiousness,' even though that too is misleading, conjuring as it perhaps does images of a bespectacled schoolchild with his or her nose in a book—which is very far from what the fathers of the Church meant by it.

Following the Latin fathers, and especially Augustine, we can briefly define curiosity as appetite for the ownership of new knowledge. This appetite the fathers judged a vice, identifying it as fundamentally pagan and as inevitably failing in its attempt to come to know things and to think well about them. This failure was, they

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<sup>5</sup> On participation and convertibility see my discussion in *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), ch. 6.

thought, guaranteed by the strange relation between knower and known established by curiosity. That relationship is characterized by two fundamental desires: to own what is known, and to know new things. To own what you know is to establish a relation of dominance over it by making it exclusively yours. In order to do this, you need to cut it out from the herd of other knowables, as it were, rope and tie it, and bring it, now under constraint, into solitary confinement in your mental pen. This sequestration in the direction of ownership attempts, so its Christian critics say, to give those who undertake it a quasi-divine dominance over what they know. The object known, for the curious, lies passive before the gaze of the knower, and is removed from its participatory relation with the Lord who made it. If you try to know things as the curious do, to become curiously learned, you make idols of the creatures you study, things that can be known exhaustively, without remainder, and without reference to the Lord. This attempt must fail, for no creature can be known in this way; what you get when you try it is a simulacrum of knowledge, something like what you get when you substitute for making love with an actual human being making love to a phantasm, an image imagined. The phantasms the curious attempt to grasp do not satisfy them, which is why the definition of curiosity includes reference to novelty: the curious are driven, desperately, to seek new things to know because they can never be satisfied by the simulacra of knowledge curiosity provides. The fathers root this analysis of curiosity in 1 John 2:16, where there is a division of the love of the world into three kinds: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Curiosity is identified with the second of these three, the *concupiscentia oculorum*. It is an idle, restless, idolatrous attempt to establish intellectual dominance over creatures as if they were not creatures but, instead, mere objects under the complete control of the curious knower. The curious value learning for its own sake, alone, which is the precise Augustinian definition of idolatry: they exchange use for enjoyment.<sup>6</sup>

There is a further and deeper criticism that can be made of curiosity as a species of the catechized appetite for learning. It is that the appetite is ravenous for extinction, for emptying the world of unknown knowables. Augustine writes, in the course of a lengthy and interesting analysis of what it means to want to know some creature as yet unknown, that "even the curious do not love the unknown. It would be more appropriate to say that they hate the unknown because they want to bring it to nothing by coming to know everything" (*sed nec ipse [sc. the curious] amat incognita, imo congruentius dicitur odit incognita, quae nulla esse vult dum vult omnia cognita*).<sup>7</sup> To bring the *incognitum*, the unknown, to nothing is to return it to the nothing from whence it came when the Lord brought it into being *ex nihilo*. This, Augustine thinks, the curious both seek and achieve, because the means they use to attempt knowledge of the unknown guarantee failure to know, and thereby remove the unknown from the possibility of knowledge. When curiosity is extended without limit, as its indissoluble connection with novelty ensures that it will be, then the result is cognitive devastation without limit—'devastation,' that is, in the strict etymological (Latin, *de + vastare*) sense of 'laying waste, emptying of goods.' It is of course not the case that creatures are removed from being altogether by the

<sup>6</sup> For more on Augustine's treatment of 1 John 2:16, and the broader patristic understanding of *curiositas*, see my *The Vice of Curiosity: An Essay on Intellectual Appetite* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMU Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, from *De Trinitate* x.1.3, ed. P. Agaësse, *La Trinité, livres VIII-XV*, Oeuvres de Saint Augustin vol. 16 (Paris; Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), p. 122.

curious; they have not that power. But it is the case that they are removed from being as knowable, and in that sense the curious are cognitive killers.<sup>8</sup>

If this critique of curiosity had been the last and only thing Christians had said about the appetite for learning, then the Church would have been a place in which that appetite was not valued, a place in which knowledge and the skills of thought were placed under the ban. But the critique of curiosity is not the last word on the subject. Curiosity is not, as Christians see it, identical with the appetite for learning *simpliciter*; it is just one form of it, the product of one particular kind of catechetical discipline and training. The appetite for learning can be catechized in quite another direction, that of closer cognitive intimacy with creatures understood exactly as creatures, which is to say as gifts from the Lord, knowable and lovable exactly as such. This form of appetite for learning the Church has endorsed, and its name is studiousness. It is an appetite for closer reflexive intimacy with the gift. This definition will have, for the moment, to remain obscure: it will become slightly less so as we proceed to consider the lineaments of what it means to study and teach as a studious rather than a curious person. But before doing that it is necessary to say something from a Christian point of view about the relation between learning as such and its particular forms.

### *Accounting for learning*

In his treatise *De reductione artium ad theologiam* [On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology], Bonaventure makes the claim that every form of cognition is theology's slave.<sup>9</sup> He includes under the heading of *cognitiones* (forms of cognition or modes of knowing) not only what we might call the disciplines, such things as astronomy and history and literature and mathematics. He also includes the acquisition of particular skills, such as those possessed by the farmer or the shipbuilder or, we might say, though he of course does not, the auto mechanic or the plumber or the computer programmer. He really does mean *all* forms of knowledge and *every* kind of learning, both knowings-how and knowings-that. All are at the service of theology; each is theology's handmaid. Bonaventure does not mean by this that all these particular knowledges are forms of theology, or that theologians, just because they are theologians, know how to make sails or lay bricks or prove theorems in mathematics. Much less does he mean that theologians can prescribe to those who do have such knowledge and skill how they should deploy or extend it. Your friendly neighborhood theologian will have nothing useful to say about how you should fix your car. What Bonaventure does mean is that theology, which is reasoned and reasonable discourse about that God who is the Lord, provides both the frame and the explanation for all these particular forms of learning.

Something of what this means can be seen by observing that there is no Christian mathematics. There is not because mathematics, like all particular knowledges and skills, does not, for the most part, climb sufficiently far up the ladder of generality to give it any particular Christian interest. Mathematics, like all particular sciences, is theology's slave and can be accounted for by theology, and to that extent it is of interest to the Church.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger saw this aspect of *curiositas* clearly, drawing explicitly upon Augustine. See *Sein und Zeit* (10th ed.; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963), §36.

<sup>9</sup> "Omnes cognitiones famulantur theologiae," Zachary Hayes, ed. & transl., *St. Bonaventure's on the Reduction of the Arts to Theology* (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 1996), §26, p. 60.

But only to that extent. Christians, as Christians, have neither special mathematical interest nor special mathematical competence. When we do mathematics—and some of us do, very well—we do it just as the pagans do, and we are and should be judged by the same criteria of mathematical excellence as they. Saying this is quite compatible with saying that Christians do have a special interest in providing an account of what mathematics is. That is because giving an account of what an activity is has not much to do with performing it, a point that can be put only a little differently by saying that it is quite possible to be a virtuoso practitioner of some activity without being interested in or capable of offering an account of what it is that one does as such. Providing a Christian account of the nature of mathematics—as, perhaps, the seeking of cognitive intimacy with the eternal order of abstract objects as these subsist in the Lord's nature—has only marginal and indirect effects upon mathematical practice, as is evident from the fact that mathematicians who offer no account of what they do, or one in every particular incompatible with the one just given, can coöperate well with those who offer a Christian account of mathematics.<sup>10</sup>

Practitioners of the particular disciplines taught and learned in our institutions of higher education are typically not much interested in offering an account of the nature of their own activity, and even less in specifying its relation to the practices that belong to other particular forms of learning. Not many biologists, for instance, are interested in discussing what biology is or how best to construe its relation to the study of Renaissance literature; neither are many learned in literature concerned to offer an account of what they do that specifies its relation to biological learning. And when biologists or *littérateurs* do talk about such exotic questions, they at once cease to practice biology or the study of literature and move to another field. To place particular forms of learning and the catechetical practices that make them possible into an ordered schema by specifying what they share and how they are differentiated one from another is not something that much concerns the contemporary university. But it is something that does, or should, concern Christians. For us, returning again to Bonaventure, theology is the master discipline—or, given her gender, the mistress discipline, the queen of all particular forms of learning, because what theology is explicitly about—the triune Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is that toward which all other forms of learning tend and from which they begin. A complete account of what they are and are for, therefore, is by definition not something they can themselves offer, and when they attempt it, perhaps by specifying their own nature or their relations to other forms of learning, they necessarily transgress their limits.

This may seem controversial. It is certainly not easy to imagine many mathematicians or biologists happily agreeing to the claim that theologians can offer an account of what they do of a precision and scope in principle unavailable to themselves, at least so long as they remain mathematicians and biologists. But it should not be controversial. If, as I have claimed, mathematicians and biologists are ordinarily not very

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<sup>10</sup> It may seem that claiming the compatibility of mathematical activity with rival accounts of what that activity is and is for stands in some tension with my earlier argument that different modes of catechizing the appetite for learning are intimate with different, and often incompatible, modes of attempting to know. But this is not, or not necessarily, so. Offering an account of what one does as a learned or would-be learned person is much less formative of and intimate with the modes of knowing one performs than are the practices into which one is catechized as a neophyte of a particular form of learning.

interested in these meta-questions, then perhaps they will, more or less happily, give over analysis of them to theologians.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this is so, two things are certain. The first is that our colleges and universities, whether Christian or not, largely lack interest in or capacity for offering framing accounts of the order and purpose of what they do, and that it is utopian to expect change in this regard—all the forces and powers of the national and trans-national scholarly guilds make the offering of such accounts effectively impossible. The second is that Christians, to the extent that we think as Christians about the nature of the life devoted to learning, cannot avoid offering framing accounts of learning's nature and purpose. It is part of the Church's calling to do this.

*Christian learning: preparatory, ancillary, and informing practices*

The abiding Christian ambivalence about learning is given conceptual form in the distinction between curiosity and studiousness as catechized forms of the appetite for learning, the former being good because compatible with the natures of both knowers and knowables, and the latter bad because incompatible with the same. Christians also have no particular expertise in or concern with the methods and practices proper to particular forms of learning, while we do have a deep and abiding interest in accounting theologically for the kinds of learning there are and their relations one to another. It follows from this that what the Christian archive has to tell us about how learning should be sought will not have to do with the practices proper to particular forms of learning. The archive has nothing to say about how to become a good musician or a good botanist. What it does have something to say about is the practices and attitudes that should inform all particular forms of learning, practices and attitudes that are preparatory for, ancillary to, and informing of what belongs properly to those particular forms. It is to these preparatory, ancillary, and informing practices that I now turn, practices that apply to all Christian cultivation of learning, which is to say to the cultivation of learning in all its particular forms. Their absence will damage the cultivation of studiousness, and their presence will nurture it, and in that sense their presence will make those who practice them more properly learned than they would otherwise have been. But, to say it again, while the practices I am about briefly to comment upon are constitutive of a properly Christian approach to learning, they do not contribute directly to the intensification of cognitive intimacy with any particular range or kind of creatures. They are to those particular intimacies rather as the cultivation of a proper understanding of love is to becoming a good lover of a particular human person: that is, necessary but very far from sufficient.

Christian thinking about preparatory, ancillary, and informing practices must begin from thinking about the liturgy. That is because Christian life is lived most intensely and most fully in the liturgy.<sup>12</sup> It is there that the Church is most fully herself as *sponsa Christi*, there that she returns most explicitly and intimately the embraces given

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<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps to philosophers. Certainly some Thomists would say this. I do not take such a view because I do not think that philosophy has either the scope or the autonomy which that view suggests. But it is not necessary further to explore, and much less to resolve, this interesting question for the purposes of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> I assume here a Catholic understanding of the liturgy, which will be comprehensible by and applicable to other Christians to varying degrees.



her by the Lord, and there that she learns most fully what she needs to know in order to be herself. Attending to the liturgically-given shape of the Christian life is of great help in seeing what ought to inform a fully Christian pursuit of learning. Liturgy, which finds its most complete form in the liturgy of the Mass but which occurs in one form or another whenever the Christian people gather to worship the Lord, always includes the following elements, though not always in the same form or order.

First, there is a sacrificial gift-exchange, in which the Lord offers himself to his people and the people acknowledge the gift with gratitude, in that way (the only way possible) returning the gift to its giver. The gift-exchange occurs in words, as prayer of confession and praise; in the movement of bodies from kneeling to standing to walking; in gesture, of self-crossing and raising the hands in prayer; and in the use of material objects (bread, wine, incense, images, books, and so on). In every modality, the Lord initiates by giving the gift and the people respond by returning it: that is the fundamental liturgical structure.

Second, liturgical work, the work of the people (which is what the word means), is done without interest in or concern for outcome. We do not receive the body and blood or hear the word or sing praises to the Lord because we think that doing these things improves us morally, makes us healthier, provides us material blessings, or conforms us to Christ—even though it may do some or all of these things. We work liturgically because it is the thing to do, because liturgical gratitude is the only way to accept a gift given, especially one of surpassing beauty and value that we do not merit, and because we are in love and are eager to show that love. Inscribing the liturgy's gestures of love into an economy of contract, within which every action carries with it an expectation, even a demand, that something should be given back, would be to corrupt the liturgy. Those gestures belong, instead, to an economy of the gift.

Third, the liturgy is threaded through with lament. Its paradigmatic form is the confession of our incapacity to do what we are in fact doing, a confession that carries with it the implication that it is not we, or not only we, who do it. In the Order of the Mass (for Catholics) there is a confession of sin close to the beginning, in which we make exactly this gesture of renunciation because of unworthiness, a gesture that is repeated in the *non sum dignus* that comes immediately before the reception of the consecrated elements. Confessing unworthiness and lamenting sin does not, as it would in the ordinary contractual economy of exchange, lead to the conclusion that we should forthwith cease what we're doing. It is, instead, a gesture of disowning which is necessary if we are properly to continue our liturgical work. Without such repeated stammering gestures, liturgical work would become ours; with them we enter, performatively, into a condition in which we act with the Lord rather than on our own.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, the liturgy is repetitive and in being so it takes—or, better, wastes—much time. This is perhaps most evident if the entire cycle of the liturgy of the hours is prayed: doing that takes something over two hours a day, and if it is combined with the liturgy of the Mass, a substantial proportion of the day is liturgically spent. Wasting time is, in ordinary English, a bad thing: we want, we think, to make the best use possible of it. But in liturgical terms, time, considered as linear time that can be scheduled, divided into minutes and hours, filled up, deployed, and measured by chronometers, is exactly what

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<sup>13</sup> For this use of the trope of the stammer see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), Part II.

should be laid waste, and effectively is. Time, considered as it should be, is cyclical rather than linear, and endlessly repetitive in its cycles: there is the cycle of the day, of the week, of the month, and of the year, each grounded, as Christians see it, in the creative work of the Lord, each evident, in different ways, in the created order, and each given its liturgical correlate. The liturgy of the hours works on a daily cycle, the Sabbath orders the weekly cycle, and the yearly cycle is given shape by the seasons of the Church's year, from the beginning of Advent to the feast of Christ the King. To enter into the repetitive patterns of the liturgy is to lay waste linear time with the radiance of eternity, and in that way to provide a foretaste of heaven.

These aspects of the liturgy, its central grammar, can serve as paradigm for the consideration of what prepares for, structures, informs, and orders the work of learning. It is not that seeking learning is itself liturgical; it is rather that the extent to which seeking learning is well ordered, aimed at studiousness rather than curiosity, is the extent to which it participates in and reflects, according to its own peculiar nature, the liturgical order. Thought about that order, therefore, illuminates thought about the practices of learning. How, more specifically, might that thinking go?

#### *Prayer as preparation*

One prepares for engagement in the liturgy by settling the soul and turning one's eyes from the world to the Lord. So also for study. There is a long tradition in the western Church of offering prayers before study; and Thomas Aquinas provides, in pithy terms, the rationale for this:

We reach the knowledge of truth in two ways. First, by those things we receive from another. In this connection, with respect to the things we receive from God, prayer is necessary, as in Wisdom 7:7: "I called and the spirit of wisdom entered me." And with respect to the things we receive from people, hearing is necessary, by means of which we receive from a speaking voice. And second, it is necessary that we apply ourselves by our own study, and for this meditation is necessary.<sup>14</sup>

We pray before study because by so doing we place ourselves in appropriate relation with the Lord as the one who gives wisdom, without which understanding is not possible. Such prayer is essential, and properly liturgical. It serves not only as an invocation of the Lord, but also as a reminder that we do not arrive at understanding by ourselves, or from our own powers. In that way, preparatory prayer is an instance of the act of disowning so important to all liturgy: whatever learning we have is not solely ours, and not arrived at solely by our own efforts. To forget to pray before we study is to forget to acknowledge what it is that we are doing, and, very likely, thereby to tend toward the curious desire for mastery rather than the studious desire for intimacy.

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<sup>14</sup> I translate from the Latin of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* 2-2.180.3 ad 4, as given in the third edition of vol. 81 of the *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* (Madrid, 1963), p. 1039.

Thomas mentions not only what we receive from the Lord, but also what we receive from other people, from the *vox loquens* with which the learned speak to us and make a gift of their learning to us. This, too, is important to remind ourselves of in prayer: without the instruction we receive from those who already know what we want to know, and who have the knowledge and skill that make it possible for them to communicate what they know to us, we could not learn. Learning thus involves a double gift: of teaching from the Lord, and from people who have already received the Lord's gift. Both ought to be acknowledged in prayer. A learner is typically also (and at the same time) a teacher, and so it is also important to pray for students, whenever possible by name. Doing so serves as a reminder that the gifts given by teachers to students are just that—gifts, owned by neither—and that grace is needed to receive them. Praying for students also serves to place teacher and students into the same context, which is the liturgical one of the gift-exchange. Such prayer should be undertaken whether or not students know that it is being done.

The place of learning is, by prayers such as these, assimilated to the liturgical, as it should be; and because prayers of these kinds are generic, setting the scene for learning simply as such rather than that for any particular kind of learning, they are practices preparatory to any and every kind of study. But the sense of gift in play here is nuanced, and in one way at least more specific than that evident in the liturgy. There, in the liturgy, the focus is on the convenient giving of gifts by the Lord to the Church and the Church's grateful return of them to the Lord. Here, on the site of teaching and learning, this is also true; but there is an added and very important emphasis, upon the gifts given by teachers to students and returned by students to teachers. This nexus of giving of course participates in the primary nexus, which is that between the Lord and us; but it is not identical with it.

Augustine, precisely in the course of an analysis of Christian teaching and learning, which he calls *doctrina*, a word that embraces both what is taught and the act of teaching it, says that there are things which do not give out or become exhausted when they are given away by their putative owners, and which possess the additional characteristic that when they are held on to without being given away are possessed in an improper way, a way that guarantees that they cannot be had.<sup>15</sup> Learning is a paradigm case. It is a *res* a thing: a body of knowledge and the skill to think about it, as has been said. But it is a thing that can be given away without being lost to the one who gives it away, being in this like love and unlike money. And, still more importantly, it is a thing that if not given away, if clasped to the bosom (or kept in the head) of the one who has it, is *non habetur quomodo habenda est*, not had in the way it should be had. If, that is, you are learned and you do not teach in some way, you attempt to extract your learning, and yourself as a learned one, from the nexus of gift-exchange in which all Christian life is lived. You attempt, that is, to make your learning a possession, as the curious do; and in attempting that you devastate it, move it from presence toward absence.

These are strong and interesting claims; prayers preparatory to study may incline Christians toward finding them both true and beautiful, which I take them to be. Prayers preparatory to study, of thankfulness for gifts already received (from the Lord and others)

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<sup>15</sup> I here paraphrase and ornament Augustine's formula, *Omnis enim res quae dando non deficit, dum habetur et non datur, nondum habetur quomodo habenda est*, from *De doctrina christiana* 1.1.1 (Latin quoted from [http://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina\\_cristiana/index2.htm](http://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm), consulted 8 June 2010).

and in anticipatory thankfulness for gifts about to be given upon the site of learning, places we who pray them in a properly liturgical place in which we acknowledge, and over time become habituated to, a vision of learning as inseparable from teaching, and of the Lord as the primary teacher. This is what the place of study must be for Christians; and even when a Christian understanding of learning is not shared by all engaged in some particular studies (I have often taught and studied in places where neither my students nor my colleagues are Christians), it remains incumbent upon Christian students and teachers to pray before studies in these ways, discarding, of course, interest in the outcome of such prayers and praying them simply as an act of love for the Lord, for others, and for what is to be studied.

*Akribeia: attention, time, repetition, inexhaustibility*<sup>16</sup>

Just as the minutest particulars of the liturgy—the movements of the body, the herbs used in the anointing oils, the furniture and decoration of the church building—are matters of intense concern to Christians (which goes a good way toward explaining why proposed or actual changes in them prompt such strong reactions), so also are the minutiae of the practices of study, and of whatever creature or ensemble of creatures is studied. And just as the liturgy lays waste to time by taking enormous amounts of it and transforming it, so also does study. The parallels go deep here as in the other examples canvassed; and bearing the liturgy in mind can help Christians to understand more fully what learning is and how it should be sought.

*Akribeia* is a useful Greek word for this aspect of learning. It means, roughly, repeated attention to particulars, even of the minutest kind. Luke reports Paul as saying that he has been educated *kata akribeian tou patrôu nomou*, which comes into Latin as *eruditus iuxta veritatem paternae legis*, and into English as "educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers" (RSV), or "thoroughly trained in every point of our ancestral law" (NEB), or (rendering *kata akribeian* adverbially) "educated strictly in our ancestral law" (NAB), or "taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" (KJV). Luke (1:3) uses a cognate term to denote the care with which he has examined the particulars of the Jesus-traditions. To attend to something *kata akribeian*, then, is to attend to each and every one of its particulars, and in so doing to regard all of them as important and revealing of what it is.<sup>17</sup> In the case of studying a text, this might mean attending to its rhetoric, lexicon, argument, silences, author, reception, genre, and so indefinitely on. The idea that every creaturely particular is important finds its ground in the thought that whatever is, is good: this applies to every creaturely particular, and it means that nothing is too insignificant to warrant attention.<sup>18</sup>

The most immediate working assumption of trying to learn about a creature or creature-ensemble with *akribeia* in mind is that the task of learning cannot be completed

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Margie Mitchell, who first, long ago in Chicago, brought the importance of this word and its associated ideas to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> For other scriptural uses of *akribeia* and cognates, see: Matt. 2:8; Acts 18:25-26, 23:15, 23:20, 24:22, 26:5; Eph. 5:15; 1 Thess. 5:2.

<sup>18</sup> On attention see, particularly, Simone Weil, "Reflections On the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in idem, *Waiting for God*, transl. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 105-116.

because what is studied cannot be comprehended. That in turn is because comprehension denotes complete understanding, knowing everything there is to know about what is studied, and since the particularities of every creature are inexhaustible—they include, for example, the very fact that it is a creature, which means in turn that comprehension of it, were that possible, would include complete understanding of its relation to the Lord—that is in principle not possible. Studios practitioners of *akribeia* know this, and therefore do not attempt mastery of what they study, a mastery that would only be possible if comprehension were possible. They attend, instead, repeatedly to what they study, always under the sign of necessary incompleteness, and with reverence for what is attended to. If every creature is inexhaustible then none can be mastered: mastery in the sense of dominance is both impossible and an improper goal. And yet, the rhetoric of mastery, dominance, and control is everywhere in our academic institutions: we speak as if we can and should master our academic fields and in doing so comprehend the creatures that constitute them.<sup>19</sup> That language, and the attitudes it bespeaks, belongs not to studiosness but to curiosity.

*Quietism with respect to outcome*<sup>20</sup>

Like liturgical work, the work of learning is done without interest in or concern for outcome; and for essentially the same reasons. To attend to the particulars of a creature is a gesture of loving intimacy, and it needs no other justification. We do not seek learning in order to make the world a better place or ourselves better people. Those things may or may not happen; that they do (or do not) is neither the goal nor the motive of learning. The studios do not assess outcomes or undertake their studies with particular expectations. Instead, we attend, lovingly, to what gives itself to us.<sup>21</sup> The curious, by contrast, are driven by goals extrinsic to the act of attentive study, and the extent to which curiosity rather than studiosness dominates our academies is indexed by the prevalence of the idea that seeking learning without interest in (preferably measurable) outcomes is indefensible. This is a matter that Christian teachers and learners who work in colleges and universities should prepare themselves to address prophetically.

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<sup>19</sup> Shortly after I had completed my doctoral degree in 1983, the work for which included study and translation of a Buddhist scholastic text in Sanskrit, I recall being asked by a colleague whether I controlled Sanskrit. Even at the time I found this rhetorical flourish in exceedingly bad taste and evidence of deep confusion. No human being can control any natural language, and to speak as if this were possible (as scholars often do: the rhetoric of control and mastery is everywhere in our academies) shows the degree to which the rhetoric and often the reality of *curiositas* rather than *studiositas* is the dominant form of the catechized intellectual appetite in our academies.

<sup>20</sup> For a more extended analysis of the idea of a quietism of interest, see my "The Quietism of Political Interest," *Common Knowledge* 15/1 (2009), 7-22.

<sup>21</sup> I draw here upon Jean-Luc Marion's formulation of the third reduction: "Autant reduction, autant donation." See, e.g., *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), ch. 1, §4.

*Lament and the stammer*

The liturgy is shot through with words and actions that question its possibility. Liturgical agents stammer and lament. So, and for similar reasons, do studious learners. First, we lament our own incapacities: we are, in various ways and to different degrees, stupid, inattentive, lazy, domineering, and blind. Being catechized in the direction of studiousness rather than curiosity does not by itself remedy these defects, but it does bring them to consciousness exactly as defects and permit them to be lamented as incapable of removal by our own efforts. For the curious, by contrast, utopian as they tend to be, even when these defects are visible they are thought removable: all we have to do is work harder and perfect our methods. Then, our defects will be smoothed away and we will have made ourselves capable of comprehending what we attend to. Lament is not, for the curious, a value, but rather a sign of weakness. For the studious, lament at one's own incapacity for study and one's failures as a student is intrinsic to learning. The extent to which it is forgotten or laid aside is the extent to which the path of studiousness has been abandoned.

Lament is, for Christian students, prompted not only by awareness of the damaged and inadequate nature of our own cognitive capacities, but also by awareness of the damage to which the world, the ensemble of creatures has been subjected.<sup>22</sup> The world is radiantly translucent, but it is not only that. It is also shot through with darkness. The divine light does not shine everywhere, but the places of shade and shadow exist only as its absence, its lack, its privation. They can be described only by negation, sought only by aversion (the closing of the eyes), and entered only by embracing the loss in which they consist. Such an embrace damages: the eye accustomed to the dark loses, perhaps temporarily and perhaps permanently, its capacity to see; it sustains damage, more or less deep. And the places of darkness are also places of chaos and disorder in which the demons of disorder – Leviathan, Behemoth, Diabolos – prowl, making less what was more, expropriating the beauty and order of the place of light and in doing so removing it from its proper glory and turning it into desolation, the place of dissimilarity, anguish, famine, and destitution in which the praise-shout becomes the wail of anguish, trailing gradually off into the peevish murmur of the self-wounding seeker of darkness. The regions of darkness are visible only by courtesy, as rents and tears in the seamless garment of light. They are the places in which knowledge becomes ignorance, vision becomes blindness, beauty ugliness, harmony discord, and, most fundamentally, life death. To seek them is to seek nothing; to live in them is to live nowhere; to offer them is to offer the empty gift; and so to seek to live and to offer is to diminish, to hack at the body of one's being with the sharp sword of a disordered will until the body is limbless, bleeding, incapable of motion, approaching the second death from which there is no rebirth.

The darkness that is damage serves, for Christians, to explain the evil that is good's absence in the world external to ourselves. The corporeal world is out of joint, not as it should be; that is why the ensemble of causal connections that constitutes its activity is so often destructive to beings like us, and to the harmony of the whole. Earthquakes and tsunamis and plagues are, in part at least, the world not working as it should. We tend to call such things 'natural disasters,' but this is misleading. They are not natural if by that is meant that they belong to the world as it should be, the world as it was brought into

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed analysis of worldly damage, *Intellectual Appetite*, chs. 3-4.

being by its creator. Rather, they are antinatural, instances of the chaos that disorders the world's nature rather than of the order that constitutes its beautiful harmony.

But we need to be careful here. Our intuitions and judgments about what is ordered and what is disordered are not always reliable because we are ourselves disordered and may therefore interpret a painful result of our own disorder as chaotic when it is nothing other than the inevitable pain of self-wounding. If you put your hand into the fire your flesh will char and you will suffer. But the fact that fire burns your flesh is not itself (probably) an instance of disorder's damage; the disorder lies in your decision to put your hand there. By contrast, the violent death of multitudes brought about by events beyond the control and absent the initiation of human beings, such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, it seems more reasonable to think, is an instance of the world's disorder, and not just because such events bring suffering to us. Any such judgments about what is and what is not evidence of the external world's disorder are disputable, and should always be made with the deep epistemic modesty appropriate to our limited and damaged capacities for knowledge.

Even if we cannot be sure about our ability to discriminate the damaged from the undamaged, the beautiful from the ugly (and our lack of certitude about these things is one more occasion for lament about our own cognitive incapacity), we can be sure that what we study is, at least in the contingent and sensible order,<sup>23</sup> in some respects damaged in such a way that it resists the studious gaze, showing to that look an absence rather than a presence. And this is a matter for lament at least as much as the lacks evident in our own studious capacities. When a Christian student seeks learning about, for example, the violence to which we human beings constantly subject one another, something can be learned. But there will also be a point at which the studious eye notes only chaos and absence, and laments that fact: the city with all its inhabitants is deliberately destroyed in fire; the infant in the womb is intentionally dismembered; the slave is lynched; and so, bloodily and grimly, on. Lament belongs here too, and not just as sadness for pain and death. There is also a properly cognitive lament, a lament that the world is not as beautiful as it should be, and that the efficient causes for its ugliness necessarily remain opaque.

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<sup>23</sup> This distinction is necessary because intelligibilia (numbers, propositions, and suchlike) are not, in my judgment, subject to damage and occlusion in the same way that sensibilia necessarily (*post lapsum*) are. This, however, is a disputable and speculative suggestion.