

The Navigator



The Newsletter of the Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendon's

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A Disciplined Faith: Study

Fr. Alan Andraeas, Prior

*"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God...with all thy mind."
Matthew 22:37*

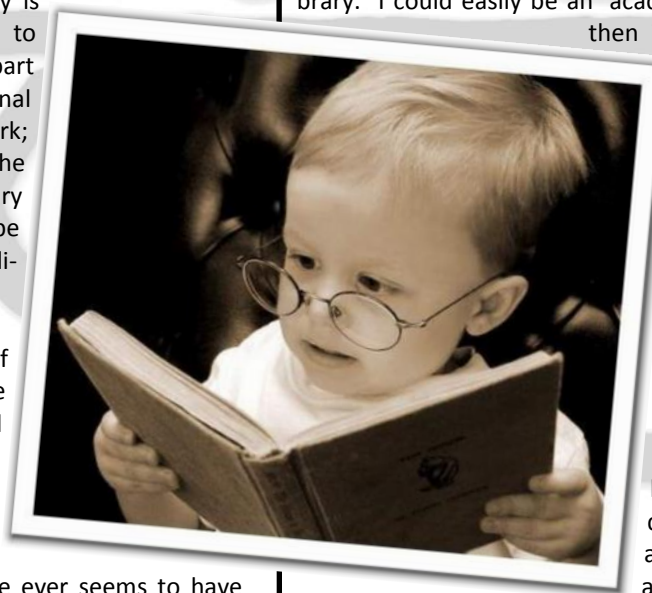
Let's look at the discipline of study; the fourth and last of the 'interior' monastic disciplines of intentional faith. We've already examined the interior disciplines of meditation, prayer, and fasting, but the discipline of study is uniquely different. Study requires us to sacrifice something that we hate to part with: the sacrifice of time. Intentional time. We can pray while driving to work; our hearts can be meditating on the things of Christ while hanging up laundry or cutting the grass; we can even be fasting while tending to all kinds of obligations.

But study is quite different; the object of study must be in front of you; there must be an expenditure of concerted attention devoted to that object—a committed block of time given to that purpose, perhaps even on a regular or daily basis. In other words, this particular discipline is costly because no one ever seems to have enough time for everything they want to do. And when there's a world of demands pressing in on you, a quick "cost-to-benefit" analysis can easily convince you that study doesn't provide enough "bang for the buck" because your most precious resource needs to be 'obligated' to more important

things. Of course, that's how the world often looks at it. But is the world right?

It seems like we're a society of extremes. Whereas Sue is a keen observer of her environment and studies the things that surround her in great detail (animals, plants, the weather, even her own physical reactions to the changing seasons or to the food that she eats), I love books—commentaries, theologies, biblical linguistics, etc. I wish I had a patron who could fuel my Amazon habit so that I could keep adding to my personal library. I could easily be an 'academic' the rest of my life. But

then it's time to milk the goats or split fire wood and I need to restore balance to my life.



At the other extreme are those—and you probably know some—who haven't cracked open a book since high school; not even to read a good mystery or spy thriller. They know all they want to know and don't want to wade into anything new. More often than not their work or life circumstances don't require the discipline of study and so their time and energy are expended on more immediate concerns. With that said, most people fit somewhere on this "love of learning" continuum.

How, then, does the discipline of study (or lack of study) effect our spiritual lives? Look at the very first sentence of this topic

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in Saint Brendan's *Rule of Life*. It states, "Spiritual transformation can never be achieved without the discipline of study." Remember the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* starring Zero Mostel as Tevye? One of Tevye's most memorable prayer-songs was "If I Were a Rich Man." After listing all the virtues that wealth could bring, he adds this one additional, heart-felt merit:

*If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
To sit in the synagogue and pray,
And maybe have a seat by the eastern wall.
And I'd discuss the learned books with the
learned men
Seven hours every day.
That would be the sweetest thing of all; oy.*

Can you imagine? Studying seven hours every day? The "sweetest thing" of all?! That might be a blow to those folks who don't like to study, but 'spiritual' study IS the primary agent that fills our minds with those things that are praiseworthy and true (Philippians 4:8); and those things will always point to *the Truth*, Jesus Christ. And as Jesus said, knowing the truth is what sets us free (John 8:32). Since *freedom*, then, is another way of saying *transformation*, a discipline of study must be one of the key, defining attributes of consecrated life and monastic spirituality.

So how do we do this? If our minds are shaped and influenced by the things we concentrate on, then the primary object of our study should begin with the Word of God; not books about the Bible, but the Bible itself. And not for the purpose of amassing information but for the purpose of transformation. One of the failures of contemporary, North American Christianity is that we have access to more Bible studies, more seminars, more conferences, more books, more lecture CDs and DVDs, and more midweek special guest speakers than ever before while at the same time growing spiritually more weak, more shallow, more needy, and more worldly. True, we might be living in a glut of Christian information, but when our faith is put to the test we quickly find that our foundation is nothing more than sand.

Likewise, our study of the Bible should 'devolve' into a kind of devotional reading that looks at every verse with a selfish

sense of "what it means *for me*." In a culture where everything around us—from fast food menus to online home improvement sites—is prefaced with cute adaptations and additions of *I, Me, My, and Your* in their marketing presentations, it's easy to be swallowed up in a sense of self-importance and self-gratification...which ultimately carries over into our understanding of the Scriptures. We must not study the Bible to see "what it means *for me*." We must study the Bible so that we can come to grips with "what it means *for God*"—seeking to understand the intent of the writer and the deeper purposes of the Holy Spirit behind what is written—so that we can be shaped by what the Word wants rather than extruding the Word into what we want.



Alongside one's Bible, a monastic should make reasonable attempts to acquire (or at least have regular access to) those tools that serve as aids to their study: a good Bible dictionary, a concordance, a trustworthy word study on the original languages, a general commentary. To this can also be added several choice classics of Christian spirituality from recognized and revered writers. This is so important given the current choices of reading material by today's church leadership (both ordained clergy and lay leadership). Whereas pastors, elders, church musicians,

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and serious laymen of two or three generations ago would relish a night of reading rich theology and the autobiographies of the spiritual 'giants' of Christian faith, Michael Horton in his book *A Better Way* states that the 'must read' list of today's professional churchman is comprised of, in rank order, "marketing studies of the unchurched, pop psychology, practical management guides by successful CEO's, and peculiar end-times novels." How sad. How telling. For many lay monastics,

MONASTIC MUSE

muse \ 'myüz \ 1: *vb* to turn something over in the mind meditatively, 2: to think reflectively, 3: *n* a state of deep thought...

Never cast off the habit of reading in the Holy Scriptures. For nothing feeds the soul and enriches the mind as much as those sacred studies do.

—Theonas of Alexandria (c. 300 AD)



the use of a carefully and prayerfully developed home library is a treasured, indispensable part of their spiritual formation.

Unless you are already a practiced student, how to study and what to study may prove to be quite frustrating at first. But like all other disciplines, the discipline of study can gain much benefit

from the wise input of a mentor. Any question of how to proceed should first be surrendered to prayer and then to the counsel of those with spiritual authority over you; particularly

to those with a demonstrated, humble proficiency in handling the Word of Truth. At the least, begin by consulting a book like Dr. Gordon Fee's *How to Study the Bible for All Its Worth*.

Dig, digest, ponder, ruminate, challenge, explore—you don't need to be gentle; the Scriptures won't break under scrutiny and examination. Monastics are to be like the Bereans who "examined the Scriptures every day" (Acts 17:11, NIV). Thus a regular, disciplined habit of Bible study (daily is ideal) should be the goal of every member of the Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendan's. Study fills us with the mind of Christ and the time, labor, and sacrifice of study is among the many gifts we give back to the Lord. In the next issue of *The Navigator* we'll begin to look at the exterior disciplines of faith, starting with the discipline of simplicity. ✕

Rejoice!
Fr. Alan Andraeas

Is there Gonna Be a Test?

Sue Andraeas, Prioress

*"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."
2 Timothy 2:15, RSV*

When you think about studying, what pops into your head? Cramming for tests in school? Getting ready for your driver's exam or some other certification? As I write this, Alan is three hours away *studying* to become our next postmaster of Denysville. (That's right, our Prior is 'going postal!') There's a test at the end, and if he fails it, he can't have the job. If you had failed your driver's exam, the DMV doesn't really care how much you studied; you would not be allowed to drive. Fail your exams in school and you don't get your diploma. Our western culture connects study to exams, and exams to rites of passage. So when we begin to talk about the monastic discipline of study, right away people get nervous. "Study *what?*", they ask. "Is there a test?" "No, there's just a study guide for you to complete." "What kind of answers do you want?" "Honest ones!" "What if I don't do well? Can I still be a member of St. Brendan's?" Yes, that conversation takes place over and over again, as though you have to pass



an exam to be 'good enough' to live a lay monastic life. For the record, we do not read those study guides with the intent to grade them. We read them and pray over them as we discern whether God is calling you to monastic life or not, but it doesn't mean the ones with the most eloquent answers 'pass' and the shortest, choppiest answers 'fail.' Actually, the opposite is often true! What we are looking for is whether you are reading has become part of you or if you have simply 'studied for the exam.'

I'm a teacher by training. I started teaching Sunday School as a teenager, then became a music teacher. My graduate work was in educational psychology (learning how people learn). I

have taught students from ages 4 through 86, taught elementary and middle School, and tutored High School. I've taught Music and Critical/Creative Thinking at the University of Alaska, Humanities at a local college in North Carolina, private music students, and now I teach homesteading and farming practices at our local adult learning center. If I've learned anything through working with all those students of all different ages and abilities, it's that 'studying' (as in reading books, listening to lectures, taking notes, and completing projects or passing exams) has absolutely nothing to do with learning, talent, or intelligence, nor does it guarantee success. I've also learned this: the most pro-

found educational moments in our lives have nothing to do with book smarts or reading retention.

Perhaps the purest form of study I've seen on this property involves animals, not people. Our first (and best) dairy goat, Brigid, would stand in the pasture, just beside her gate, and stare at the fence. She seemed, for hours, to be doing nothing at all and I thought she was a bit daft. Suddenly, one day, she began rhythmically twitching her one ear, about 4 seconds



between each twitch and then—she jumped the fence. She had not been 'doing nothing' all that time. She had been studying the ticking sound of the solar-powered energizer for the electric fence, and once she had the timing down, she could safely jump the fence without being shocked. Smart, wasn't she? Our donkeys spend all day staring at the meadow just beyond their pasture. I used to assume they were wishfully thinking about the greener grass on the other side of the fence. They weren't. Just beyond that other

pasture is the Dennysville cemetery, and the donkeys KNOW when something is wrong in that cemetery. Doyle gets miffed if someone even changes the flowers beside a gravestone! He stares at them, studying them, testing them.

We're not limited to the simplistic mentality of goats and donkeys, but how closely do you study your environment in order to know God? How aware are you of things going on in your neighborhood, your workplace, your household—your own head? Do you study how your life truly is interwoven with the lives of others, or with the land where you live, or do you just sort of go with the flow? Or worse, do you assume that all that is around you is for your sake? Not that we'd ever admit that we think that way. But it *is* the default setting for a human being who is not paying attention to the interaction between himself and the world around him. (Don't believe me? How would you define greed? Isn't it, at its core, the total lack of awareness of anything beyond myself except for the way it

“It keeps you tethered in the reality that God intended for you to live in as well as being aware of what He is doing around you!”

impacts *me*?) Assumption, not stupidity, is the opposite of being studious.

The word *study* originally had more to do with activity than it did with mental ascent. It comes from a Middle English word fused to an old French word that meant, 'to be busy with, to devote oneself to, to concentrate on.' After all, in medieval times, most people were illiterate; study for them could not simply involve reading. My concern for our society at present is that most people spend so MUCH time reading—texts, e-books, and other electronic verbal and nonverbal communication—that they do not study what's right around them. In fact, we are quickly losing contact with reality and moving into a virtual (false, temporarily simulated) reality of computers, smart phones, and media of all sorts that are as far removed from the study of reality as it could possibly be. So we, as a culture, have moved from being rather aware of our surroundings to becoming self-engrossed, to living more and more in a simulation of reality. Are you beginning to see the true importance of true study? It keeps you tethered in the reality that God intended for you to live in as well as being aware of what He is doing around you! I've made it a daily practice to study this property to see what God is up to: what's growing, what isn't, what the air smells like, the 'migration patterns' of the free-range chickens and wild birds, of the goats in their pasture, the health of all the livestock, what needs attention, what needs replacing or reordering, what practices are failing, and how one chore is interconnected to the rest, who stops by for eggs or milk, or for worship, or just to visit. And all of that with no books! (Don't get me wrong. I READ books—plenty of them—in order to know how to raise all these critters and plants. But the books only provide general information, not intimate knowledge of what is happening right here right now. That only comes from studying what's in front of me on a daily basis.)

Now, go up to the top of this article and reread the verse from 2 Timothy. Do you see the word 'study'? Let's look at it more

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closely, and from a different translation. The King James Version reads, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God..." The Greek word has been translated as 'study' but also as 'do your best.' It has nothing to do with reading, cramming, or preparing for an exam. It has everything to do, however, with honest effort, mental application, diligence, and even, in its more archaic form, speed. So it would seem to mean that God is more interested in our being present in the present, being observant and engaged, than He does with how many books we've read or how much information is in our noggins. This kind of study not only makes us approved but able to handle the word of truth.

Reading books so often puts information into our heads that does little or nothing to transform our lives. If Christ is to be



That's what St. Paul was telling his young student Timothy, after all, how to handle truth; The Truth.

seen—first *by* us and then *in* us—we have to seek Him personally and not just seek information about Him. We might learn about an historical figure by reading about him, but the best way to truly know someone in our midst is to observe him, study him, and become accustomed to his actions. Do we believe Jesus is in our midst? If so, look around. Really look! And listen. Study what's right around you. What is Christ doing in your neighborhood? In your house? In you? This is the intent of our study guides, and the reason why study has traditionally been one of the monastic disciplines. The books we suggest are merely to help you know what to look for. There's no test, no grade.

There never has been! But there is a Savior who is very anxious to be known by you. He's not in some virtual reality or between the pages of some book. He is known through his Creation and through those around us. We just have to study.

Sue Andraeas

All Thy works with joy surround Thee / Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays /
 Stars and angels sing around Thee / Center of unbroken praise.
 Field and forest, vale and mountain / Flowery meadow, flashing sea /
 Chanting bird and flowing fountain / Call us to rejoice in Thee.

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"—Text, Henry van Dyke; Music, Ludwig van Beethoven

The Final Word: St. Isidore

Bishop of Seville (Patron Saint of Students), from his *Book of Maxims*, c. 636 AD

All spiritual growth comes from reading and reflection. By reading we learn what we did not know; by reflection we retain what we have learned. Reading Holy Scriptures confers two benefits. It trains the mind to understand them; it turns our attention from the follies of the world; and leads us to the love of God and our neighbor. Conscientious readers will be more concerned to carry out what they have read than merely to acquire knowledge of it. For it is a less serious fault to be ignorant of an objective than it is to fail to carry out what we do know. In reading we aim at knowing, but we must also put into practice what we have learned in our course of study. The more you devote yourself to a study of the sacred utterances, the richer will be your understanding of them, just as the more the soil is tilled, the richer the harvest. Some people have great mental powers but cannot be bothered with reading; what reading could have taught them is devalued by their neglect. Others have a desire to know but are hampered by their slow mental processes; yet application to reading will teach them things which the clever fail to learn through laziness. Those who are slow to grasp things but who really try hard are rewarded; equally those who do not cultivate their God-given intellectual ability are condemned for despising their gifts and sinning by sloth. Learning which is unsupported by grace may get into our ears, but it never reaches the heart. It makes a great noise outside but serves no inner purpose. But when God's grace touches our innermost minds to bring understanding, His word which has been received by the ear sinks deep into the heart.



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