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For the Sake of Knowing and Loving God

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Leclercq OSB, Jean, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

When speaking of the history of West, especially of the time between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, it is often said that St. Benedict and the monasteries that sprang up throughout Europe founded upon his Rule preserved and saved culture. What does it mean to say they “preserved a culture”? The depth and breadth of their work in this regard is astonishing, but it is not easily grasped in an age like ours which has so little contact with monastic life. The monks were not antiquarians or curators of museum pieces from antiquity, let alone mindless scribes, slavishly copying dead manuscripts. To the contrary, their education, life, and work was a preserving of and a participation in a living tradition, animated by a very particular principle.

In *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Jean Leclercq offers his understanding of the animating principle of monastic life: every action taken and every thing known and preserved is for the sake of knowing and loving God. The *quaerere deum* is the monastic principle *in nuce*. Leclercq, in this series of lectures delivered to fellow monks, endeavors to flesh out what this animating principle has meant in the history of monasticism. These lectures are an extraordinary survey of monastic life and culture, but here I will concentrate on three related themes: freedom of thought (I), conversion of the world (II), and liturgy (III).

I. Freedom of Thought

In medieval monasticism, education followed a certain order, and certainly gave attention to some topics over others, but the monks’ education was never restricted such that there were subjects or books within the intellectual tradition they were absolutely forbidden to read. In

fact, precisely because the monks knew that everything they learned was entirely at the service of God, they were free to pursue avenues not explicitly spiritual or theological. A large part of any monk's education was the learning of Latin, or what Leclercq calls "grammar." Grammar was necessary for two reasons: first and foremost to be able to speak, think, and otherwise use the language of the liturgy, the language in which the worship of God was conducted. Second, Latin was necessary in order for the monks to be able to read not only the spiritual masters, but many other authors as well. Almost every monastery had a library that included Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and other pagan authors, even as these same authors did not have Christ in mind as they were writing. We should not take this fact for granted: the freedom we presently experience in education is something bequeathed to us by this freedom of monastic culture in the pursuit of knowledge. Because Christ is the Logos of the universe, and because God is the author of creation, we need not shy away from what is true and beautiful, even if not explicitly dedicated to God himself. Indeed, what is true and beautiful is always helpful in the search for God. Monastic life, ordered as it is to God, grants the monks the space to study any number of subjects and authors without having to worry about stepping into temptation. It is the very order of their lives—the order of the Rule of St. Benedict—that gives them this incredible freedom of thought.

II. Conversion of the World

This leads to my second point, the monastic desire for the world's conversion. Now, this does not mean that the monks went out evangelizing; the movement of the monasteries was rather more centripetal. The conversion of the world took place *in* the monasteries, in and through the monks themselves. They tilled the earth and worked the ground in order that their place could image the Garden of Eden. This is not to say the monks thought they were creating an earthly Paradise—their sights were firmly fixed on the next world. However, in their labor, the monks were already participating in the heavenly kingdom. Similarly, in education, the monks understood their reading and learning to contribute to the conversion of the world. Leclercq reminds us that "to understand things is to realize the relationship they have to Christ" (139). Thus, the simple act of knowing a thing is itself transformative, for both the knower and the thing known. In addition, everything read and studied was converted precisely by being read and studied by Christians—i.e., the monks. Thus, in a way, the pagan authors became Christian in and through their readers. The writers of antiquity, says Leclercq, "were made comprehensible and useful to men who lived in an environment totally different from their own. The authors had really been 'converted' to Christianity" (119). Not only did monastic culture generate a freedom in recovering and reading the authors of the past, but a kind of duty as well: all of history achieves its conversion in the Body of Christ, here incarnated in individual Christians.

III. Liturgy

The third and final point, and a point that must be brought up in any discussion of monastic culture, is the importance of the liturgy. The liturgy is of course not outside of the previous two

points, but rather their *telos*, the end toward which education and conversion reach. Ultimately, for the monks, love is the form of knowledge. If all their action is for the sake of knowing God, then it should be clear why the liturgy is the apogee not only of their education, but their entire life: in the liturgy we express and incarnate our love for God, and in the liturgy all earthly beings and knowledge are brought to their culmination in the service of worship of God. “The whole monastic economy was organized around a life in which leisure for praising God absorbed a great amount of time” (249). Education, far from being extrinsic, rather achieves its own *telos* in liturgy. Everything learned and worked for, everything true and beautiful—from whatever source gained—is allowed to be its most full, actual, and beautiful self, in the praise and worship of God. “In the liturgy,” writes Leclercq, “grammar was elevated to the rank of an eschatological fact” (251).

Monastic culture, then, far from escaping the world, as some have accused it, plunges right into it with a freedom only possible when one’s life is ordered by the *quaerere deum*. Every thing learned is learned for the sake of the thing itself, and also for the sake of knowing God. There is no competition between these two goals, and the monks knew this to their core. This principle—that every thing achieves its most true and beautiful self in God’s light—has been handed down to us and continues to fructify our learning today. Education is not simply the preservation of material, but is, at its core, the *quaerere deum*.

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