

The Holiness of Study

By Paul F. Ford

SJS Day of Recollection Talk, Birth of Mary, September 8, 1989, the golden anniversary of the dedication of the seminary church

We find ourselves at the end of our first week of school, a week that began with Labor Day. By now most of your classes have met once. You know most of your reading and writing assignments. For some of you the weeks between now and Christmas stretch before you like an unrelieved desert.

It was my experience as a student here and of my fellow seminarians here and at Fuller and in my own doctoral studies that the occupational hazard of being a seminarian is dryness. Before this talk I made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament over in the side chapel. I was overwhelmed by the availability of the Holy, how close the Holy is to us. But how hard it is to stay present to the Holy One, especially (I suppose) for priests. Their occupational hazard is overfamiliarity with the Holy—whom they touch, to whom and for whom they speak, with whom (in their fellow human beings) they work and converse. But our occupational hazard, as I say, is dryness. And the cure for this dryness is to tap the wellsprings of the holiness deep down ordinary activities. That's why I have titled this talk, "The Holiness of Study."

There's probably small comfort (but I will attempt it anyway) for you to become aware that each credit hour of class is more or less equivalent to one forty-hour work week. And your labor consists chiefly in reading, writing, listening, questioning, and conversing. Thus, those of you have nine credit hours this semester will be working nine forty-hour weeks and those of you who have fifteen credit hours will occupy every forty-hour work week of the fifteen week

semester now underway. This rough calculus, however, gives you little comfort, until you recall the people living in homes around the seminary, or your parents, or siblings, or friends who drive off every morning (I saw them on my way here for morning prayer) to what we hope is meaningful work, eight hours a day, five days a week.

We hope theirs is meaningful work; but for many, we know, it is not. It is druggery; it is work; it is good only for putting food on the table. Few people have the opportunity we have of doing intrinsically meaningful work, the work of theology. This work has always been described as *fides quaerens intellectum*. Fr. Jon Sobrino, a great liberationist theologian reminds us that theology is also *spes quaerens intellectum* and *caritas quaerens intellectum*. Theology is not theology unless it is the three theological virtues infused in us at Baptism—living faith, hope and love—looking for understanding.

Alas, for many of us the work of theology is boring. It doesn't take a Zen master or Christian mystic to tell us that boredom is caused by wanting to be somewhere else. The ancients called the desire to be somewhere else, *acedia*, which I translate as "restless depression." And the non-Christian East and the Christian West and East are unanimous in proposing choice-to-be-present as the antidote to boredom. To avoid boredom, we must choose to be present. And for the Christian this choice to be here now is exercised in prayer.

Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 A.D.) wasn't the first spiritual director nor will he be the last to tell us: "If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian" (Chapter Sixty on Prayer). If he is right, then it is not dogmatic theology, it is only religion if you haven't prayed; it is not moral theology, it is only ethics if you haven't prayed; it is not philosophy as orientation to theology, it is only philosophy if you haven't prayed. It's only language acquisition and not pastoral Spanish or biblical Hebrew, if you haven't prayed. Field education

without prayer is not the experience of pastoral ministry, whatever else it may be. Prayer turns rites into liturgy, speech class into homiletics, counselling into pastoral counselling. Without prayer, church history, the record of the Spirit of God at work among the pilgrim People of God, is evacuated into mere history. And without prayer, biblical studies is only dead texts, not the living Word of God.

St. Andrew of Crete [in his prayer read at the office of readings for this feast] says, “[Christ] changed whatever is burdensome, servile, and oppressive into what is light and liberating.” We who find studies burdensome, servile, and oppressive—all of us, some of the time, but some of us almost all the time—need to inquire how Christ did this. The answer is: the Paschal Mystery. He entered into the narrowness of human life, bounded by death, and expanded our lives into vestibules before—and our deaths into doors opening onto—the Kingdom of God.

As we all know, we enter into the Paschal Mystery through the sacraments of initiation. Are you aware that buildings become churches in the same way? This golden jubilee year, many of our days of recollection and spiritual conferences will hark back to events in our past. For the purposes of this conference, let me remind you of the day, fifty years ago October 8th, when Archbishop Cantwell stood before those chapel doors and began the most ancient rite in the church, the rite of consecration. Our chapel became the holy place that it is through washing, chrismating, and eucharisting (if you will permit this gerund). The archbishop and his assisting priests washed the walls with baptismal water and anointed the walls near the twelve candlestands with sacred chrism. Likewise they washed the altar table with the same water, poured chrism over the whole tabletop, burned incense at the five crosses (signs of the five wounds of Christ), Then they set the Table with the vessels and the offerings of the people over which were then pronounced the sacred words, “This is my body . . . this is my

blood.” Thus our chapel experienced the sacraments of initiation.

Is it too much to suggest that you initiate this academic year and all of your academic endeavors in the same way? There is a book which will help you do so, a book which should be part of every seminarian’s library, and not just on the shelf but constantly used: *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*. Promulgated by the U.S. Bishops on Pentecost Sunday, 1988, it is meant to help all of us recover the tradition of blessings and prayers which has been lost these past twenty years. I recommend it so strongly because I firmly believe: You cannot learn to be a ministerial priest if you haven’t first learned to exercise your royal priesthood, the common priesthood. In this book there are blessings for studies and the instruments of study, pp. 301–308. (And while you are at it, use the blessings of one’s living space on pp. 297–301.)

Even if you don’t have the book, the principles are the same. First, take holy water and bless your books, your chair, your desk, your word-processor (careful not to use too much water here!). The sacramental of holy water is yours to use. In fact, in preconciliar days at this seminary, there was the lovely and theologically profound custom of blessing water at every Sunday Mass and then sending it, via *aquafers*, to every room in the dormitories. The water-bearer sang out the announcement (perhaps this is why the custom lapsed), “*Ecce, aqua benedicta*” to which the inmate of the room answered, “*Deo gratias*.” Each room had its own font. Why doesn’t our postconciliar seminary, given the Church’s restored emphasis on the centrality of Baptism, restore a similar practice?

Then, “chrismate” your study area by invoking the Holy Spirit with the ancient prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit . . .” (the same prayer printed on the opening pages of every Catholic bible, a sign that only prayer enables this text to be the Word of God for the reader).

To make your work holy in the last way, the way of Eucharist, the great thanksgiving, I have two suggestions: (1) begin each study period with a Preface, continue with an attitude of offering up your reading and thinking and writing, and end with a Doxology; or (2) begin with “Grace before Study” (a practice which may feel awkward) and end with “Grace after Study” (a practice which may come all too easy for some). Grace before Study seems unusual until you become aware of literacy as a gift (just ask anyone for whom English is a second language what a gift that is) or until you become aware that the very leisure for study, indeed for preparing for the priesthood, is a gift (just ask any of our Vietnamese brothers how the Communists felt about seminaries and seminary studies).

I would like to challenge you in a special way to make what I have been saying a reality in your life. Try writing a prayer which prepares you to study a favorite subject or which thanks God for having spent time studying this subject. Or try writing a prayer about a least-favorite subject. I am going to post on the bulletin board two great prayers of this type: St. Anselm’s and St. Thomas’s. Surely there is creativity similar to these great saints here in this room . . . and the similar desire to support and encourage each other in this central matter of seminary life.

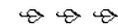
In three ways, then, analagous to the ways in which people and church buildings enter the Paschal mystery, you will transform your desk into an altar and your books and pencils and other tools the vessels of this altar. And you will transform yourself into the priest and the offering.

St. Paul speaks of this type of transformation especially in Romans 12:1. There we are urged: “Offer up your bodies as living sacrifices.” And, age after age, the trouble with living sacrifices is: They want to crawl off the altar. And you are the living sacrifice going up in smoke at your desk. What will keep your feet to the fire, or rather, in the fire? Your consent, your

desire to be present rather than bored. If you evade this responsibility now, are you not putting yourself in danger of later walking away from the phone, the door, the sick call, perhaps even the priesthood?

Donald Nicoll, in his beautiful book *Holiness* (pp. 54–57), tells the stories of two men, one who evaded this task and one who assumed it. He tells of a brilliant medical student who cut so many corners in medical school that he cut someone’s life short; and he tells of a seminarian burdened with what he is sure is a call to put in extra time in seminary learning Russian, a call he doesn’t understand but nevertheless obeys. The day he does understand this mysterious call is the day he is summoned to attend to a dying soldier with whom no one has been able to communicate. After the exchange of a few words, the seminarian-now-priest knows that the man is Russian and is thus able to help him get ready to meet Christ on the other side of death.

In the matter of your studies, your only real choice is to imitate that priest. The People of God expect nothing less.



I exhort you to devote yourself to study: knowledge is almost an eighth sacrament for a priest, and the greatest evils have arisen because the ark (of knowledge) has been found in other hands than those of the Levites.

St. Francis de Sales