

Three Comments about Benedictine Monastic Community Reading

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Editor's note: These three short articles hint at the rich variety of table reading which has been done regularly within Benedictine and Cistercian houses and are included with the hope that other related research might follow about monastic reading. Bibliographic note reprinted from *The Abbey Banner*, Spring, 2003, pp. 10-11.

I. "Food for Thought: Monastic Table Reading"

Benedictine life has never been entirely at home with modern mores. A glaring example is the case of meals. In the age of fast food, Benedict's regimen for the table includes carefully prepared dishes, monks who take turns serving the community, prayers to introduce and complete the dinner, and reading that should always accompany the meal. Benedict refused to reduce meals to mere caloric intake. Rather, they were a time for spiritual, intellectual and physical nourishment.

Always sparing when it came to instruction, Benedict neither specified the books to be read nor the purpose for reading. Thus Benedictines through the centuries have adapted table reading to suit their own purposes.

At Cluny, for example, the monks continued passages from Scripture that they had begun in choir. This allowed them to cover major sections of the Bible in short order. At Durham, the monastic archives indicate that the monks read heavily from the lives of local saints and regional histories. Still other monasteries had a steady diet of spiritual texts.

At Saint John's that tradition continues, and monks from ages past would recognize in the ritual of dinner in Collegeville a familiar pattern. Today's meal opens with a prayer, follows with a chapter read from the *Rule of Benedict*, continues with fifteen minutes of reading from a book selected by a specially appointed committee, and concludes with a prayer. Afterwards the monks are free to leave or to linger over coffee and conversation.

What do modern monks read? Many factors influence the selection of texts to be read. Seasons play a part, so during Lent the readings tend to be more spiritual in nature. Current events can influence the selection as well, but in general biography and history tend to be the areas from which most books in the refectory at Saint John's are drawn.

Eamon Duffy's recent book, *Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes*, was well received at the monastic table. So too was Joseph Ellis' *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, a book that detailed the lives of some of America's original political personalities.

David H. Donald's biography of Abraham Lincoln, simply entitled *Lincoln*, held monks' attention for many weeks, though its length came to weigh heavily. None of the monks approved of Lincoln's assassination, but it did bring both an end to his presidency and the book, as well as an audible sigh of relief.

Do the monks like everything that is read to them? Decidedly not! Within the past twenty or thirty years many books have not reached the finish line. Many years ago the biography of the Mayo brothers came to an abrupt end when the chapter on their pioneering surgical techniques proved too much for some sensitive stomachs. A history of Mexico likewise was moving along very nicely until the author began to provide overly graphic descriptions of Aztec human sacrifice. Still other books have remained unfinished because the subject matter turned out to be far more tedious than initially supposed.

Topic alone is not the sole factor affecting the reception of a book, a fact that Benedict recognized when he specified that not just anyone should take up the book and read. Some voices can make the blandest book seem wildly interesting, while others have prompted the abbot to reach for the bell to signal a premature end to a day's reading.

Further complications can arise when pictures and graphs pop up in the middle of a text, leaving the best of readers at loss for what to do. And in a phenomenon not unique to Saint John's, unfortunate mispronunciations have achieved legendary status in the folklore of most monasteries since the time of Benedict. One reader thought "misled" was pronounced "mizeded."

No one book has ever enjoyed universal acclaim in the monks' refectory at Saint John's, and perhaps that is as it should be. In an age when the various media and diverse academic pursuits vie

for the attention of the individual monk, reading in refectory provides one of the few moments of shared intellectual experience in the monastery. Ironically, it is the book that animates conversation and even disagreement that goes the furthest in forging the bonds of community. (EH)

II. "A Record of Read Books"

An Abbey Archives' treasure is a small volume entitled "Record of Books Read in the Refectory." From 1939 to 1968 this journal contains the titles, authors, dates when a book or article was read and occasional concise evaluation. For example:

1941: *The Man Who Got Even with God*, M. Raymond, OCSO. Not quite finished. We had enough of it.

1950: *The Trapp Family Singers*, Maria Trapp. Seemed to be well liked.

1951: *Kon-Tiki*, Thor Heyerdahl. Most generally appreciated book read in years.

1952: *The Little World of Don Camillo*, Giovanni Guareschi. Treats a serious topic in a very humorous way. Enjoyed by all.

1953: *Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton. Reactions mixed but almost everyone agreed that it went on too long.

1957: *St. Benedict and His Monks*, Theodore Maynard. A thoroughly unhistorical, subjective meditation on our Holy Father Benedict, packed with unsupported generalizations and misconceptions.

1957: *The Nun's Story*, Kathryn Hulme. This book found everyone an interested listener and raised perhaps more discussion than any book read in the refectory. Liked very much by most and even those who disliked it agreed that it was very well written.

Books recently read:

Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen, Michael Ford
Benjamin Franklin, Edmund S. Morgan

The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life, Dr. Armand M. Nicoli, Jr.
Faithful Dissenters: Stories of Men and Women Who Loved and Changed the Church, Robert McClory (DD)

III. "Table Reading In The Monastery Today"

In speaking with members of St. Benedict's Monastery regarding table reading, one thing immediately becomes clear. There is definitely a "before" and "now" for most members, especially those who came to the monastery before, during, or immediately after the Second Vatican Council. It also becomes clear that there are as many opinions regarding table reading as there are members, although the opinions tend to fall into two general categories.

Table reading in the past was at the noon meal and the evening meal with conversation allowed only on special feast days and sometimes only after a short reading. Readers were generally chosen with care—sisters who would prepare in advance by reading through the material and checking pronunciations when necessary to avoid either amusement or pain for the listeners. This was usually successful, although some readers were known for their occasional wry tone in editorial comment.

The material chosen for reading was usually different for noon than for dinner. The noon reading was more often a biography, a travel book, or a book deemed of both interest and educational merit. Two all-time favorites still remembered with pleasure are *The Lost World of the Kalahari* by Laurens Van der Post and *Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific by Raft* by Thor Heyerdahl. *The Gentle House* by Anna Perrott Rose is also mentioned over and over by sisters whose faces light up in memory, as are *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown and *Karen* by Marie Killilea. In the areas of biography Ida Gorres' biography of St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Hidden Face*, was popular as was Russell Baker's *Growing Up*.

The reading during the evening meal was usually of a more reflective kind, but it always began with the saint of the day from *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. Because often there was more than one saint for each day, it seemed that some effort was made to read about more obscure saints. One sister remembers, as a novice, one Halloween night waiting on the novices' table and listening to the life of St. Quentin, a martyr in Gaul whose fingernails were torn out, his throat was cut, and his body was thrown into the river. The unfortunate sister's name was Quentin. She had not read *Butler's* before suggesting receiving that name when she entered the novitiate.

Generally, table reading in the past was enjoyed, especially the noon reading which was lighter and easier to become engaged

with whether eating or waiting on table. But what many sisters found of special interest and looked forward to were the letters from our own sister missionaries in Taiwan, Japan, Puerto Rico, and the Bahama Islands. These sisters were all known by the older sisters and soon became known by the younger members through their letters to the community.

These letters were the writers' first hand accounts of living in another country and culture, and they were fascinating to many of the sisters. Even more, they gave the sisters at home a sense of being in on a particular mission endeavor—as in a real sense they were. Much later, when these missions became dependent priorities, and still later when they became independent, the sisters at St. Benedict's could rejoice with the sisters in these countries while at the same time feeling both a sense of loss and disconnection and a sense of pride in the growth of these priorities.

Table reading today is a different story. Because of the variety of ministries the sisters engage in today, for many sisters the evening meal is the only meal eaten with the community. For this reason many enjoy the opportunity for conversation at the meal. However, more importantly, many find table reading difficult simply because of distractions. In the past, with many members in the community, meals were served family style. With fewer members meals are served in a buffet style with sisters invited table by table to the serving tables. This means there is both more activity and more noise to distract from the reading. Still other members feel that their life is filled with words coming from all directions, so listening to table reading becomes arduous at the end of a long day, especially if the reading is more reflective.

In spite of all of the opinions, table reading has not disappeared entirely from St. Benedict's Monastery. Each month on the first Saturday the community observes a Day of Recollection. Usually this includes a conference from the prioress and a day of silence and reflection. Sisters are asked to keep this day as free as possible from work and distraction. Appropriate table reading is often chosen by the prioress on the general topic of the morning's conference. The reading is for approximately 15 to 20 minutes followed by silence for the rest of the meal.

During the days of community retreats the noon meal has table reading in support of the retreat theme or on monastic topics. Classical music is played during the evening meal. Because of the reflective nature of the retreats and the silence throughout the day,

the reading is both expected and appreciated, especially by sisters who live away from the monastery who have no opportunity for table reading.

Table reading during Lent has gone through several evolutions. At one point the evening meal had table reading daily. Tuesday night, however, is community night with the sisters eating with their living groups, some of them not in the common dining room, so the continuity of the reading was lost for some sisters. Because of this, table reading often became more stressful than fruitful, so the reading was changed to Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Eventually Friday was dropped. Lenten reading is usually a book that has a theme of interest to the sisters and one that can be missed at times while still benefiting from the reading.

One particularly successful book was Daniel Homan and Loni Collins Pratt's *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. Table readers report that when the reading is especially interesting to individual sisters, as this one was, they often ask to see the book and then borrow it from the library for private reading. Sisters who are hard of hearing sometimes ask to use the book for a short time to see what they missed!

During the Triduum the table reading is from current periodicals like America, U.S. Catholic, and St. Anthony Messenger. The articles are chosen to enrich the sisters' participation and appreciation of the Triduum services. Again, the general atmosphere of silence and reflection helps in both the experience and in the appreciation of the reading.

Table reading at St. Benedict's is always open to change and to comment. What the sisters have learned is that the way it was done at one time is not necessarily how it will be done today or tomorrow. What they do prefer is something that is lighter and easier to follow through the distractions of the dining room rather than something that is heavily reflective or theoretical. (SW)