

SPIRITUAL READING OF THE CHRISTIAN
CLASSICS: AN AVENUE TO FAITH DEEPENING AND
FAITHFUL LIVING

By Susan Muto*

As fallible, finite creatures, we are always in need of God's grace to sustain us in our quest to live faithfully. In cooperation with grace, we may pursue and practice as an avenue to faith deepening certain disciplines that help us to meet God in everyday life. One of those recommended by masters of spirituality in all classical faith traditions is that of spiritual or formative reading.

Formative reading requires that we become disciples of (obedient listeners to) the Word of God as it addresses us through the faith-filled words of scripture and the masters. This exercise in spiritual living prepares us for Christian service, since who of us can give to others what we ourselves do not live? How can we expect to radiate the values of a religious tradition if we are not living them on a day-to-day basis?

*Dr. Susan A. Muto is Executive Director of the Epiphany Association in Pittsburgh, PA, and formerly a professor at the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University. Her career of teaching and writing has taken her around the world, including guest lectureships at Ashland Seminary.

It is not enough to be knowledgeable in the literature of the natural and social sciences. Important as this information may be, it is insufficient for our purposes. If we read only to gather information, neglecting to deepen our interiority, we may widen rather than bridge the gap between us and God.

To preserve an appreciation for the spiritual classics, we must not focus so much on what is new (information-gathering) that we forgot to resource ourselves in the formational texts, traditions, doctrines, and directives of our respective churches. As formative versus merely informative readers, we share in the task of restoration while remaining open to the power of the Spirit to lead us to new direction disclosures.

I. From Mastery to Discipleship

Spiritual reading returns us to the classics of our faith tradition while readying us for Christian witness in new and challenging situations. Let me set the scene for these reflections by paraphrasing a passage from the contemporary poet and spiritual writer, T. S. Eliot.

In his poem, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" Eliot profiles our condition at this moment of history. He suggests in the opening lines that though ours is an age of technical progress, it may be, by the same

token, an age of spiritual regression. He observes that we live in an endless cycle of idea and action, endless invention, endless experiment. This age brings us knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; knowledge of speech, but not of silence; knowledge of words and ignorance of the Word. The poet claims that all our knowledge brings us nearer to ignorance, that all our ignorance brings us nearer to death, but nearness to death, no nearer to God. Then he asks the formative questions: Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

His question gives us pause to think. Is what he says merely poetic or is it starkly prophetic? He concludes that the cycles of heaven in twenty centuries have brought us farther from God and nearer to the dust.

The poet's words touch us deeply. They do more than inform us about the present age. They draw us into meditative reflection on the time of transition in which we live. Despite an abundance of information, why do so many professionals and teenagers commit suicide? God invites us to choose life abundantly. Why do so many choose death?

If the words of the poet are to evoke a reflective response, we must read them in the right frame of mind. It is important to move from an information-gathering approach,

which tends to master the text, to a docile approach, which readies us for graced transformation. The movement from mastery to discipleship creates a sphere of mutuality between us and the text. Transcendent meanings can only be released when we establish a personal relationship with these words, thereby allowing them to touch and transform our lives.

II. Bridging Limits and Possibilities

Relational bonding between the listening heart of the reader and the words of power in the text is characterized by at least three attitudes: receptivity, appreciation, and participation.

We could compare this kind of reading to what happens when we meet a friend. Our presence to one another is spontaneously receptive. We don't have to think about how much we enjoy being together. We are simply there for one another. The affinity we feel is rooted in our deep appreciation for one another's uniqueness. We respect each other physically, psychologically, spiritually. This appreciative mood makes us eager to listen to one another and to draw forth further insights from our conversation. Last, but not least, we care about one another. We want to be part of each other's life, not outsiders looking in, but involved and concerned persons. We are for one

another because we know in some mysterious way that we participate in a love that is totally for us.

Formative reading requires that we be receptive to those directives in the text that touch our heart. They evoke inner longings to receive God's word in the inmost center of our life. We appreciate the timeless meanings of the message, while letting go of time-bound accretions. What we seek are points with which we can resonate, not ones that spark argumentation. Rather than rebuff the text because we feel a few resistances, we try, as in a good relationship, to work these through by means of further reflection. Most of all, we attempt to make that with which we resonate a part of our lives. This means that we not only imbibe inner attitudes conducive to living a Christian spiritual life, we also let these attitudes flow forth in daily actions in the world. Our stance toward the text is not that of a spectator upon transcendent reality but of a participant in it.

Formative reading thus involves a shift, in Adrian van Kaam's words, from "form-giving," in which we are inclined to impose our meaning on the text, to "form-receiving," in which we let its meaning influence us. We move from a mainly rationalistic, faultfinding mentality to an appreciative, meditative, confirming mood. Our spiritual life is refreshed whenever we

take time to savor these timeless values. They become a living part of who we are. The text is like a bridge between the limits of our life here and now and the possibilities awaiting us if we open our minds and hearts to God.

Relating to sacred words in this way is like holding a two-edged sword in our hand (Heb. 4:12). Words of power challenge us to look at the quality and seriousness of our Christian life. At times the Lord's words cut deeply into our heart. We behold in ourselves the spectre of living a superficial spirituality. We feel a healthy pinch of compunction. Are we putting on a holy front, or are we really trying to live in union with God? The words we read compel us to take off the mask of worldly sophistication. Are we ready to admit that without God we are and can do nothing?

III. God the Gardener

The words of Holy Scripture, the writings of the spiritual masters, can be likened to rain from heaven. As droplets saturate dry fields, 50 sacred words quench our thirst for truth in a satisfying way. The Spirit is at work in this reader-text relationship. God can and does use the text to facilitate inner transformation. When words touch and transform our heart, we can be sure the Spirit of the Lord is the gardener behind them. God plants the seed

of the word in the soil of our human spirit, whether it is parched or fertile. After a time of germination, the seed begins to bear the lasting fruit of transformation in Christ. We move from indifference to rededication, from casual prayer to transcendent presence.

Formative reading could thus be defined as the art of listening with inner ears of faith to what God is saying in the happenings that comprise our life.

This capacity to make connections between the text being read and our current situation can become a distinguishing feature of our life in the world. We not only absorb words and submit them to the reasoning process, we allow these words to evoke personal symbols, stories, memories, and anticipations. Significant connections may coalesce in our imagination and reveal meanings that were previously hidden. Amidst clutter and disorder, we behold the perfection of divine wisdom.

Such reading makes us wonder if we are responding rightly to God's will or only waiting for our own expectations to be fulfilled. Will we despair in the face of life's limits or welcome them as challenging formation opportunities? Are we able to see our past, present, and future in the light of God's benevolence? A first step in the right direction is to personalize the ageless wisdom embedded in words of power. Reading and rereading them helps us to find

the elusive link between life experience and the living God.

IV. Reading as Dwelling

Why is this time-tested practice difficult for many people today? As a spiritual exercise, slowed down formative reading is meant to transform our hearts and minds, to stimulate meditation, to inspire action. A day in the life of a monk is oriented in great measure around lectio divina. To do it well, one has to develop special dispositions like "ruminatation." Because the Word of God is like a precious morsel of food for the soul, we have to chew the text over again and again. In the process of digesting its wisdom, we grow in intimacy with God. We unite ourselves slowly yet steadily with the knowledge that accompanies faith.

Another attitude of persons engaged in formative reading involves a change in awareness of self and others. We move from a "linear" to a "dwelling" approach. The word dwelling--and words related to it like abiding, attending, resting, and slowing down--signifies a kind of homecoming. The formative reader dwells upon or makes his or her home in the words of Holy Scripture and the writings of the spiritual masters.

The attitude of dwelling fosters, in turn, that of docility or openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through regular

sessions of personal or shared spiritual reading. In a spirit of docility, the word is digested by the reader. One literally savors the wisdom sacred words contain. One listens with an inner ear to their teaching. In this sense faith comes through hearing with an attentive ear. We are tuned into the Spirit speaking in our heart through inspired authors and spiritual seekers. These texts are at once timely and of timeless value. They are classics.

Contrast such attitudes as those of rumination, dwelling, and docility with the informational mentality that dominates today. Rather than reading the classics, we fall victim to the compulsion to be current. We desire above all to be in-the-know. We feel deprived if we do not listen to the evening news or flip through the daily paper. There is nothing wrong with keeping up with the events of the world. The problem is, if we get caught in the compulsion to be current, we may be unable to stand still. We may forget to drink from the well of words that speak to the heart of the listener, words that transcend the temporal and open one to the eternal.

What is the effect on our dwelling consciousness when day after day we are bombarded by radio, television, newspapers, billboards--a whole kaleidoscope of information that takes us outside of ourselves? This question is not meant to imply that we should never listen to the radio, read a

newspaper, or watch television. It is to remind us that mere information-gathering can be an obstacle to spiritual reading. Do we spend too many hours in front of the television? Do we feel compelled to be current to the point of shelving the spiritual classics?

The attitude of rumination conflicts with a predominantly informational approach. Information, as opposed to rumination, has a tendency to fill us up, sometimes to the point of indigestion or information overload, whereas the reader of a spiritual message wants to return to it. In formative reading there is always more to be said, whereas in informative reading we soon feel satiated.

The informational attitude, unlike that of docile rumination, seeks to conquer and master its subject matter. One takes in as much as one can hold, choosing quantity over quality. One may indulge in a kind of "gourmet" spirituality. In this "taste test" approach, we act as if spiritual reading were a great smorgasbord spread before us for the taking. We go along and taste a variety of treats, but we do not sit down and savor a good meal.

By the same token, there is a vast difference between "dwelling" and "linear" reading. Dwelling implies a spiral movement. We stand in one spot and go deeper. Linear suggests a horizontal approach aimed at expanding our knowledge. While both

styles are necessary, an exclusively linear approach may cast us into a state of hyper-agitation. We have to be "in" with the latest. This tendency admittedly markets best-sellers, but what does it do to the spiritual classics? It can be an obstacle to the life of the spirit by fostering in people a penchant for "pop" spirituality rather than deepening faith.

If outer informational listening is all that we do, what suffers is our capacity for meditative reflection. We may be prone to label a new book "progressive" or an old book "conservative" and feel no obligation to read it. Once a label is applied, we can escape the sometimes painful moment of reflection when we have to dwell on what the text is saying to us about our life direction.

The outer ear that gathers information is especially tempted to dismiss as irrelevant texts of old, for "What can a relic of the past teach us today?" This superficial response overlooks the wisdom found in the classical literature of spirituality. It cuts us off from a significant source of ongoing adult Christian formation.

V. Imbibing the Text

To restore the art of formative reading, we have to try to devote time to this exercise, even if we only do so for ten

or twenty minutes a day. We can sit down and read one psalm, for example, with our heart set to savor its meaning. Instead of turning from page to page searching for something new, we stay with one verse, even one line. Through this slowed down approach, we meet God in the sacrament of the present moment.

Faithful living implies, therefore, setting aside time for spiritual reading. Though our age tends to draw us away from interiority, preventing rather than encouraging us to ruminate, dwell, and listen with an inner ear, we must return to the classics. It is in this state of receptive presence that the words of scripture, as well as the writings of classic and contemporary spiritual masters, come alive for us. Such reading, done in a slowed-down way on a regular basis, reestablishes our commitment to Christ while helping us to let go of peripheral concerns.

Formative reading is uplifting, but these gratuitous moments are not guaranteed. The danger is that we may grow discouraged if nothing happens. God asks us to remain faithful to his words in all circumstances, even if our human minds can never fully understand their meaning, even if our actions fail at times to conform to our beliefs.

In addition to setting aside time, we must learn to slow down and read reflectively. We may even mark whatever in

the text evokes a spontaneous resonance or resistance and ask ourselves why we feel this way. In the course of time, after persistent practice of this spiritual exercise, we may find that the words we read begin to take on a life of their own inside of us. Their wisdom sinks into our heart. It affects our thoughts and actions. We want to share the fruits of this transformation with others in need of inspiration--with our children, parishioners, colleagues, students.

In this way we experience the passage from reading to meditation to action. To read is to receive the word into the heart; to meditate is to listen to its deeper meaning; to act implies a silent exchange of love in which we know that the Lord is the source of our strength. Relaxed and refreshed by these experiences, we can return to the task at hand.

As we increase our attentiveness to sacred texts, new ranges of significance light up. The text stimulates us to go beyond superficial interpretations. We learn to wait upon the word, to reread a text of depth several times. The older we grow, the more meanings we are likely to detect. We accept that the mystery of grace does not have to conform to our time frame. We wait in gentle anticipation for lights to emerge. We ask God to help us to reach deeper levels of wisdom, whenever and however he chooses to grant this gift.

We could compare reading a spiritual text in this fashion to puzzling a "koan." A "koan" is a riddle a Buddhist spiritual master might give to a disciple, not because he wants the disciple to solve the puzzle rationally but because he wants him to live in the wonderment of not being able to find a solution. If the disciple were to decipher the message, he would become a mere master of the word, taking pride in his expertise and, thus losing the whole point of the exercise--to foster humility and to learn that the gift of enlightenment is beyond one's power to control.

The Western disciple, in a similar vein, might desire when reading a text from scripture, to become a master of exegesis, linguistics, or biblical history only. This mastery, worthwhile as it may be, can also pose an obstacle to formative reading. If we exercise our capacity to master the text by means of study only, we may miss its experiential connection. Analyzing the text is one thing. Imbibing it in intimate presence to God is another.

The rational intellect, highly developed in the West, facilitates abstract reasoning and information sciences, but in and by itself it cannot grasp the full significance of spiritual texts as life messages. The text is an invitation, not an answer; a question, not a solution. Formative reading appeals to the reader to identify experiential with the faith search

recorded in the text, to try and re-experience to make it one's own.

VI. How We Live It

Ordinarily during our busy active work days, we live on the level of discursive reasoning. We have to manage our lives, organize schedules, get things done, conduct meetings. For important tasks like these we need to draw upon our rational, organizing intellect. We must also be able, on a regular basis, to "bracket" this functional mind when we approach a spiritual text in faith. We must now go to that text not so much to master it but to humbly dispose ourselves to be mastered by it. We respect its power to penetrate the surface mind and to draw us into a deeper level of wisdom. What awakens is not merely our exterior senses but those more interior intuitions that ready us for the experience of divine intimacy, should God grant this grace to us.

Beyond the information that comes through the discursive intellect, we discover in an experiential way what it is like to live in the awareness of God's presence that transcends explanatory effort. Whereas theology helps us to understand the truths of revelation, spirituality points to their proximate lived reality. Formative spirituality asks not so much why we live the faith but how we live it. This knowledge of the heart is what classical

spiritual masters want to communicate so that we, their readers, can come to live personally the mystery of our faith.

If we wish to hear the Spirit speaking to us through the words of the masters, we have to be at peace with the fact that their message may at times appear to be cryptic. We may not understand it on first reading and, in a sense, it ought not be understood that easily. New layers of meaning continue to be revealed to us each time we return to the text. As we develop and deepen the art and discipline of formative reading, we also open ourselves to God's grace alive and at work in us. The words we read may be the same, but their meaning is different. In a sense, the text discloses its secrets to us as we grow in wisdom and grace before the Lord.

Texts that seemed easy to understand may become more paradoxical. The faith we took for granted challenges us anew. God becomes a "dazzling darkness." The Spirit is a "speaking silence." What does it mean to lose myself in order to find myself in God, to decrease that God may increase? How mysterious, strange and wonderful it is not only to know about God (information) but to begin to come to know God (formation).

VII. Re-sourcing Ourselves

Our goal as Christians is to become not the masters, but the servants of the Word.

Mastery is appropriate when we are composing a term paper or taking minutes at a meeting. When we turn to sacred writers, our role is different. In docility to the Spirit, who leads us to truth and who searches the deep things of God, we are to use our times of spiritual reading to heighten our knowledge and love of God, to reaffirm the gift of our faith.

To read formatively is to retire momentarily from our busy life of service so that we can once again re-source ourselves in the wisdom of the masters. Only then can we appraise whether the Spirit is truly speaking in our life or whether we are listening solely to the sound of our own voice. The words of the masters aid us in this assessment. As the complexities of modern life compound, we need to read the classics. Their appeal for simplicity becomes compelling in a world where, as Henry David Thoreau said so aptly in Walden, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

We Christians are called to be shepherds of the sacred dimension of reality, to transform the world into the house of God. There is an acute need in our culture for spiritual leaders, formed by the classics, who will guide us out of the wasteland of spiritual regression toward the promised land of faithful living.

The way of formative reading is the way of discipleship. It helps us to follow

Christ more faithfully in this world so that we may enjoy his company forever in the next. With St. Paul we, too, can say:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained (Phil. 3: 12-16, NRSV).

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine, Saint. The Confessions of St. Augustine. Translated by John K. Ryan. Garden City: Doubleday, Image, 1960.

Eliot, T. S. The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934.

Kierkegaard, Søren. Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing. Translated by Douglas V. Steere. New York: Harper, 1956.

Muto, Susan. Blessings that Make Us Be: A Formative Approach to Living the Beatitudes. Petersham: St. Bede's, 1982.

_____. A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading. Petersham: St. Bede's, 1995.

_____. Pathways of Spiritual Living. Petersham: St. Bede's, 1991.

_____. Approaching the Sacred: An Introduction to Spiritual Reading. Denville: Dimension Books, 1975.

_____. Steps along the Way.: The Path of Spiritual Reading. Denville: Dimension Books, 1975.

_____. The Journey Homeward: On the Road of Spiritual Reading. Denville: Dimension Books, 1977.

_____ and Adrian van Kaam. Divine Guidance: A Basic Directory to the God-Guided Life for all Believers. Ann Arbor: Resurrection, 1994.

van Kaam, Adrian. Looking for Jesus. Denville: Dimension Books, 1978.

_____. The Woman at the Well. Denville:
Dimension Books, 1976.

_____. The Mystery of Transforming Love.
Denville: Dimension Books, 1982.

_____ and Susan Muto. Commitment: Key to
Christian Maturity. New York: Paulist,
1989.

_____ and Susan Muto. Commitment: Key to
Christian Maturity, A Workbook and
Study Guide. New York: Paulist, 1991.