Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s *Center for Discernment*
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Introduction

In the reading from Thursday morning’s Office, we were encouraged by St. Peter to put our gifts “at the service of one another, each in the measure (we) have received.” And so, since I have been gifted with the knowledge that my education affords, as well as the talent of expression that sometimes goes with this, I would like to offer a series of reflections over the coming year upon topics that occur to me throughout the day that might be of some help to you as you discern how to live full, authentic and beautiful Christian lives.

09.12.08: Taking Holy Scripture Seriously

In my work as a professor of philosophy, I have been struck repeatedly at the reverence that the saints, particularly Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, have shown for the Holy Scriptures. In one sense, this reverence is hardly surprising: this is the Word of God gifted to us by God Himself, something which reveals to our minds and hearts those highest realities which could never have been attained by natural human reason alone, but yet which are vital to our happiness, peace, and fulfillment. Nonetheless, when you consider the professional activities of these two saints, it is striking, by modern standards, that they center not only the entirety of their lives around the Holy Scriptures, but that they engage in their respective disciplines so that they might understand the Word of God better, and consequently “incarnate” the Word in their lives. Thus, Aquinas does not labor over Aristotle, comment extensively upon his works, and teach what he discovers about him to others simply out of some love that he has for Aristotle, or out of some professional dedication or interest that comes with his profession. Rather, he engages Aristotle so that he might understand God all the more, and help others to do the same. If Aristotle did not help him in this way, the Greek’s works would not have been on his horizon of interest. Thus, Aquinas did not consider himself to be a philosopher or a professor, although by our standards he could be described justly as both. Instead, he considered himself to be a Christian and a theologian who life work consisted in the conformation of all that he was to the Word itself, the Word as communicated to all through the Holy Scriptures.

Fr. Pinckaers, in his book *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, understands this well. He states that if Augustine or Aquinas were asked how to study their works, that they would offer the following: “Before you read our works, begin with the Gospel, with Scripture. Listen to the Word of God, for here the Master is heard, and he is the principle source of our knowledge. After this, consult our works. They will help you, like faithful servants, to advance in the knowledge of God.” (320) Fr. Pinckaers, then, adds in his own voice, “All their works, however voluminous, are, when all is said and done, commentaries on the Gospel, which can be reached only through an inner door, faith’s hearing.” (ibid).

One of the most powerful ways by which we can discern the voice of God in our own personal lives is to sit with the Word, to contemplate it in the silence of our hearts, to allow it to become our very bones, sinews and muscles, to permit its author, the Holy Spirit, to teach us the Word so that it might penetrate to the very core of our being, visit us, as Scriptures state, and make its home therein. Part of this is accomplished powerfully through the Office that we pray both morning and evening. But a dedicated devotion to and reading of the Holy Scriptures throughout one’s life is central to our lives as Christians.
How, then, should I read Scripture? Fr. Pinckaers details many approaches. However, for the purposes of discernment and the realization of the authentic Christian life, simply read it for the truth of what it contains, as the means whereby I might come into contact with those most profound realities that lie behind its words. Once again, Fr. Pinckaers offers some sound advice:

It is one thing to establish, for example, the text of the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Mount by tracing its history; it is quite another thing to take it in itself and understand how the poor, the afflicted, and the persecuted can be happy, or again, to recognize that it is vain to hear and study such texts without putting them into practice, as we are told at the end of the Sermon. The study of historical, positive truth demands time-consuming labor on the part of the specialist and can be protracted indefinitely. If this labor were required as indispensable for an authentic reading of Scripture, access to Scripture would be barred for most Christians, pastors as well as laity. Scripture would become the preserve of professional exegetes. Happily, however, the truth contained in Scripture is of another order. It is accessible to anyone who has ears to hear the questions posed by the Sermon on the Mount about happiness, the meaning of life, and the Kingdom, about the new justice and fraternal love, about the heavenly Father and prayer, Christ and his teaching...(D)irect reading (of the Holy Scriptures)...will light up life, feed prayer, and sustain action; exegetical problems need be no hindrance...It seems to me indispensable to give honest priority to a direct reading of Scripture over any type of commentary, exegetical, theological, or whatever it may be. In preparation, only absolutely necessary elements would be required: an exact translation, an explanation of terms, a minimum of historical and religious facts, some introduction by a competent person, and an appropriate setting, such as that of private prayer or liturgy. (318)

In this approach, one acquires the key, so to speak, which unlocks not only the mysteries of our other studies, but also the way by which they might be incorporated into our lives as Christians. Aquinas understood this well, and addressed this in the very first question of his major work, the Summa Theologiae. He states that his discipline, theology, makes use of human reason and all the arts and sciences that develop from reason, not to prove the faith we have received from God, but rather to make clear the things that are put forth by theology as it reflects upon its central text, namely the Holy Scriptures. It is Holy Scriptures that are considered to be the ultimate authority in all matters essential to the faith, and that the authority of all other writings, all other witnesses and examples, is derivative and thus are to be used with great care:

For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says (in his Letters to Jerome, xix, 1): “Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem everything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.” (ST. I. 1. 8. ad2)

Thus, we return to Fr. Pinckaers’ reflection concerning the life work of both Augustine and Aquinas, namely that in their burning devotion to God Himself, they turned to Holy Scriptures and meditated upon them their entire lives, devoting their respective energies, talents, research, teachings, writings and discipline to understanding the Word that the Scriptures contain. By doing this, they not only honored God Himself, but they conformed their entire persons to the truth, the goodness, and beauty found therein. In this, they found one of the vital elements by which they realized their unity, peace, and happiness, something that all saints have practiced in their desire to live full, authentic and beautiful Christian lives, something which our Church and her tradition preserves, teaches and defends. May we learn from these great examples.

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