Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

10.31.08: An Encomium of Wisdom

Permit me in this reflection, if you will, to rejoice simply in the fact that the Office of Readings this week has been filled with some of my favorite passages from the book of Wisdom! We began on Sunday with Solomon’s praise of wisdom, considered the logic to which the wicked are heir on Monday (which includes on page 442 of Volume III of our Office profoundly frightening words that could easily have been placed in the hearts and mouths of those who taunted Christ as he hung upon the cross), and heard of the promises of God to the just on Tuesday (not to mention the condemnation that awaits the wicked). Wednesday, Thursday and Friday brought forth some of the most beautiful words written concerning wisdom ever uttered by human voice:

(Wednesday) Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. He who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for he will find her sitting at his gates. To fix one’s thought on her is perfect understanding, and he who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought....

(Thursday) For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, agile, clear, unstained, certain, not baneful, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, kindly, firm, secure, tranquil, all-powerful, all-seeing, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for light is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail...

(Friday) Her I loved and sought after from my youth; I sought to take her for my bride and was enamored of her beauty. She adds to nobility the splendor of companionship with God; even the Lord of all loved her. For she is instructress in the understanding of God, the selector of his works. And if riches be a desirable possession in life, what is more rich than Wisdom, who produces all things? And if prudence renders service, who in the world is a better craftsman than she? Or if one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues; for she teaches moderation and prudence, justice and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful for men than these...So I determined to take her to live with me, knowing that she would be my counselor while all was well, and my comfort in care and

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For those of you who have not yet explored the other parts of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Office of Readings is ideally a part of our morning and evening prayer. It presents two readings, the first from the Holy Scriptures, and the second from the Patristic heritage, which, when taken together, beautifully compliment the psalms that we pray in the morning and evening, helping us to understand their depths and wide application in our lives and that of all Christians. The Office of Readings is a very practical way to read Scriptures and to gain exposure to Patristic writers whom we would not normally otherwise encounter. One of the things that I find especially gratifying about this part of the Liturgy of the Hours is the care with which these readings are chosen. There is an attention not only to the continuity of a theme over the course of a week’s worth of Biblical readings, but also to the Patristic writings which are often offered as commentaries upon the Biblical readings of that week. And if we find ourselves celebrating the feast day of a saint, you can be assured that writings either by or about this saint are offered, something which gives us greater exposure to the “heroes” of the Christian life beyond the short summaries provided in the Proper of Saints.
grief...Thinking thus within myself, and reflecting in my heart that there is immortality in kinship with Wisdom, and good pleasure in her friendship, and unfailing riches in the works of her hands, and that in frequenting her society there is prudence, and fair renown in sharing her discourses, I went about seeking to take her for my own...And knowing that I could not otherwise possess her unless God gave her to me — and it was a mark of insight to know whose gift she was — I appealed to the Lord and besought him, and with my whole heart I said:

There then follows that wondrous prayer prayed by Solomon before the Lord for the hand of Wisdom (Wisdom 9) which we ourselves make our own once every four weeks as we pray the psalter (Saturday morning prayer of Week III, pages 1073-1074).

My purpose here is quite simple, namely to remind one and all to seek wisdom with all your effort both at this time of your lives as students at DeSales, and throughout the rest of your lives. For in courting such a beauty, we acquire all that is good, holy and true, we become known as friends of God, we take up the position of Mary at the feet of Jesus, we receive the gift of the virtues from God Himself, we take on the yoke that is easy, the burden that is light, and we become rightly, beautifully and authentically inflamed with the passion and ardor of love and find ourselves in the company of the only Beloved that truly matters, the only Beloved worthy of pouring out our lives in a true act of celebration, of gift, of charity. In her company, we realize all that we are as the image and likeness of God, we desire to run ever long these paths in all that we feel and all that we do, and are ever sure, even in the most difficult and perplexing of situations where we find ourselves not fully comprehending the situation or what it is that we must do, that she will guide us in ways that are level and smooth, and not bring us to shame but rather to the glory promised to the sons and daughters of God. In union with her, we become clean, pure, undefiled, aware of the very breath of God upon the land, constantly renewed in mind and heart, and even our bodies, though ill and aging, are taken up by the effulgence of her delights. In her radiant beauty, we begin to shine, and our ugliness begins to recede, reformed simply by her presence in our lives. She waits patiently for us, for she knows that we truly love her and would do anything to further the relation that we already enjoy, the very gift of God Himself in our lives.

Whenever, then, I hear anyone, especially the religious, say that they hate philosophy or, more generally, the learned life, I feel like those exalted yet tragically romantic figures of a by-gone age who, incensed by the insult directed towards their fair lady, demand the satisfaction of a duel at dawn (think here of Reepicheep from the Narnia series — if I could be one character in the Narnia series, it would be him). And it is not an anger that arises from any misplaced pride that I myself have, or any claim to nobility that my profession affords. It is simply one which naturally and morally arises in the face of the dishonor that is visited upon she who is most good and most beautiful. And if one responds by asking what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, or why, in the face of the wisdom of God, need we be involved in the wisdom of man, I reply that one is never justified in despising the lesser for the sake of the greater. Not only is this practice that of the philistine (one that often betrays, when examined carefully, both arrogance and sloth), but is anti-incarnational (did Christ despise our humanity when he took on human form for the sake of our salvation? do we, in a lesser sense, despise the grade, middle and high school teacher for the sake of the honor we bestow upon the college and/or university teacher? do we find fault with children when they cannot eat meat, but must eat Pablum instead?). It is a fact of any decent Catholic approach to reality that we view the lesser as means whereby we might appropriate and enjoy the greater, that the lesser, being good in itself, serves the higher by being one of the many ways by which the higher is attained or, at the very least, approached (imagine despising the base and cliff of a mountain for the sake of the summit and its approach, a peak that one could not reach without having travelled first along the
base and up the cliffs!). Thus, the thrill that the Catholic feels in the face of Wisdom herself is not something to be understood in subjectively narcissistic terms. Rather, it is the jubilation that naturally wells up from the deepest regions of the soul in the face-to-face encounter with one of the greatest gifts with which the human species has been gifted. Finally, if one responds that one simply does not feel this fervor for Wisdom, and that, consequently, it would be pointless to seek her out since one cannot honestly woo her, then seek her nonetheless, putting your trust in the spirit of God speaking through the authors of the Scriptures stated above. Be not concerned for any lack of ability on your part, nor for any lack of desire that you might experience. Both are not yours to bring, but rather are gifts from God Himself for which we must pray. Not only does Wisdom herself seek all who desire to love God and neighbor with all their being, but Christ himself encourages us to knock upon this door constantly until we are admitted by reason of our love, our discipline, or just out of our sheer determination. Speaking personally, it is only these past few years of my life that I have come to feel deep within my person all of that of which I have written and taught. The vision of the goodness and the beauty of Wisdom were always there, as too were the promises of union and enjoyment. But the beckoning and the wooing took a long time, the pearl of great price had to be purchased, and much had to die within me before I could be found worthy of her. Despair is simply not an option for any Christian in the face of this courtship. For when we consider that we shall behold and commune with that Wisdom who is God Himself, and this for all eternity, what little advances we make here are merely an anticipation of that day without end, that eternal celebration ever new in every moment of it. Thus, strive with all your ability to be found among those who knock without ceasing, ever in the hope of the fulfillment of the promise of God, of that consummation for which we all devoutly wish, and in which our emptiness will be no more, and the fear of our nothingness will fade from all memory.
Afterword

When I become ill, I find myself having a sudden sympathy for Descartes’s dualistic view of human nature, specifically that there might actually be something to his view that the human person is simply a soul using a body. The reason I entertain this possibility is because of that very odd experience the sick generally have, namely of having a mind fully operative but a body that just cannot move under this new burden, a body that cannot respond in the way in which one would like. Thus, I begin to feel very much like a donkey overburdened by its master:

![Image of a donkey overburdened by its master](image)

Yep, that’s me. That’s how I feel, suspended ignobly in the air for no reason, looking the fool for all to see, waiting for my master, the so-called mind, to realize the situation, have mercy on my carcass, lie me down upon the ground and just let the illness pass. But no, such is never the case, and I find myself with only a lightened load, just enough to get my feet on the ground, so that I might attend to the burdens of the day. The result, however, is that I weave about the road in the performance of these duties, ever seeing the goal ahead of me with clear sight, but unable to marshall my abilities to travel the road in as direct a fashion as I endeavor normally to do. In short, please forgive the meandering of this week’s reflection. I hope to be better next week, and be better suited to my tasks.

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