

EARLY MONASTIC EXEGESIS: THE BASIS OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISE AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

In my own monastery of Saint Andrew's Abbey in Valyermo, California, and I suspect in most communities with active ministries of hospitality, there are two questions prospective guests and retreatants often pose: first, does the monastery offer Spiritual Exercises; and second, do the monks provide spiritual direction? While most nuns and monks who follow the Rule of Benedict happily answer "yes" to the question concerning spiritual direction, the quasi-technical term "spiritual exercise" sometimes gives us pause. We presume that the questioner wishes to know whether we offer 30-day Ignatian retreats, and we thus restrict the focus of our answer to whether our community includes an expert in Ignatian spirituality. In this paper I will recommend that we expand our definition of "spiritual exercise" to include elements from the early monastic tradition that can profitably be shared with retreatants and that are readily available within the daily monastic horarium, elements that also provided the basis for early monastic spiritual direction.

An expanded approach to spiritual exercise does not entail a new or revisionist definition, but rather a return to an older and more comprehensive understanding of this concept. In his article in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* Jean Leclercq suggests two semantic ranges for this term during the early centuries of Christian monasticism: first, *exercitium* in the literature of early Latin monasticism refers broadly to the twofold labor of asceticism and contemplation.. Second, and more specifically, "spiritual exercise" often served as a synonym for *meditatio*, the memorization and repetition of biblical texts, especially of the Psalter, in order to contemplate in the sacred text the One Who originally inspired it.¹

One insight modern monks and nuns can draw from Leclercq's first definition is that the term "spiritual exercise" in early monasticism highlights the interrelationship between all elements that comprise the monastic day. There is relatively little concern with distinctions between different ascetical practices or "methods" of meditation: instead, the emphasis is on their interconnectedness. *Exercitium* was not separable from, but was, rather, fully integrated into the monastic *horarium*; indeed, according to Leclercq's first definition, "spiritual exercise" is nearly identical with the varied and interrelated cycles that comprise the monastic day. The interwoven rhythms of psalmody and prayer, of work interspersed with contemplative study, of communal celebration and solitary meditation, gradually initiate the monastic practitioner into the twin arts of *theoria physiké*, the contemplation of God in creation, and *theologia*, intuition of the divine nature beyond all words and concepts.² "Spiritual exercise" thus entails an oscillating rhythm between ascetical practice and spiritual vision.

Leclercq's second, more focused definition highlights the centrality of *meditatio*, the constant, inward repetition of memorized biblical texts or whole psalms. This fundamental practice underlies, accompanies, and draws from nearly every other element of the monastic day. The texts employed in *meditatio*, (or *meleté* as it was called in the Greek monastic tradition), were themselves the fruit of other related monastic practices: they could arise from the monks' private *lectio divina* or from the corporate psalmody of the divine office; or they might be the precious gift of an *abba* or *amma* who had prescribed their use in response to the disciple's plea "Give me a word!"³

An insight we can profitably reappropriate is the ancient conviction that this *exercitium* leads to *theoria physiké*, the great art of contemplating God within creation. In early monastic tradition *theoria physiké* begins with rumination on the sacred text, and progresses into what may be termed

¹ J. LECLERCQ, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* vol. 4/2 (Beauchesne, 1961), col. 1903-1908, esp. 1904, 1908.

² EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 1; CASSIAN, *Conference* 14.1.3.

³ Cassian provides what may be the most famous instance of this in *Conferences* 9 and 10, where Abba Isaac carefully trains Cassian and Germanus to treasure and use in monologistic prayer Psalm 70:2, *Deus in adiutorium meum intende, Domine ad adiuvandam me festina.*

“contemplative exegesis”, the art of perceiving beneath the letter of Sacred Scripture the designs, purposes, and loving presence of the Triune God. This is accomplished through prayerful, allegorical interpretation of sacred scripture coupled with the conviction that the ordinary events of daily life (*ta pragmata*) imprinted in memory and imagination can also serve as “text” for such exegesis. This approach is very ancient. In the writings of Philo of Alexandria fundamental components of such contemplative exegesis can be seen to predate not only Christian monasticism, but even Christianity itself. Nevertheless, it would not be wrong to describe this method also as “monastic exegesis”. Two modern scholars, Jean Leclercq and Peter Brown, have particularly emphasized the monastic character and origins of this practice.

In his book, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* Leclercq describes the evolution of a *cultura Dei*, a rich medieval “monastic culture” devoted to a “literature of transcendence” with a primarily eschatological character. This monastic culture was both rooted in and exemplified by an approach to reading and interpreting the sacred text that was oriented towards an experience of “compunction”, which Leclercq defines as “longing for Heaven”.⁴ This anagogical monastic exegesis is the fruit of monastic *lectio divina*, the slow pondering of biblical text that seeks not so much information as personal experience of God, the author of the sacred text. During the medieval period with which Leclercq is chiefly concerned in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, the practice of *lectio divina* would have occupied a Benedictine monk or nun, depending on the season of the year, for perhaps between two and three hours per day. And in the early centuries of Christian monasticism with which we shall be principally concerned in this article, that is the late fourth and early fifth centuries of Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian, the practices of *lectio/meditatio*, *anagnosis/meleté*, would, in different forms, have occupied an even larger proportion of the monk’s waking day.

In *The Body and Society* Peter Brown emphasizes the monastic art of learning to read the “book of the heart” This he does by contrasting the pre-monastic Christian practice of spiritual exegesis typified by Origen and his disciples with that of the Desert Fathers:

[...] The desert became the powerhouse of a new culture. [Whereas ...] Origen’s spirituality [...] often assumed philological resources that could be found only in upper-class circles, in close proximity to great cities[;] in the *Life of Anthony*, and in successive layers of monastic spiritual guidance, we can detect the emergence of an alternative. The monk’s own heart was the new book. What required infinitely skilled exegesis and long spiritual experience were the “movements of the heart,” and the strategies and snares that the Devil laid within it. [...] The shift from a culture of the book to a *cultura Dei*, based largely on the nonliterate, verbal interchange of a monastic “art of thought,” was rightly hailed as the greatest and the most peculiar achievement of the Old Men of Egypt: it amounted to nothing less than the discovery of a new alphabet of the heart.⁵

Thus with the help of Leclercq, and Brown we may identify early monastic spiritual exercise both with the larger symphonic rhythm of asceticism and contemplation that comprises the monastic day, and also with the underlying leitmotiv of intertwining *lectio divina* and contemplative exegesis. Such exegesis of biblical and personal salvation-history in turn facilitates the ability to perceive God in nature and in history; and for those entrusted with the ministry of spiritual guidance it enables the stories of struggle and faith that constitute the narrative matter of spiritual direction also to be perceived as matter for contemplation.

In this paper we shall explore five aspects of monastic “spiritual exercise”, employing as our guides two exponents of this monastic craft: Evagrius Ponticus, the most prolific writer of all the desert fathers, whose died in Egypt in 399; and his disciple, John Cassian, who died around 430 and whose writings transmitted to the Christian West the insights of the great *abbas* with whom he had lived during his sojourn in Egypt. We will focus particularly on their understanding of the place of contemplative exegesis in the life of the Christian from five interrelated perspectives: first, the place of *theoria physiké* in monastic schemata of the spiritual life; second, the art of monastic exegesis, that is, reading or contemplating the scriptures; third, *theoria physiké* understood as the art of contemplating (

⁴ J. LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study in Monastic Culture*, tr. C. Misrahi, (Fordham Univ.Pr., New York, 1961), pp. 55-56; 87.

⁵ PETER BROWN. *The Body and Society, Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Chapter 11, «The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus» (Columbia Univ. Pr., New York, 1988), p. 229.

or reading) what Evagrius called “the ages”, that is human history and the created world; fourth, the monastic art of reading the heart; and finally we will consider the spiritual elder, and thus indirectly the role of community.

2. THE PLACE OF THEORIA PHYSIKÉ IN MONASTIC SCHEMATA OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Since the late middle ages and especially following the eras of the Reformation and Counter Reformation it became traditional to divide Christian spiritual life into successive stages or “ways”, and to understand progress in the spiritual life as a gradual ascent from lower “ways” to higher. Manuals of the spiritual life encouraged directors to diagnose the stage attained by their directees in order to recommend or discourage spiritual practices and methods of prayer according to the relevant spiritual level or stage. But this somewhat simplistic model of linear ascent is not what we find when we look closely at early monastic sources.

Although, as we shall see, Evagrius Ponticus does distinguish between what would later be regarded as stages of spiritual maturity, it would be more accurate to say that for him, and to some extent also for John Cassian, these steps or levels can more profitably be regarded as aspects or movements within the spiritual life; more akin to primary colors, or different notes in a musical chord, rather than steps or rungs of a ladder, popular as the metaphor of a spiritual ladder already was and would subsequently become. And at the center of this movement, in some sense coordinating and illuminating the whole, lie the twin arts of *theoria physiké* and monastic exegesis.

For Evagrius the contemplation of God in creation and the task of contemplative exegesis lie at the crucial midpoint in his schema of spiritual progress. At the most basic level is what Evagrius calls the *praktiké*, ascetical practice, which entails the whole realm of ethical behavior, that is, the acquisition of virtue and the elimination of vice, attained through divine grace and by heroic engagement in the inner warfare with tempting thoughts or *logismoi*. Above, but intimately linked with this ascetical project is the realm Evagrius calls *gnostiké* and *theoretiké*, spiritual knowledge and contemplation. It is important to note, however, that Evagrius in company with the whole early monastic tradition does not use the word *theoria*, “contemplation” is the restrictive and somewhat anemic, sense it has acquired in much modern Christian spiritual literature. For Evagrius the word “contemplation” does not refer solely or even chiefly to a practice that entails the setting aside of images and words. In line with the whole Alexandrian tradition, he includes in the *theoretiké*, both that high and almost inexpressible contemplation of the divine nature he calls *theologiké*, “theology”;⁶ and that middle realm with which we are chiefly concerned here, which consists of the contemplation (or knowledge) of God in creation, and which Evagrius calls *physiké* or *theoria physiké*.

To understand the interrelationship between these realms it may be helpful to recall Fr. Jeremy Driscoll’s summary of Evagrius’ understanding of the spiritual life as “the mind’s long journey to the Holy Trinity”⁷ I would suggest that this journey can be profitably envisioned as a helix, a geometrical form that combines both linear direction and circular movement.⁸ For Evagrius the linear motion consists of “progress” (*prokopé*) or “ascent” (*anabasis*) towards God which is at the same time characterized by a circular movement between the poles of *praktiké* and *theoretiké*: that is, between the asceticism and contemplation.

Fundamental to Evagrius’ model of spiritual progress is his conviction that the Christian *praktikos* or ascetic can and should, if possible, mature into a *gnostikos*, a “knower” or “sage”, an *amma* or *abba* skilled in contemplation and capable of imparting spiritual knowledge. Evagrius’ description of levels or stages of spiritual progress does not imply that it is possible to completely rise above the *praktiké* and graduate from the quest for virtue. On the contrary, as the *praktikos*, the Christian ascetic, makes

⁶ Evagrius’ restriction of the term *theologia* to doctrine concerning the divine nature is also found in GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Oration 27.9* and *Oration 28.1*.

⁷ This is the title of JEREMY DRISCOLL’s English translation of the *Ad monachos*, a text which Driscoll has shown (*The «Ad Monachos» of Evagrius Ponticus*) to contain the essential elements of Evagrius’ spiritual doctrine arranged in sequential proverbs intended for memorization and meditation.

⁸ Although Evagrius does not employ the image of the helix to describe spiritual progress it was used later by Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite.

progress he or she learns to perceive the work of asceticism *gnostikoteros*, that is, from an increasingly contemplative perspective.⁹ And since the struggle against certain passions continues until the very moment of death,¹⁰ even the mature *gnostikos* must continually advance in virtue, practicing ascetical vigilance.¹¹ Thus the journey towards God is not a simply a movement beyond *praktiké* into *theoretiké*: spiritual progress includes a gentle oscillation between these two poles in such a way that continuing attention to the changing demands of *praktiké* yields ever greater contemplative refreshment

Cassian's schema of the spiritual life is essentially a translation into Latin of Evagrius' model:

The discipline (*disciplina*) and expression (*professio*) of our religion, which tends to the contemplation of the secrets of invisible mysteries, and seeks no present gain but the reward of an eternal recompense, depend[s] on a fixed order and scheme. And the knowledge of this is twofold: first, *praktiké*, practical knowledge that entails the amendment of habits and purification from vices; second, *theoretiké*, which consists in the contemplation of divine things and the understanding of most sacred thoughts. (*Conference* 14, 1.3)

As we shall see, Cassian goes on in this text to define *theoretiké* as a method of exegesis, "divided into two parts, the historical interpretation and the spiritual sense". Like Evagrius, Cassian closely links the contemplation of God in creation with the art of contemplative exegesis. It is noteworthy that this discussion in which Cassian situates *theoria physiké* in a schema of the spiritual life is Conference 14, his conference on spiritual exegesis of the scriptures.

A nuance Cassian brings to monastic schemata of spiritual progress is his conviction that the present moment should always be illuminated by our eschatological goal. At the very beginning of the *Conferences* he describes our journey towards God as taking place from the dual perspectives of *telos*, our ultimate end, and *scopos*, our immediate or present goal. "Our *telos*, our ultimate end, is eternal union with the Triune God: "[...] the end of our way of life is the kingdom of God; (*Conf.* 1, 4.3.) "[we do all these things] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," (*Conf.* 1, 3.1). As to our *scopos*, our immediate task and concern Cassian writes: "This then should be our main effort: and this steadfast purpose of heart we should constantly aspire after; namely, that the soul may ever cleave to God and to heavenly things," (*Conf.* 1, 8.1). Thus for Cassian our lives are illumined with a twofold light, *telos* and *scopos*: *telos* is our final end, an eternal promise of union that beckons from beyond time; while *scopos* is our present spiritual practice in which we seek, even in this life, "to feed on the beauty and knowledge of God alone," (*Conf.* 1, 8.3). living in "desire [that] can never have an end," (*Conf.* 1, 8.4).

As we shall see, it is in his attempt to formulate a model of spiritual life and spiritual progress, that Cassian defines *theoretiké* as a fourfold method of biblical exegesis. Thus the exegetical method that for Evagrius is the heart of *theoria physiké* is for Cassian one of the clearest definitions of the whole life of contemplation.

Before proceeding to the practice of monastic exegesis it will helpful to reiterate that although Cassian and Evagrius employ schemata describing progress, "ascent", in spiritual life, they did not conceive of this ascent as simply linear: we have already mentioned the preferable image of a helix. Even more important for us today in employing these models is to avoid the notion of a "stepwise" progression that could sound, especially to those with some experience of academic institutions, like a series of "prerequisite courses" leading ever upward, and once taken, never to be repeated. This is not the Christian, but rather the Gnostic model of spiritual ascent through spheres, past watchful archons, employing esoteric insights and memorized phrases. This is the model, not of Evagrius or Cassian, but rather of the computer game, or – worse yet – of the *DaVinci Code*.

For Evagrius and Cassian the contemplation of God in creation is less a practice or a method than an integrating theme, a sort of spiritual glue that binds together the different elements of the whole monastic lifestyle. This lifestyle should become deeper and richer over time, but it always preserves its original outline, form, and component practices. In other words, the Christian contemplative, as

⁹ EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 50, 79, and 83.

¹⁰ EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 36.

¹¹ On the persistence of anger in those who have made considerable spiritual progress: EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 10, 31, and 32.

understood in the early monastic tradition, never advances beyond psalmody, scripture, liturgy, or manual labor into more “advanced” practices in such a way as to leave these “ordinary” practices behind. Rather, illuminated by *theoria physiké*, as it were transfigured by contemplative exegesis, the rituals and practices of monastic ascetics intertwined with the ordinary *pragmata* of daily life become the preferred meeting-place with God.

3 CONTEMPLATING (READING) THE SCRIPTURES

Evagrius’ method of spiritual exegesis mirrors his model of the spiritual life, which he summarizes in the first chapter of his book, *The Praktikos*. He condenses insights drawn from Clement of Alexandria and Origen’s into a tripartite formula: “Christianity is the teaching of our Savior Christ consisting of *praktiké*, *physiké*, and *theologiké*.” In chapters 17-19 of *The Gnostikos*, Evagrius’ sequel to *The Praktikos*, he details the use of these three categories in biblical exegesis. In chapter 18 he invites the reader to first distinguish between straightforward texts which may be interpreted literally and passages which require the use of allegory. Next one must determine whether the text in question should be interpreted at the level of *praktiké*, *physiké*, or *theologiké*. At the ethical level of *praktiké* it will concern the virtues and vices of *epithumetikon* (desire), *thumikon*, (defense/indignation) or *nous*. A text concerned with *physiké* will explicate the inner meaning of some part of the created order; and passages touching on *theologiké* will describe some aspect of the mystery of the Trinity. Some texts, however, such as prophecies, ought to be interpreted only in their literal sense and should not be forced into this schema.

In chapter 17 of the *Gnostikos* Evagrius stresses the value of knowing the spiritual definitions of things, particularly of virtues and vices; and in *Gnostikos* 19 he recommends familiarity with “common expressions” which recur frequently throughout the scriptures. The importance Evagrius assigns to the task of learning this art of contemplative exegesis is revealed in the fact that the largest part of his literary output consists of biblical commentaries consisting largely of *scholia*, or sentence-summaries, in which he offers his reader precisely these spiritual “definitions” and explanations of “common expressions” which he urges the *gnostikos* to learn.

Evagrius’ *gnostikos*, his ideal Christian contemplative is a biblical exegete who searches the scriptures for insights that will benefit others and himself. This contemplative exegete seeks to understand human nature and human circumstances so that he can discover in the scriptures remedies for his own spiritual ills and the ills of those who seek his advice. The Bible is therefore not only the sourcebook for his own spiritual journey; it is also the gift, the therapeutic “prescription” he recommends to those who seek advice. The *gnostikos* must be able to “give a word to each, according to his worth” (*Gnostikos* 44). To do this he must become familiar with all the levels of meaning contained in the scriptures, from ethical instruction, through the contemplation of creation, to the mysteries of the Trinity. In the scriptures he discovers a symbolic world of history and story that helps him to express both the “ethical” insights he learned as a *praktikos* and the new mysteries of creation he is exploring as a contemplative.

Evagrius believed the Scriptures, and especially the Book of Psalms, afford a vision of the whole creation, including the daily struggles of the *praktiké*, as refulgent with divine meaning. The Bible can serve as a training-ground for the Christian contemplative, a kind of workshop in which the *gnostikos* learns to perceive the divine *logoi*, the inner meanings and purposes of God, in the events of salvation history recounted in the biblical text. Once this art has been learned the *gnostikos* is able to turn from the scriptures, and especially the Book of Psalms to the “divine book” of creation¹² where these *logoi* are perceptible everywhere, especially in the daily struggle against sin.

For Cassian, too, the Bible is both the starting point and the ongoing source of Christian contemplation. For Cassian the *theoretiké* consists chiefly in the fourfold method of contemplative exegesis he describes in Conference 14, and which his writings would make normative for the medieval West:

14.8.1. [While] the *praktiké*, is distributed among many subjects and interests, the *theoretiké* is divided into two parts, i.e., the historical interpretation and the spiritual sense. [...] But of spiritual knowledge there are three kinds, tropological, allegorical, anagogical [...] 8.2. Thus the histor[ical

¹² The contemplation of beings is a “divine book”: EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 138:16(2). .

sense]embraces the knowledge of things past and visible, [...] But to the allegory belongs what follows, for what actually happened is said to have prefigured the form of some mystery [...] 8.3. But the anagogical sense rises from spiritual mysteries even to still more sublime and sacred secrets of heaven, [...] The tropological sense is the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching, [...]

For both Evagrius and Cassian the Bible is a microcosm in which the literal (historical) events of salvation history open out to reveal what Evagrius calls the divine *logoi*, the inner purposes or plan of God discernible beneath the surface of the events described in the text. Thus contemplative exegesis can serve as both an art and as a preparatory exercise that enables the Christian teacher or spiritual director to look up from the scriptures into the events and relationship that surround him, applying to these daily circumstances and experiences the skills he has learned as a biblical exegete.

Before considering the use of this exegetical method as a way of understanding human history and human experience, it will be helpful to recall the all-pervading nature of contemplative exegesis in the life of the monk or nun. In the age of Evagrius and Cassian meditation on scripture suffused the entire monastic day. This was obvious to all during the centuries when the monastic divine office was interspersed with intentional intervals of silence, specifically intended to transform psalmodic chant into the personal prayer of those who chanted. But even during the hours of manual labor, when simple *meleté/recitatio* of the biblical text accompanied almost every form of work, the goal, as Evagrius expressed it, was for this private psalmody to be offered in an “undistracted” way:¹³ that is, experienced as a window into either God’s diverse glory in creation, or that transcendent experience of God that silences all speech and unites into simplicity all thoughts and images.¹⁴ The practice of reading or reciting memorized biblical text from memory touched every part of the monastic day; and it was not a practice from which one in any sense “graduated” into more esoteric and less textually-rooted practices. The “pure prayer” of Evagrius and the “fiery prayer” of Cassian are not substitutes for, but rather more often the fruit of psalmody and scripture-meditation. The formula-prayers that Cassian extols in *Conferences* 9 and 10, and the antirrhetic texts Evagrius frequently recommends are not alternatives to, but rather ways of enhancing and deepening the monastic “spiritual exercise” of liturgy, *lectio divina*, and manual labor.

4 CONTEMPLATING (READING) THE “AGES”

Among the most beautiful and moving passages in the literature of early monasticism are texts in which our monastic forebears describe the joy of beholding God in the various and complex orders of creation. For Evagrius this is the “richly varied wisdom” of Ephesians 3:9-10 which he particularly associates with the complex imagery of the Book of Psalms and with the person of Christ.¹⁵ In chapters 17 and 23 of his treatise *On Tempting-Thoughts, (Peri logismon)* Evagrius, invites the Christian contemplative to allow his “conversation with the Psalter” to lead into vision of that wider world that is mirrored in the interior universe of the heart:

17. The concepts of this present age - these the Lord gave to human beings, like sheep to a good shepherd: for it is written, *He has placed the world in his heart*; (Eccl. 3:11).

23. [...] And if, weary from our toil, a certain *acedia* overtakes us we should climb up a little onto the rock of knowledge and converse with the Psalter (cf. Ps 48:5), plucking with the virtues the strings of knowledge: let us again tend our sheep as they pasture below Mount Sinai, so that the God of our fathers may also call to us out of the bush (cf. Exod. 3:1-6) and grant us the *logoi* of the signs and the wonders (cf. Exod. 7:9, 11:9-10).

Here Evagrius depicts the human heart as a miniature reflection of “the concepts of the present age” the complex tapestry of human history in which, just as in the scriptures, the *gnostikos* can learn to behold the “*logoi* of signs and wonders”, the inner meanings and purposes of God. Evagrius particularly emphasizes two *logoi*, providence and judgment¹⁶ in his hierarchy of contemplative objects which the *gnostikos* must learn to perceive¹⁷ both in the fixed microcosm of the scriptures and

¹³ EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 86.

¹⁴ EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 *On Psalm* 137.1(3).

¹⁵ EVAGRIUS *On Prayer* 85;

¹⁶ EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* I.27.

¹⁷ EVAGRIUS, scholion 15 *on Psalm* 72:23.

in the ever-changing macrocosm of creation. The highest object of contemplation is God; next comes God's creation, that is the corporeal and incorporeal reasoning natures or *logikoi*, including all the "ages and worlds" of angels, human beings and demons. But for Evagrius, the real significance of created things and historical events lies in the witness they provide as to the purpose and intentions of the Creator.

More important than details concerning the ranks or ordering of the *logikoi*, that is to say the structure of the natural world, are their *logoi*, the inner purposes of God to which they attest. The "*logoi* of providence and judgment" are, for Evagrius, one means of probing beneath the diversity of creation so as to perceive all created things as active participants in the ongoing spectacle of creation, fall, and restoration. Meditation on these *logoi* entails an appreciation of creation from the perspective of its origin and destiny. The variety and multiplicity apparent within creation, "the diversity of bodies and worlds", ought to remind the *gnostikos* of God's compassionate "judgment", his *krisis*, understood not as disastrous punishment, but rather God's gracious gift to every reasoning nature of the body and world that will best facilitate its return to that divine unity from which all have fallen. The complexity and variety of creation thus serves as a reminder of the diverse paths and circumstances that lead to God. The "*logos* of providence" enables the Christian contemplative both to bear in mind God's constant ministering presence in all human circumstances and to recall that grace is mediated, often by friends, acquaintances, *abbas* and *ammas* and even angels who facilitate those acts of free choice that enable reasoning beings to make spiritual progress.¹⁸

For Cassian, too, finding God in the Scriptures enables the Christian to contemplate the presence and purposes of God in creation and in human history. Cassian explains that God is to be sought both in apophatic simplicity and in that kataphatic complexity that characterizes the world in which God delights:

the contemplation of God is gained in a variety of ways. For we not only discover God by admiring His incomprehensible essence, a thing which still lies hid in the hope of the promise, but we see Him through the greatness of His creation, and the consideration of His justice, and the aid of His daily providence: when with pure minds we contemplate what He has done with His saints in every generation, [...] when in our wonder we think that the drops of rain, the days and hours of the ages, and all things past and future are present to His knowledge; when we gaze in unbounded admiration on that ineffable mercy of His, [...] that He Himself, overcoming our enemy in us simply for the pleasure of His good will, rewards us with eternal bliss and everlasting rewards, when lastly He undertook the dispensation of His Incarnation for our salvation, and extended the marvels of His mysteries to all nations. (*Conf.* 1.15, 1-2)

It would be well to highlight one final aspect of the exegetical perspective of Evagrius and Cassian: namely, the person of Christ. Whenever the *gnostikos* interprets the events of human history or the phenomena of nature, he or she necessarily begins with the assumption that the purposes and the person of Christ lie concealed beneath all events and natural phenomena. Especially for Evagrius Christ is the exegetical key to the scriptures, and especially of the Psalter: Christ is that "richly-diverse wisdom of God" whose person and words explain the most obscure texts. Christ is also the "demiurge", the creator of all things,¹⁹ whose traces have been left in all of nature, and especially in the human heart or *nous* that bears the divine image. The practice of monastic exegesis as typified by Evagrius and Cassian is a constant exercise in what might be termed "applied Christology", an effort to discover the purposes of God in human history by means of both the Gospel message and the Church's teachings concerning the ministry and person of Christ.

5. CONTEMPLATING (READING) THE HEART

What, then, is this text, the human heart, that the monastic exegete "reads" when serving as *abba*, *amma*, or as we would say today, as "spiritual director"? Early monasticism well understood that the term "heart" is a key biblical metaphor for the deepest level of human personality and identity. Evagrius identifies the biblical "heart" with the philosophical *nous*, Plato and Aristotle's organ of *theoria*, contemplation, most often rendered in Latin as *intellectus* or *ratio*. For Evagrius the *nous* or

¹⁸ EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI.43.

¹⁹ EVAGRIUS, scholia: 2 on *Psalm* 89:4; 4 on *Psalm* 135:23; 3 on *Psalm* 44:4(1).

innermost self is the part of creation in which God can be most clearly beheld, since it is that place which most clearly reflects the divine image. In chapters 38 and 39 of his treatise on tempting thoughts, *Peri Logismon*, Evagrius hints at the vastness of the landscape that is the *nous*:

38. Our reasoning nature, having been put to death by vice, is raised by Christ through the contemplation of all the ages. And his Father raises the soul which has died the death of Christ by means of the knowledge He gives of Himself. And this is what was meant by Paul: *If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him*. (Rom. 6:8 ; 2 Tim. 2:11).

39. When the *nous* has stripped off the old man and put on [that which comes] from grace, (cf. Col 3:9-10) then it will see its own state at the time of prayer, like a sapphire or the color of heaven, which Scripture calls the place of God that was seen by the elders under Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 24:20).

In these two chapters contemplation of the *nous*, the innermost self, is depicted as an intertwining movement between two poles: first, the vision of God's mysterious presence in the story of salvation history contained within the heart, the "contemplation of all the ages"; and second, a transcendent glimpse of the *nous* as the *topos theou*, the sapphire "place of God" on which the God of Israel stands in the Septuagint version of Exodus 24. In these texts Evagrius depicts the Christian spiritual director engaging in one of the highest forms of spiritual exercise: the contemplative task of beholding, unflinching, the tumultuous and even sordid arena of temptation, compulsion, and addiction; while at the same time perceiving the means by which this arena can become again the "place of God", capable of pure prayer and clear vision.

This spiritual exercise, the contemplation of the human heart, begins with the practice of discernment, *diakrisis*, the ability to distinguish between: first, thoughts that come from God; second, those that proceed from within the self; and, third, those which come from the demons. This art of *diakrisis* is one which the Christian ascetic, or *praktikos*, has undertaken since the beginning of the spiritual journey, and is one that will endure until the moment of death.²⁰ However, progress in the capacity to behold God in creation enables the Christian contemplative to undertake this task *gnostikoteros*; that is, with deeper contemplative wisdom and understanding.

If any monk wishes to experience of the savage demons and to become acquainted with their art, he should observe his tempting-thoughts and note [down] their intensification and diminution, and their interconnectedness, and their timing, and which demons produce what, and which demon comes after another, and which does not follow after which; and he should seek from Christ the inner meanings (*logoi*) of these things. [The demons] dislike those who approach the ascetic life with greater knowledge (*gnostikoteros*), for they wish to shoot in darkness at the upright of heart (Ps. 10.2). (*Praktikos* 50)

Thus the monastic exegete who is also *abba* or *amma* and *gnostikos* leans to see the heart's disordered state in light of the *logoi* of healing ("judgment") and providence. This perception further reveals the indestructible potential of becoming again, through appropriate *ascesis* and prayer, the shining, sapphire "place of God".²¹

Cassian, too, describes this monastic art of discernment, employing the popular but somewhat less-euphonious metaphor of becoming a good money-changer:

He ought then carefully to notice this threefold order [that is, whether thoughts arise from God, from the self, or from the devil], and with wise discretion analyze the thoughts that arise in our hearts, tracking out their origin and cause and author [...] so that we may deserve as the Lord's command bids us to become good money-changers, whose highest skill and training is to test what is perfectly pure gold. (*Conf.* 1.19; 1:20.1)

The ability to see the purposes of God within the soul, to see what Evagrius calls the *logoi* in the events of one's own life, that is, within one's own personal story of "salvation history" enables the Christian contemplative to serve in the role of spiritual director, as *abba* or *amma*. As spiritual director the contemplative may then offer to others the healing remedies one has discovered to be effective in the arena of one's own inner struggle and growth.

²⁰ EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 36.

²¹ Evagrius describes this potential as the indestructible "seeds of virtue": scholion 3 on *Psalm* 125:5; scholion 62 on *Proverbs* 5:14; *Kephalaia Gnostica* I.40; *Peri Logismon* 31; *Letters* 43.3 and 59.3

6. THE SPIRITUAL ELDER

Although the *abba* or *amma* is often depicted as a solitary, early monastic sources make it clear that the gifts of discernment and expertise in offering spiritual counsel are rooted in the experience of obedience in community, or at least in a relationship characterized by obedience to a spiritual elder. A close reading of the *Life of Antony*, for example, reveals that his growth in virtue and prayer began with a productive apprenticeship to a *geron*, a spiritual elder, and that Antony, the archetypal hermit, made initial progress through careful attention to the examples of virtue he found in his local parish community. Evagrius learned the art of discernment through the teaching and example of Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Melania the Elder, Rufinus, and the two Macarii of Nitria and Scetis. Cassian was instructed by the abbas he names in his *Conferences*, as well as through friendship with his monastic companion Rufinus; and, as we shall see, he particularly emphasizes in his first *Conferences* that true discretion presupposes a willingness to open one's heart to a spiritual elder.

Peter Brown describes the importance in early monasticism of openness to a spiritual guide:

[the inner movements of the heart] were best conveyed orally to a spiritual father. It was a situation which tended to give priority to the languages closest to the heart, that is, the vernaculars of Egypt and the Near East—Coptic, Syriac, and demotic Greek. The deepest relief of the soul came now, not from the written page, but from that tap of the Old Man's fingers on his disciple's chest, which assuaged the heart beneath. [...] it amounted to nothing less than the discovery of a new alphabet of the heart.²²

John Cassian particularly emphasizes this “dialogical” aspect to exegesis of the human heart. In Conference Two he portrays Abba Moses as asserting:

True discretion can only be secured by true humility. And the first proof of this humility consists in reserving everything (not only what you do but also what you think), for the scrutiny of the elders: so that you do not trust in your own judgment at all, but rather acquiesce in their decisions in every particular; and judge what is to be considered good or bad according to their traditions [...] (*Conference* 2.10.1)

While Cassian's conferences provide insight into the tradition of an Abba offering extended responses to disciples' spiritual questions and concerns, it should be borne in mind that his texts are not verbatim records of such conferences. Writing in Gaul around the year 420 Cassian offers in the *Institutes* his recollections of what he had experienced twenty years previously during what was already coming to be wistfully regarded as the “golden age” of Egyptian monasticism.²³ His conferences were undoubtedly adapted to the needs of his intended audience: that is, his own community in Lerins. Clearer examples of immediate responses to the needs of disciples and directees are found in Evagrius' *Letters*. We are generally forced to guess at the queries that inspired these letters because Evagrius is not content to offer the simple responses or interpretations so characteristic of both the *Apophthegmata patrum* and the later and considerably more voluminous spiritual correspondence of such abbats as Barsanuphius and John of Gaza. Evagrius' *Letters* emphasize the interrelationship between multiple ascetical projects, thus illustrating very clearly the interrelationship between spiritual direction and that “spiritual exercise” which consists in contemplative exegesis of the biblical text and the human heart.²⁴

In *Letter 25*, written to a former soldier and non-monastic ascetic Evagrius advises careful attention to the heart at the time of prayer:

But if you wish to comprehend the state of your heart, whether it is careful or inattentive, then observe yourself at the time of prayer. With what sort of images [*phantasiai*] is your *nous* confused and distracted; which arise first, impassioned or dispassionate [images]? If it is besieged by [impassioned tempting-] thoughts, then it is inattentive to the commandments of God; and the passions ripen, arousing indignation and desire, together with a crowd of evils and suffering. But if it finds itself disturbed by [dispassionate images], then it is not observant in reading²⁷ and prayer^[238]:

²² PETER BROWN, *The Body and Society*, Chapter 11, «The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus», p. 229.

²³ “[After the devastation of Nitria in 399] The freshness of the first generation was fading from Scetis also. And the older monks knew it,” D. CHITTY, *The Desert a City*, p. 60; cf. also pp. 65-68.

²⁴ Although the majority of these letters are available only in Syriac translation, thanks to the labors Claire Guillaumont we now possess portions of several of these in the original Greek, including *Letters* 4 and 25, cited below.

rather, it is destroyed through [mentally] joining various events and new pursuits, constantly wishing “to say or hear something new.” Nevertheless, “fight the good fight”, in order to be “crowned with the wreath of justice” and to behold Christ the bridegroom, whom you now seek through good works, which is in reality the search for the Lord.²⁵

Here, as in *Praktikos* 50 cited above, Evagrius invites the Christian contemplative to regard temptations as data indicating the kind of remedy the soul requires. He particularly emphasizes the value of *lectio divina* as a means of liberating the soul from images and thoughts that seem benign but keep the *nous* from pure prayer. He reiterates this point in Letter 4, to Abbot Loukios:

And you know from Our Lord that reading the Sacred Scriptures is very conducive to purity, since it turns the *nous* away from anxieties concerning this visible world, from which arises the corruption of unclean thoughts that shackle the intellect by their passions, binding it to corporeal affairs. Therefore do not grow weary of exhorting the brethren to read the scriptures at the proper times and “not to love the world nor what is in the world;” (1 Jn 2:15), [...] while [also] keeping watch over [tempting-] thoughts, which is a poison against “wolves”, [much-] hated by the demons..

For the struggle undertaken with discernment is replete with numerous temptations. But it affords great purity of mind that will not be ridiculed by the demons, since they are not in a position to accuse the intellect or the soul]. For just as wisdom fittingly orders the judgment [*krisis*] of ordinary matters [], so also the gift of discernment is entrusted in regard to mental fantasies with the discernment between holy and depraved, between pure and unclean thoughts,. And the cunning of the mocking demons may be recognized: they clothe themselves in images of the senses and of memories in order to lead into error the soul [eagerly] hastening toward the “knowledge of Christ”.

Thus it is essential for everyone who takes the field in this warfare to seek from the Lord discernment, while making sure they lack nothing essential for the reception of this gift. In summary these [essential prerequisites] are: abstinence; gentleness; vigils; withdrawal [from the world]; and constant prayer strengthened by reading of the sacred scriptures. The practice of virtue cuts off the passions, for there are found desire and sorrow and wrath. Reading, however, uproots the trifling worldly senses after practicing the virtues, and consecrates our intellect in the formless, divine, and unifying knowledge that our Savior in the gospels allegorically called the “closet” (Mt 6:6), signifying the hidden Father.²⁶

In addition to the practical recommendations contained in these texts it is important to highlight what they reveal of Evagrius’ overall approach. First, Evagrius does not simply interpret his reader’s experience or suggest a specific practice: rather, he recommends a whole way of life, a never-ending “spiritual exercise” consisting of attentiveness to the dynamic inner landscape of the heart, intertwined with appropriate asceticism and contemplative exegesis. The art of discernment, “comprehension of your heart” as he calls it in *Letter 25*, entails contemplation of the inward ascetical struggle in the glorious eschatological light of “Christ the bridegroom”. This work of inward vision is fortified by the daily ascetical project of “reading and prayer”. Similarly in *Letter 4* discernment proceeds from reading and prayer combined with practices such as abstinence, gentleness, and solitude. Evagrius’ concern is thus not so much to recommend a specific practice than to encourage his reader to embrace with greater zeal the entire daily rhythm of monastic life.

Second, Evagrius not only recommends the reading of Sacred Scripture as a remedy for sin and an aid to spiritual discernment: he also expects his readers to employ the art of contemplative exegesis in interpreting his letters. His citations and allusions to biblical texts, and above all his symbolic use of biblical images such as “crown” “wreath”, and “bridegroom” in *Letter 25* and “poison” and “wolves” in *Letter 4* is meant to encourage meditation on these images and their allegorical meaning. Evagrius expects his readers to develop and employ their talent for interpreting biblical allegory in order to understand the inner meaning of their own life story. Thus Evagrius the spiritual elder encourages his

²⁵ Tr. based on Greek of Letter 25.6 in CLAIRE GUILLAUMONT «Fragments grecs inédits d’Évagre le Pontique» *Texte und Untersuchungen* 133 (1987): 209-221.

²⁶ Tr. based on portions of the Greek of Letter 4.3-5 in GUILLAUMONT «Fragments » *Texte und Untersuchungen* 133 (1987):, 219-220.

disciples in that “spiritual exercise” which enables them both to interpret their lives in the light of Christ, and also to serve in their turn as spiritual elders, teaching this art to others.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper began with an encouragement to reappropriate a traditional monastic definition of “spiritual exercise”, broadly encompassing the whole daily cycle of monastic practices, and in a more focused sense emphasizing *lectio divina* and contemplative exegesis. Understood in this way, every monastery is a place where spiritual exercise is practiced and where it can also be taught to guests and retreatants. As we have seen, this facilitates training in the arts of discernment and spiritual direction. Two final points should be noted in concluding. First, the reappropriation of these traditional definitions may assist in correcting a spiritual imbalance that is becoming daily more noticeable. Since the mid nineteen-sixties there has been an ever-increasing emphasis on spiritual practices that focus on the apophatic, that is the imageless, wordless aspect of contemplation. Such practices certainly have value, especially in an age characterized by image- and information-overload. However, there is a danger of losing that balanced spiritual rhythm so prized by our spiritual forbears if equal attention is not paid to practices that treasure and teach the kataphatic dimension of Christian life characterized by rich imagery, text, and symbols. Techniques ordered primarily towards the maintenance of apophatic states implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) cast in a negative light the inner world of thoughts, concepts, fantasies, and distractions, rather than regarding them as Evagrius and Cassian did, as data that reveal our inner spiritual state and as hints and symbols of God’s deeper purposes in creation. It is therefore incumbent on those who live within the monastic milieu, that is nuns, monks, oblates, and all who look to early monasticism for spiritual guidance, to particularly encourage and teach the practice of *lectio divina* together with an appreciation of the multiple interrelated rhythms of the monastic day - “spiritual exercise” according to Leclercq’s broad definition. And this should also entail application of the skills learned in *lectio divina* to the created world around one, especially to the microcosm of that world contained within the human heart.

Finally, it may be helpful to recall the emphasis in the early Church and especially in early monasticism on the liturgy as matter for *lectio divina*. Christian bishops and monastic teachers during and immediately after the generation of Evagrius and Cassian had begun to realize and take full advantage of the value of liturgical celebrations as means of initial and advanced Christian catechesis. It would be fair to say that by the first decades of the fifth century the liturgy was on its way to becoming the principal locus of both Christian catechesis and contemplative prayer. This is well-attested in the catechetical homilies of Ambrose and Cyril of Jerusalem, and in the later and even more vivid texts of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor. These great teachers effectively employed the drama of the liturgy to portray by means of the then-developing cycles of the liturgical year the great truths of salvation-within-history which Evagrius calls the *logoi*.

Our age is often rather glamorously described as “post modern”; but it could as easily and perhaps more accurately be characterized as “despairing”, as increasingly cynical concerning the possibility that history or events contain any purpose or meaning. Perhaps by means of monastic spiritual exercise we can again learn to contemplate with expectation and wonder the crystallization and patterning of that meaning present in the immeasurably rich liturgical cycle of days, weeks, and years; then, empowered by the arts of *lectio divina* and contemplative exegesis, we may rediscover the ability to behold the cycles of modern human history in a new and hopeful way.