

Guigo the Carthusian: The Ladder of Monks and Implications for Modern Life

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One of the most lasting and far-reaching impacts among spiritual writers can be seen in Guigo the Carthusian. Guigo wrote his reflections primarily for his own community in the twelfth century, but his approach for *lectio divina* has spread, and can now be found throughout the Christian world. Indeed, the practice of *lectio divina* predated Guigo by several centuries, and it was already established as a cornerstone of the life of the Benedictines; however, with Guigo, the approach was formalized and explained so that this practice could be accessible to all.

Guigo lived and wrote during the twelfth century in modern day France. Biographical information on him is scarce at best, and the only certain facts that are available are that Guigo was a Carthusian, he was made ninth prior of the Carthusian motherhouse at La Grande Chartreuse. In 1173, he became the general of that order. Finally, in 1180, he resigned the office of general of the Carthusian order. Guigo died in 1188. The text that became known as *The Ladder of Monks* was originally written and intended as conferences for his community while he was prior, but, providentially, the text has become more widely available in the nearly 900 years since.<sup>1</sup>

Guigo's life in a Carthusian monastery was, to put it lightly, austere. In general, the Carthusians did not speak unless necessary, and, as a rule, the only vocal sounds they make is chanting the Divine Office.<sup>2</sup> In this austere and silent life, Guigo came up with his ladder of monks to be ascended to reach contemplation of God. He describes the origin of this idea as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, "Guigo," (class lecture, Notre Dame Seminary, October 14, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change: an Introduction to Lectio Divina* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2009), 26.

One day, when I was busy working with my hands, I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came to my mind: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. These make up a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has few rungs, yet its length is immense and wonderful, for its lower end rests upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets.<sup>3</sup>

From this simple beginning, Guigo II goes on to describe in detail his approach to scripture in which any person can be “lifted up from earth to heaven.”

The first stage of *lectio divina* that Guigo discusses is *lectio*, reading. In this stage, Guigo begins the illustration of eating grapes which takes him throughout the work. This first step he likens to putting a grape into his mouth. In this first stage, Guigo calls the person engaging in *lectio divina* to invoke Holy Spirit’s help then slowly read through a passage of scripture and even re-read it several times. It is important at this stage to resist the temptation to simply read to complete the passage. This can be especially challenging in the modern world that is driven by results and success. Instead of reading to complete a passage, Guigo’s approach calls the reader to read “as slowly and thoughtfully as possible.”<sup>4</sup> The goal is not to complete the passage, but rather to “let the words of Scripture sink in or be ingested so that they can nourish the whole person.”<sup>5</sup> Here, the reader notices the words that are actually used in Scripture, and he allows himself to be caught up in parallels and

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<sup>3</sup> Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks: a Letter On the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978), 67-68.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Hughes, *Spiritual Masters: Living a Life of Prayer in the Catholic Tradition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor (IN), 1998), 85. Hereafter referred to as Hughes.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, 85.

reflections of what the words say. One author summarizes this stage as looking to understand the who, what, when, and where of a passage.<sup>6</sup>

The second rung of the ladder of monks is *meditatio*, meditation on the passage in question. Guigo likens this to ruminating and chewing on the food that was put into the mouth in the *lectio* rung. In this stage, with the who, what, when, and where in mind, a person asks the question, “why?” The goal of this rung is to understand what God wishes to convey individually through the passage of scripture. The immediate literal sense was attained in the *lectio* stage, now, a person takes time to reflect on the allegorical, moral, and eschatological senses of the passage. Here, a person is invited to notice what was said or not said and the deeper meanings and ramifications for his own life. Guigo, in his example using the beatitudes, notes that the scripture does not announce that the “pure in body” are blessed, but rather “the pure in heart.”<sup>7</sup> He reasons, from this, that it is not enough to be pure in body, but one must be pure of heart as well. He also notes the parallels to this truth that can be found in the prophets when they say things like, “Create a pure heart in me, God.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, *meditatio* includes the mind turning to the bliss for which it longs: “to see the face of the Lord.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, the person engaging in *lectio divina* meditates on the spiritual senses of the Scripture passage and the implications for his own life.

The third rung that Guigo discusses is *oratio*, prayer. In this stage a person turns to God with what he has learned and come to understand in the first two

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<sup>6</sup> Gray, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> Guigo, 70.

<sup>8</sup> Guigo, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Guigo, 70.

stages. He talks to God, tells Him of the fruits of his *lectio* and *meditatio*, asks questions, and seeks the grace to live the life that has been illuminated by the Scripture. Guigo describes this stage as “seeking the flavor of the food.”<sup>10</sup> For many, this can be one of the most difficult stages in the process because, as Saint Paul reminds us, “we do not know how to pray as we ought.”<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, this is also the rung on which God is most forgiving. Indeed, Saint Gregory the Great observed that “prayer is desire to pray whether the petition is fully articulated or not.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the most important aspect of this rung is our sincere desire and genuine attempt to enter into prayer and respond to God’s Word in prayer. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux describes prayer like this: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”<sup>13</sup> Nothing in this definition or Guigo’s requires success, but merely consistent and genuine effort. That which is lacking will be supplied as Paul says in the second half of the quote above: “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the fourth rung of Guigo’s ladder is that of *contemplatio*, contemplation which Guigo describes as enjoying the nourishment of the food that has been eaten in the first three rungs. This rung is unique from the other three because it is not an active task of the intellect or will as were they, but rather a gift

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994), Ro 8:26.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 2558.

<sup>14</sup> Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994), Ro 8:26.

from God that man cannot force or acquire of his own accord. Whereas the first three rungs of *lectio divina* are active, this fourth rung is largely passive; it is the activity of God, not of man. Further, because it transcends the limits of human language, it also is the most difficult to define. It can be said that the progression through the four rungs proceeds from sense in *lectio* to intellect in *meditatio* to affect in *oratio* to “the capturing of all those powers by God in something that transcends them”<sup>15</sup> in *contemplatio*. Guigo describes *contemplatio* as the soul becoming “drunk” on the Lord. He tells the reader that God “breaks in upon the middle of its prayer...He slakes its thirst” and causes “all carnal motives [to be] so conquered and drawn out of the soul that in no way is the flesh opposed to the spirit, and man becomes, as it were, wholly spiritual.”<sup>16</sup> The challenge for the modern reader of this description is that it seems so alien to anything any modern reader may have experienced — or indeed expects to ever be able to experience — that many modern Christians simply give up on the possibility of engaging in such prayer or they seek solace in systems that promise a guaranteed easy road to contemplation in a few easy steps. Tim Gray offers perhaps the simplest definition available of contemplation in his excellent book on *lectio divina* for laypeople: “a gaze of love.”<sup>17</sup> In his estimation, this final stage of *lectio divina* is simply enjoying gazing upon God and allowing God to do what he wills in the heart. Understanding, defining, and experiencing contemplation has been central to the Christian experience since the beginning. Unlike the modern self-help approach to

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<sup>15</sup> Gray, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Guigo, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Gray, 93.

contemplation, however, Guigo's ladder and the Christian spiritual tradition make no promises that contemplation will be granted at any given time or that a person engaging in Guigo's ladder will experience extended ecstasies of contemplation or otherwise. It must always be recalled that, in the Christian tradition, these consolations are always gifts from God, not the result of human effort, and, as such, it is necessary to allow God to be God and trust that He will grant them as He wills and when it is best for each person. Instead of providing a sure approach to achieve such gifts, the instructions set forth throughout the Christian spiritual tradition set out to create facilitating circumstances, to prepare the Christian to receive the gifts and consolations when God chooses to bestow them.

Even in his semi-hermit life in the Carthusian monastery, Guigo was realistic about the challenges of entering prayer and practicing extended times of prayer using his ladder. In his text, he observes four common obstacles that many face: "unavoidable necessity, the good works of active life, human frailty, or worldly follies."<sup>18</sup> These four common challenges are themselves four rungs of a ladder that could be seen to oppose the ladder Guigo has proposed to pray the Scriptures. Each of them builds on the last, and, only the last is truly worthy of blame. The first obstacle, unavoidable necessity, is something that must be endured by all. It is interesting that, even living in a community with a schedule specifically designed to promote prayer and solitude, Guigo is able to see that such prayer is frequently interrupted by the challenges of life. The second obstacle, good works, were likely less of a direct challenge to Guigo in the carefully regimented hermit life of a

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<sup>18</sup> Hughes, 91. (Quoting Guigo).

Carthusian, but they are a very real part of the modern reader's life. Guigo notes that this obstacle is to be endured. It seems important to note that he does not excuse it as the first, but rather encourages the Christian to endure it; the not infrequent claim by some priests that "my work is my prayer" by which they excuse themselves from having to carve extended private prayer time into their parish schedule would be alien and likely wholly rejected by Guigo. The third, human frailty, is a running theme throughout the Christian spiritual tradition. Guigo notes that this obstacle should invite compassion, presumably from those who see the failures of the Christian. Finally, if each of these rungs of Guido's anti-ladder is climbed, a person ends up so far from prayer that he simply engages in worldly follies and forgets his God in prayer; this, according to Guigo, invites blame. A person who neglects his prayer time without unavoidable necessity, being caught up in good works, or the fault of true human frailty is not only guilty of a fault, but of a sin, and he must repent and seek to correct his behavior.<sup>19</sup>

In reading this text as part of seminary formation, it seems important to see its ramifications for priestly life as well as for that of the common Christian. First of all, Guigo's ladder provides a path for priests to remain always in touch with God. As was stated above, for a priest to be a priest, and not just a social worker who also fulfills sacramental duties, it is absolutely necessary that he include time of private extended prayer. This is not primarily for the intellectual stimulus of allowing the priest to better understand his role as priest, although that will frequently be a fruit. It is not for the sake of the priest talking to God and interceding for his parish

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<sup>19</sup> Hughes, 91.



community and those under his pastoral care, although that is a necessary part of his role as priest. Instead, a priest's time of private extended prayer in solitude "has much more to do with communion than communication."<sup>20</sup> If a priest does not maintain a constant communion with God, then his ministry is empty. It is from that communion with God that his ministry must flow. It must come from Christian charity that is the fruit of that communion, or, as the apostle Paul is quick to note, he is nothing. While a priest may, like any other Christian, be dry in his prayer on occasion, or even frequently, Guigo's ladder provides a method by which he can always be listening for what God is trying to say and constantly facilitate the communion that will make a fruitful ministry possible. Another important result of Guigo's ladder in the life of a priest should be visible in his preaching. A homily that is the result of a critical and academic analysis of the readings will, at best, inform the parish, but it will rarely inflame them. A homily built solely on emotion and popular fads will leave a parish without any depth since it has been fed, at best, on baby food only. Instead, a homily built on a firm foundation of meditation on the Scriptures and communion with God will serve to inspire and inflame a parish to both approach God's Word for themselves and incorporate the Scripture into their lives.<sup>21</sup>

Even though he wrote for a semi-hermit community of monks in the twelfth century about a practice that had been part of monastic prayer for 800 years already, Guigo's *The Ladder of Monks* provides a wealth of advice for the modern reader of Sacred Scripture. There is profound value to be had for layperson,

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<sup>20</sup> Hughes, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, "Guigo," (class lecture, Notre Dame Seminary, October 14, 2013).

seminarian, or priest in his text, and his approach to ascend from the earth to heavenly secrets, while not guaranteeing God's gift of contemplation, certainly provides an excellent facilitating environment to prepare the Christian for it.

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