

Fr. Perozich comments —

A holy bishop I know whose preaching I often have heard demurred when a cleric was elevated to a higher rank saying, “Well, he has several degrees.”

Being degreed does not make me holy. Neither does it make me intelligent. I can only spout what it is that I remember that I have learned from my education, be it good or bad, as well as my personal opinion for the way I would like things to be.

Personally I have 3 masters degrees, Sports Science, Divinity, and Master of Arts in Religion. They don’t make me holy, truthful or smart.

One priest at the University of San Diego used to tout his academic credentials in spite of the fact that he had immoral leanings and shoddy theological presentations.

A clever woman mocked his pride intoning a melody familiar to us of the 50’s from the Mouseketeers, “Big deal: STL, STD, M - O - U - S - E.”

Holiness is an expression of intellectual truth and charity in order to bring God’s people to Him, not to some worldly idea from a cleric’s own mind or more likely from some worldly think tank.

This book is primarily for us priests, but I include lay readers of these emails because I don’t want you to be buffaloes by babbling buffoons.

So the answer to the opening title is YES, a holy priest AND a FAITHFUL theologian.

Do you want a holy priest or a theologian?

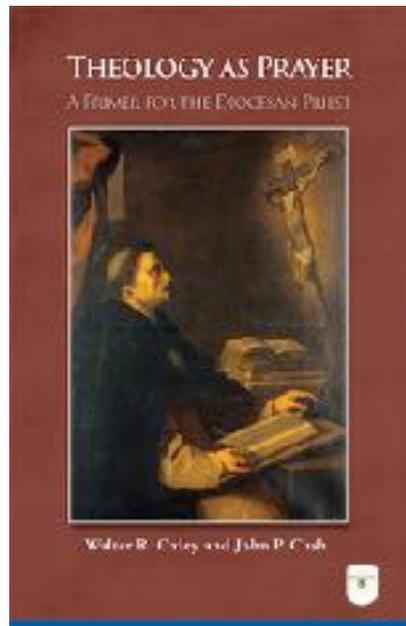
The excellent *Theology as Prayer: A Primer for the Diocesan Priest*, by Msgr. Walter R. Oxley and Fr. John P. Cush, calls for an integrated priestly existence, as all dimensions of a priest’s life must form a coherent whole.

[October 27, 2022 Peter M.J. Stravinskas](#)
Print



Detail from undated painting of St. Thomas Aquinas. (Image: Institute for Priestly Formation)

All too often, when a seminarian is confronted with bad grades, he may end his self-defense with the flourish: “Do you want a holy priest or a theologian?” A savvy formator will reply with a flourish of his own, reminding the aspiring priest that **St. Teresa of Avila opined that, faced with the unfortunate choice between a holy priest lacking theological acumen and one wise in theology but perhaps lacking in some virtues, she would opt for the latter!** Over a century ago, Father Francis Duffy, a founder of the *Dunwoodie Review*, reflecting on an anti-intellectualism among the seminarians of his day, remarked: “Our main drawback is a certain intellectual sloth which masquerades as faith.” Another priest, with less tact, simply asserted, **“Piety is as ephemeral as the morning dew; dumb is forever!”**



Monsignor Oxley and Father Cush, the joint authors of this short but very valuable volume, bring a vast experience in the work of priestly formation to the present work. They eschew any dichotomous approach to priestly formation; after all, **the “Catholic” way is rarely “either/or” but “both/and.”** In point of fact, if searching for an overarching theme here, it would be that good theology provides the matter for a sound spirituality, especially for a priest. That is why, in addressing future priests, I remind them that their primary vocation at the moment is that of a student; hence, if they are not applying themselves in the academic sphere of their lives, that should be the first sin they bring to their next confession.

Here one finds a love for the priesthood and for priests; hence, the oft-used second person pronoun, as the reader can feel himself personally addressed, indeed, appealed to. The very first page sets the tone as the reader is encouraged to **“pray with theology” and to “continue to read”¹ theology, leading to “a deeper love and appreciation for theology.”² We are reminded that the primary task of a priest “is to teach the People of God in charity”;** as a matter of fact, that point was underscored by the Council of Trent as well. This may seem counter-intuitive to some who would imagine Trent as highlighting the sacramental or liturgical role of the priest over preaching and teaching. Not so, because the Fathers of the Council had learned, from painful experience, that **“sacramentalizing” without “catechizing” only leads to the very superstitions on which the Protestant Reformers built their case.**

And so, to teach well requires one to read widely – a point to which we shall return shortly.

Therefore, **the priest must cultivate the life of the mind and become an “intellectual apostle”** who,” according to Father John Courtney Murray, **“must know with fuller sympathy and speak with greater nicety, conscious always of his *primal duty* to seek and love and liberate the truth that is at the heart of every error”** (emphasis added). Our authors again cite Father Murray’s insights: “The simple priest is under the necessity of being trained as a theologian because of his association in the magisterial office of the bishop.”

The first chapter, which so well sets the tone for the rest, ends by asking: “Does good theology lead to holiness? Can study lead to holiness?” The answer comes swiftly: “Hopefully, this book will offer the reader who is a priest a rationale and an encouragement to continue to engage in the work of the intellectual life.”

The second chapter, “The *Habitus* of Prayer and *Lectio Divina*,” is a practical guide to “prayerful study,” “the means by which theology and doctrine come to life for the faithful because of the credible sign that the priest has become and is becoming.” We see that although there is great personal benefit to the priest to be a lifelong learner, there is also an important pastoral benefit. What is being called for here is an integrated priestly existence; in other words, no compartmentalization: prayer here, study there, work somewhere else. Rather, all dimensions of a priest’s life must form a coherent whole. The seminarian (and by extension, the priest) is warned against self-distraction through useless online pursuits, thus wasting time. Inasmuch as time is a precious commodity which, once wasted, can never be retrieved, we must guard against its misuse – which becomes very possible if a priest has made peace with a bachelor existence, rather than an apostolic one.

The third chapter zeroes in on “theological *lectio*,” which uses the four-part approach of *lectio divina* and adapts it to theological pursuits: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), *contemplatio* (contemplation). The text chosen should be Christocentric and should be read prayerfully, then re-read, pausing over passages that struck a chord; a caution is leveled that the reading should not be done so much primarily as a learning exercise as for an encounter with Christ. Similarly, the text selected should not be excessively difficult, lest it devolve into an analytical process. Once the reading phase is completed, the next three steps follow pretty much in the same manner as *lectio* with a biblical passage. Thus, the reading is committed to the written word which, in turn, will eventually

find their way to the spoken word, whether through preaching, teaching, counseling or confessional praxis. The reading and reflection thus serve as a kind of remote preparation for the various aspects of pastoral ministry, giving flesh to St. Peter's encouragement: "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

In the fourth chapter, the authors select ten theologians whose works they consider to be apt candidates for theological *lectio*: Bernard Lonergan (I never understood him as a college seminarian and don't think that he's gotten any less dense or I any brighter); Hans Urs von Balthasar (another one who always seemed to work from the fog into the clouds for me); Karl Rahner (I never "cottoned" to his formal theology but found his homilies and meditations quite beautiful); Henri de Lubac (now we're getting warmer); St. Bonaventure (whose work "grabbed" the young Ratzinger); St. Thomas Aquinas (who was treated like a neanderthal by my horrible seminary but whom I grew to appreciate deeply under the tutelage of the friars of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington); St. Ignatius of Antioch (the second-century theologian, who launched the Anglican John Henry Newman on his love affair with the Fathers of the Church); St. Maximus the Confessor (the seventh-century, indefatigable "confessor" of a true Christology, who so wedded theology to life that he endured excruciating sufferings for the truth); St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (both of whom exercised an extraordinary influence on my post-ordination theological formation). Needless to say, anyone can produce his own "faves."

The fifth chapter answers the question of the dubious cleric: "How does all this work?" The authors take the theologians identified in Chapter IV and "subject" them to the four-part process as the skeptical cleric is gently led to see how "do-able" it all is. The reflections are profound, beautiful, and inspiring.

In classical style, the book ends on the very same note on which it began, holding up "the life of the mind and the connection between the spiritual dimension of priestly formation (which is, of course, lifelong and ongoing) and the intellectual dimension." What Monsignor Oxley and Father Cush have been advocating in these pages can be stated quite simply as "doing theology on one's knees."³

Early on in the text, the authors quote with approval Jesuit Father J. Leon Hooper, who echoes 1 Peter 3:15, pointedly calling for **the development of skill "in defense of the faith against rationalistic incursions. . . as the price of the survival of faith."** "The survival of

faith.” That expression put me in mind of Cardinal Newman’s only sustained consideration of priestly formation – a sermon preached by him on what should have been a joyous occasion on the opening of the first Catholic seminary in England since the Reformation.⁴ To say that the future Cardinal rained on the parade would be an understatement. After tipping his biretta in the direction of the happy nature of the momentous event, Newman used the rest of his time proffering a series of dizzying predictions about what those young men would face in the coming years of their priestly ministry.

He refers to the “perilous times” which he saw on the horizon: “The special peril of the time before us is the spread of that plague of infidelity,” by which he meant living without any sense of a transcendental horizon. Wasn’t there, one might ask, always unbelief in one form or another throughout history? Well, not really, as Newman explains: “Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply irreligious.” Then addressing the seminarians directly, he warns: “My Brethren, you are coming into a world, if present appearances do not deceive, such as priests never came into before, that is, so far forth as you do go into it, so far as you go beyond your flocks, and so far as those flocks may be in great danger as under the influence of the prevailing epidemic.” Did Newman’s crystal ball take him into the 21st century?

Permit me to conclude with two points:

First, the authors set the tone by calling this work a “primer”; in other words, this is to be a first step along the long road of forging a fulsome spirituality of study.

Second, since this is a “practical” book. Let me be practical, too. So, Reverend Fathers, get hold of a copy of this book and make it your Advent reading project – perhaps it will lead you to make a new liturgical year resolution to commit to theological *lectio*. Lay Faithful, if you are wracking your brain for a “practical” gift as a stocking stuffer for your favorite priest or seminarian, think about this book, which can contribute to his welfare and which could also overflow for the welfare of the people he serves.

Theology as Prayer: A Primer for the Diocesan Priest

By Walter R. Oxley and John P. Cush

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Endnotes:

1In other words, such continuous reading is the work of a lifetime. This puts me in mind of a conversation at the Saturday evening dinner table of a rectory where I – and six other weekend assistants (all teachers) – were discussing some current theological topic, only to be interrupted by the pastor who proudly proclaimed, “Guys, I haven’t read a book since I was ordained.” One of the brethren retorted: “Larry, you never read a book *before* you were ordained!”

2This is a necessary corrective to the rather frequent slights directed at theology by the present pope, which can fuel a negative attitude toward theological pursuits by seminarians.

3Truth be told, one of the biggest difficulties of the post-Vatican II era was the emergence of certain problematic academics who did theology in a laboratory. For instance, can anyone envision a Charles Curran or Hans Küng on his knees? As a matter of fact, is there a single photo of either of them even celebrating Holy Mass?

4“The Infidelity of the Future,” 2 October 1873.

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