

You Become What You Read: Transmission of Traditions in Monastic Reading and Writing

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Abstract

Catholic monastic traditions have been passed on through centuries partly through monastic literature. Despite the long historical span, the role of monastic reading and writing in the transmission of traditions has generated little research interest, and no comprehensive study is available on this topic. This article investigates the transmission of monastic traditions through three studies: 1) An analysis of reference profiles of three contemporary monastic writers (Carthusian, Carmelite and Cistercian); 2) An analysis of novice reading lists from seven monastic communities (Carthusian, Carmelite, Cistercian and Benedictine); 3) A brief literature review on the transmission of tradition in early monasticism. These studies identify some similarities in reading and writing, especially regarding the early monastic traditions. Some differences of historical profiles between monastic reading and writing also emerged. Together these three studies indicate a tradition of ancient monastic path of life-long transformative learning in the school of humility and obedience.

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Resumo

As tradições monásticas católicas foram transmitidas ao longo dos séculos, em parte através da literatura monástica. Apesar do longo período histórico, o papel da leitura e da escrita monástica na transmissão de tradições gerou pouco interesse na investigação, não existindo nenhum estudo abrangente disponível sobre este tema. Este artigo investiga a transmissão das tradições monásticas através de três estudos: 1) Uma análise dos perfis de referência de três escritores monásticos contemporâneos (cartuxo, carmelita e cisterciense); 2) Uma análise das listas de leitura de noviços de sete comunidades monásticas (cartuxa, carmelita, cisterciense e beneditina); 3) Uma breve revisão da literatura sobre a transmissão da tradição no monaquismo primitivo. Estes estudos identificam algumas semelhanças na leitura e na escrita, sobretudo em relação às primeiras tradições monásticas. Surgiram também algumas diferenças de perfis históricos entre a leitura e a escrita monástica. Em conjunto, estes três estudos indicam uma tradição do antigo caminho monástico de aprendizagem transformadora, ao longo da vida, na escola de humildade e obediência.

Palavras-chave: Monasticismo; Transmissão da Tradição; Leitura; Literatura Monástica.

Introduction

Potential new entrants to Catholic monastic communities are typically assigned to a novice master who takes charge of their formation. They may be offered conferences, lectures, live or online courses and private spiritual guidance. Many religious Orders also provide their novices 'required' or 'recommended' reading as an introduction to their spiritual traditions. The adage 'you become what you read' then takes an

almost literal meaning.¹ You read about Carmelite tradition to become a Carmelite nun. Or, your previous reading of Carmelite authors might have influenced your desire to become a Carmelite nun. Indeed, Nicky Hallett in her study on English nuns in seventeenth-century Carmelite cloisters writes about a nun whose reading led to a monastic vocation. She enjoyed reading so much and spent so much time alone that her family sent her to talk to a priest. To this seventeenth-century young woman, reading itself was a sign of vocation.² Another nun in the same study described herself as having always been a lover of reading. One day in her youth, she was tumbling over a priest's little library. The priest chided her for disordering his books but then asked her to choose any one book which he would then lend to her. She chose one that was placed very high without knowing what book it was. The priest told that she had made an excellent choice, for it was the *Life of Saint Teresa*. She read it several times and every time was more and more delighted with it. The book inspired her with the “desire of being of her Holy [Carmelite] Order.”³

In this context, we should not forget the influence of Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* that ends with the suggestion to “read these words”⁴ to others so that they may learn about the life of monks. Athanasius reminded the readers that the Lord leads those who serve Him unto the end, *not only to the kingdom of heaven, but here also* – “even though they hide themselves and are desirous of withdrawing from the world” – making monks illustrious and well-known everywhere on the account of their virtue and the help they render others.⁵ Athanasius's words proved insightful as his biography of monk Anthony later played an instrumental

¹ The idea here relates to ‘intentional monastic reading’ associated with formation and the transmission of tradition. Not all that one reads will necessarily contribute to what one becomes.

² Nicky Hallett, “Philip Sidney in the Cloister: The Reading Habits of English Nuns in Seventeenth-Century Antwerp” in *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 100.

³ Hallett, “Philip Sidney in the Cloister”, 100.

⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* (Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2014), 94.

⁵ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 94.

role in the conversion of Augustine of Hippo.⁶ From this followed events that in turn led to his contribution to monastic writing and history.

1. The Chain of Monastic Reading and Writing

The assumption is that when one enters the novitiate in a monastery, one will be expected to learn about their tradition and familiarise oneself with the important authors of the Order. Such transmission of the Carmelite tradition is evident in the following chain:

1. A contemporary Carmelite nun, Sister Angela Thérèse was interviewed by Mary Loudon for her book *Unveiled: Nuns Talking*, published in 1992. In this interview, Sister Angela Thérèse explains the personal experience of God's presence in all aspects of her life:

I see God more as a presence, both within us and without, because He is everywhere all the time, and within us as well. That's a very Carmelite thing – the practice of the presence of God. We call it the Divine Indwelling, the idea that He's with us everywhere all the time. He's with us amongst the pots and pans as much as He is when we're in the choir on our knees.⁷

2. Sister Angela Thérèse's description resembles that of Carmelite Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1611-1691), in his *The Practice of the Presence of God and the Spiritual Maxims*:

The time of business... does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen... I possess GOD in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.⁸

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), VIII.12.

⁷ Mary Loudon, *Unveiled: Nuns Talking* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 29.

⁸ Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God and the Spiritual Maxims* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 16.

3. This thought, in turn, originates from Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), who instructs the Carmelite nuns of her day in *Book of the Foundations*:

...when obedience calls you to exterior employments (as, for example, into kitchen, amidst the pots and dishes), remember that our Lord goes along with you, to help you both in your interior and exterior duties.⁹

Sister Angela Thérèse characterised the theological concept of ‘Divine Indwelling’ as a “very Carmelite thing.” This concept is associated with the image of “pots and pans in the kitchen” combined with the “practice of the presence of God.” Did she read about these ideas in the text of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection or in that of Teresa of Ávila, or both? Did she read it, or hear it somewhere? It is not possible to know. It appears, nevertheless, that Sister Angela Thérèse had internalised an element of the Carmelite tradition that can be traced down to Teresa of Ávila’s writing in the sixteenth century.

Another chain of monastic reading and writing is observable in *Labour by Candlelight*, a poem by a contemporary Carthusian monk. He writes about a solitary monastic reader who follows the path of thousands of anonymous monks before him. He reads, and writes about his reading.

Labour by Candlelight

Warm candlelight
Falling as faith gives fire to the Sacred Word;
While night with ineffectual force
Raids this hallowed sphere.
Here I sit and ponder
And feel at one with thousands

⁹ Teresa of Ávila, *Book of the Foundations*, trans. John Dalton, accessed January 22, 2022, <http://www.carmelitemonks.org/Vocation/TheBookOfTheFoundations.pdf>

Of whom the world knew nought,
Who down the ages did as I do:

Lived by candlelight
Falling night by night;
By loving trust turned words to holy wonder;
Struck flames from the Sacred Rock,
Burned to be with God as I do...¹⁰

‘Monastic reading’, in this poem, introduces three meanings. Firstly, the *content* of reading associated with *Logos* that inspires the texts of the reader. Secondly, the *tradition* of reading that gives the individual the identity of being a ‘professed monastic reader’. Thirdly, the *process* of reading, where ‘reading’ itself is identified as the first stage towards contemplation. In the Carthusian tradition, Guigo II, the ninth Prior of the Grande Chartreuse in 1173-1178, outlines reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation as the four rungs of a ladder by which monks are lifted up from earth to heaven.¹¹ The lower end of the ladder (reading) rests upon the earth but the top (contemplation) “pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets.”¹² This process of reading is therefore transformative, where monastic ‘being’ leads to a life-long journey of ‘becoming’.

This triple objective of monastic reading is displayed in *Labour by Candlelight*. The anonymous Carthusian monk reads the Sacred Word (*Logos, the content*). When he reads, he feels one with thousands of unknown monastic readers through ages (*the tradition*) who, with “loving trust” and “holy wonder” strike flames from the Sacred Rock and “burn to be with God” (*the process*, where reading is the first stage of the ladder

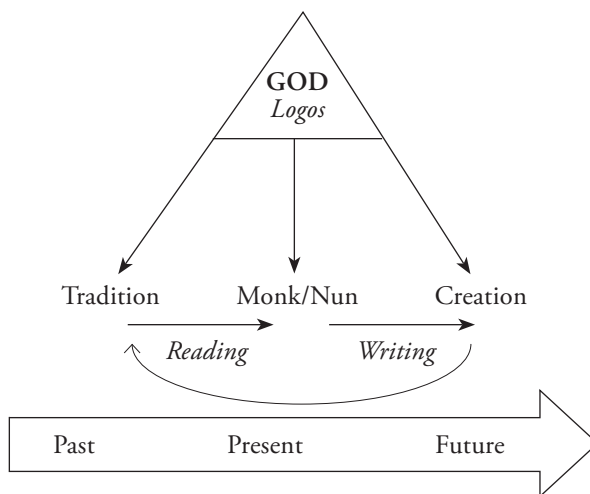
¹⁰ Carthusian, “O Bonitas!” *Hushed to Silence*, ed. Robin Bruce Lockhart (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2001), 10.

¹¹ Guigo II, in *Listening to Silence: An Anthology of Carthusian Writings*, ed. Robin Bruce Lockhart (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 20.

¹² Guigo II, in *Listening to Silence*, 20.

to be lifted up from earth to heaven). The iterative process of monastic reading and writing is presented in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 – Transmission and creation in monastic reading and writing



2. A Study of Monastic Writing

English monastic historian Marilyn Dunn in her study of emerging monasticism argues that a large part of the purpose of monastic texts is to look back to earlier days of monasticism and even to the biblical era. She found that the constant repetition of sections taken from earlier works is one of the most noticeable features of monastic writing – especially monastic rules – in which the search for perfection was always accompanied by the perception of earlier wisdom and the desire to maintain orthodox tradition.¹³

With the aim to follow on Dunn's observation, a small quantitative study was previously conducted on the literature quotations of three

¹³ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), vi-vii.

modern-time monastic authors.¹⁴ Three books published by members of different contemplative Orders (Carthusian, Trappist and Carmelite) were analysed textually to identify the historical references or sources mentioned in these works. Generic topics with no obvious connection to a specific historical period were chosen from each author:

- (1) Vocation and Discernment by an anonymous Carthusian Novice Master;¹⁵
- (2) Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton, OCSO, a Trappist monk;¹⁶
- (3) Eternity and time by Wilfrid Stinissen, OCD, a Carmelite friar.¹⁷

A few findings emerged. In line with Dunn's observations, the Scriptures and early monastic writers were indeed the most frequent reference points for the three writers (Table 1). The Carthusian and the Carmelite authors, especially, quote the Scriptures extensively. Thomas Merton, in contrast, has fewer biblical quotations. The Gospels and other New Testament texts account for the vast majority of the references each representing roughly a fifth of the total mentions. The Old Testament books account for 10% of all quoted sources. The only somewhat surprising aspect is the overall low number of Psalm references. One could have expected Psalms – used daily in the liturgy of hours – to appear more frequently in these texts. But this may be explained by the differentiation between liturgical prayer and literary work.

¹⁴ Riitta Hujanen, *Monastic Perspectives on Temporality: Time is a Mirage* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 11-13.

¹⁵ Carthusian, *The Call of Silent Love*, trans. Anglican solitary (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995).

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005).

¹⁷ Wilfrid Stinissen, *L'Éternité au cœur du temps*, trans. Marie-Nicole Talle (Toulouse: Éditions du Carmel, 2013).

“Rules and other texts” contain references to all monastic Rules as well as some texts without named authors. The Carthusian writer records a significant number of references in this category, predominantly to Carthusian Statutes (62 mentions). The frequent referencing to the Carthusian Statutes is likely associated with the original audience of the book. This is a Carthusian Novice Master writing to novices about vocation and discernment within their monastic tradition.

Table 1 – References to scriptures and other texts

	A Carthusian <i>The Call of Silent Love</i> (198 pages)		Merton <i>Contemplative Prayer</i> (144 pages)		Stinissen <i>L'éternité au cœur du temps</i> (199 pages)		Total
	Carthusian		Trappist		Carmelite		
Old Testament ex-Psalms	47	9%	6	3%	38	11%	8%
Psalms	4	1%	3	1%	19	5%	2%
New Testament ex-Gospels	120	22%	4	2%	91	26%	19%
Gospels	166	30%	3	1%	79	22%	22%
Apocryphal Texts	1	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0%
Scriptures Total	338	62%	16	8%	227	64%	53%
Rules and other texts	65	12%	4	2%	2	1%	6%
Other literature	142	26%	189	90%	123	35%	41%
Total	545	100%	209	100%	352	100%	100%

The common source of influences for the three authors was the Scriptures and the earliest monastic sources. The tendency to adhere to ancient monastic traditions and constant referencing to early monastic sources seems especially evident among the contemplative Orders that

trace their spiritual heritage to the period of the Desert Fathers. This is their shared roots. But after that, the routes start to diverge, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2 – Historical source references and mentions by monastic writers

	A Carthusian <i>The Call of Silent Love</i> (198 pages)		Merton <i>Contemplative Prayer</i> (144 pages)		Stinissen <i>L'éternité au cœur du temps</i> (199 pages)		Total
	Carthusian		Trappist		Carmelite		
Scriptures	338	62%	16	8%	227	64%	53%
Rules and other texts	65	12%	4	2%	2	1%	6%
BC	1	0%	2	1%	4	1%	1%
0 – 1000	62	11%	86	41%	11	3%	14%
1000 – 1200	55	10%	35	17%	0	0%	8%
1200 – 1500	3	1%	14	7%	8	2%	2%
1500 – 1700	12	2%	36	17%	35	10%	8%
1700 – 1900	1	0%	1	0%	18	5%	2%
1900 –	8	1%	15	7%	47	13%	6%
Total	545	100%	209	100%	352	100%	100%

The Carmelite Wilfred Stinissen favours Scripture quotations (64%) but, compared to the other two authors, he has relatively more reference points in the modern times, as well as in the period 1500-1700. The prevalence of the latter period is explained by his references to the two great Carmelite authors of the period, John of the Cross (32 mentions) and Teresa of Ávila (3). After John of the Cross, the second most quoted source by Stinissen is another Carmelite, Thérèse of Lisieux (10

mentions). Stinissen, when writing about eternity and temporality, relies extensively on his Carmelite tradition.

The Carthusian anonymous author rarely refers to sources beyond the eleventh century. The Scriptures (62%) and the Carthusian Statutes (11%) together constitute his main reference points. His early monastic and patristic sources (11%) are the classical ones: Evagrius Ponticus, Desert Fathers, Cassian, Anthony the Great, Augustine of Hippo, Isaac of Nineveh, and Athanasius, in order of frequency of mentions. Another 10% of his reference points are in the period between years 1000 and 1200, mainly to early Carthusians, especially Bruno of Cologne, the founder of the Order (34 mentions) and Guigo (9). But beyond that, modern authors do not seem to offer much quotable material for the Carthusian Novice Master. Only 24 – less than five percent – of references are made beyond year 1200. Ignatius of Loyola (4 mentions) and John of the Cross (3) are his most referred sources in the modern times.

Thomas Merton's main references are relatively more varied and broadly distributed compared to the other two authors. His quotations span more evenly across several centuries and represent different monastic traditions. Merton's most quoted sources in *Contemplative Prayer* are: Carmelite John of the Cross (22 mentions), Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (21), Pope Gregory I (18), and the Benedictine founder Benedict of Nursia (17). Among the earliest monastic sources, Merton also refers to the classics: Basil of Caesarea (13 references), Desert Fathers (9), John Cassian (8) and Evagrius Ponticus (7). Overall, his preferred sources are in the first millennium with 86 mentions (41% of total).

Merton seems to differ from the other two writers in at least two aspects. First, the Carthusian and Carmelite authors show some preference for using sources from their own monastic traditions while Merton chooses a broader scope, although with a significant focus in the emerging early monastic period. Second, The Carthusian and Carmelite writers quote the Scriptures extensively (62% and 64% of references, respectively) in contrast to Merton's 8%. However, it should be noted that

these are only isolated observations. More definitive conclusions about their influences cannot be made without further analysis of their other literary works. The distinguishing elements could also be explained by the specific topics of their books, their audience, or their style of writing.

Table 3 presents the degree of commonality in sources used by the writers. All three authors mentioned Augustine of Hippo and John of the Cross, the latter gathering the greatest number of references overall (57). The sources mentioned by at least two of the authors cover a broad historical scope, with the greatest concentration in the first millennium.

Table 3 – Mentions by two or more authors

BC	Plato
0 – 1000	Augustine of Hippo, Athanasius, Desert Fathers, Evagrius, Cassian, Isaac of Nineveh, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Pope Gregory I
1000 – 1200	Bernard of Clairvaux
1200 – 1500	Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler
1500 – 1700	John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola
1700 – 1900	–
1900 –	Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Dom John Chapman, Gabriel Marcel, Friedrich Nietzsche

It should be noted here that not all that one reads will influence one's writing. Textual references can be made also to oppose certain views.

3. A Study of Monastic Reading

Nicky Hallett's study on monastic reading mentions prescribed book lists for Carmelite nuns in a seventeenth-century cloister in Antwerp to

be read within the community or privately.¹⁸ If it holds that “you become what you read,” uplifting holy literature would be highly recommended. Reading the Word of God would help one to become God-like to the extent that it is possible in this world. The mirror image suggests that idle or worldly reading might tempt one to become idle and worldly, and should therefore be discouraged. According to Hallett, the Antwerp papers indicate that, while the nuns did indeed make distinctions between pre- and post-professional reading and sought to divest themselves of worldly dispositions, some element of their previous demeanour remained, if only in their anxiety about it. They sought to redirect their reading habits rather than abandon them.¹⁹

This current study explores contemporary novitiate reading as part of monastic formation. With this aim, I approached a small number of Benedictine, Cistercian, Carmelite, and Carthusian monasteries in the United States and United Kingdom, directly and through lay members, with a request: *“I am looking for information about recommended reading lists for novices. What literature are they expected to learn?”*

Seven replies arrived by email between August and November 2021 with a total of 118 titles for recommended reading.²⁰ It should be noted that each monastic community typically makes decisions on formation independently; even individual novice masters can have much discretion on this matter. It would therefore be rather difficult to obtain comprehensive and representative information on novitiate reading. One benefit of this design, however, lies in the comparability with the quantitative small-sample study on references of the monastic writers. The cases are individual but these two independent studies offer, at least, a possibility

¹⁸ Hallett, “Philip Sidney in the Cloister”, 89.

¹⁹ Hallett, “Philip Sidney in the Cloister”, 91.

²⁰ With thanks to the Nottinghill Carmelite monastery in London, UK; Saint Joseph and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Monastery of Discalced Carmelite Nuns in Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA; Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, USA; Saint John’s Benedictine Abbey in Minnesota, USA; Benedictine Marmion Abbey in Illinois, USA; Mt. St. Mary’s Trappistine Abbey, in Massachusetts, USA; Mount Saint Bernard Trappist Abbey in Leicestershire, UK; Carthusian Parkminster Charterhouse Parkminster in West Sussex in UK, and Dr. Dan Schneider for their contributions.

to consider some patterns of reading and writing across similar contemplative monastic traditions.

The findings are presented for each religious Order separately with a brief summary in the end. Some responses from the monasteries included additional commentaries on novitiate formation, which have been used as complementary information.

3.1 *Carmelites*

Two Carmelite cloisters reading lists were received; one from the United States, another one from the United Kingdom, both with very similar profiles. In simple terms, Carmelite novice readers are mainly formed by three Carmelite Doctors of the Church: Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux. Apart from one mention of Desert Fathers, these Carmelite communities rely extensively on their own writers. No authors beyond the nineteenth century were mentioned (Table 4).

Table 4 – Carmelite Novice Reading Lists

	Carmelite nuns 1		Carmelite nuns 2		Total	
Time period:						
ca. 300 – 1000	1	20%	-	0%	1	9%
1000 – 1900	4	80%	6	100%	10	91%
1900 –	-	0%	-	0%	-	0%
Tradition:						
Early Monastic	1	20%	-	0%	1	9%
Carmelite	4	80%	6	100%	10	91%
Total	5	100%	6	100%	11	100%

Additional Commentaries

1: Our recommended reading for novices will vary somewhat, depending on each one's level of knowledge when they come. For Carmelites, the Rule and the writings of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross are basic, especially St Teresa's *Way of Perfection*. Over time, there will be an introduction to other Carmelite saints and to the early monastic tradition of the Desert Fathers, etc. Alongside these will be the study of scripture and Christian doctrine – the latter often having to start at a very basic level these days!

2: Other classes/studies include: the history of the Carmelite Order, and Elijah, the Gospels, the history of religious life, a class on the virtues, Mariology.

The referencing profile of the Carmelite author Wilfred Stinissen shows a relatively similar pattern in comparison with the Carmelite novice reading lists. The same three Carmelite saints feature prominently in both studies. In contrast, Stinissen referred to a number of more recent sources which were not found in the Carmelite reading lists.

3.2 *Benedictines*

One of the earliest monastic reading lists is found in the Rule of St Benedict. The Rule explicitly recommends the teachings of the holy catholic Fathers, the Old and New Testaments, the rules of Basil of Caesarea, the writings of John Cassian (*Conferences* and *Institutes*) as well as Lives of the Fathers to be read in monasteries.²¹ According to Ralph Greis, OSB, with Cassian in the background the eremitical tradition remains, even if it is not put into practice very often, a part of the Benedictine spiritual heritage. The reading of Cassian and other works of early

²¹ *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* 73:1-5, trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982).

Fathers implies also the possibility for the transmission of some early eremitical ascetic practices and traditions into cenobitic monasticism.²²

Table 5 – Benedictine Novice Reading Lists

	Benedictine monks 1		Benedictine monks 2		Benedictine monks 3		Total	
Time period:								
ca. 300 – 1000	4	50%	5	38%	4	15%	13	27%
1000 – 1900	-	0%	-	0%	-	0%	-	0%
1900 –	4	50%	8	62%	23	85%	35	73%
Tradition:								
Benedictine	2	25%	6	46%	13	48%	21	44%
Early Monastic	3	38%	4	31%	3	11%	10	21%
Cistercian	3	38%	1	8%	5	19%	9	19%
Other	-	0%	2	15%	6	22%	8	17%
Total	8	100%	13	100%	27	100%	48	100%

Additional Commentaries

1: We have both primary and secondary sources for our novices to study... The good news is the wealth of fine material that is available today. In addition to the specified reading list, there is a very basic overview of monastic life.

2: Novices also read various articles and watch webinars pertaining to their daily classes in the Novitiate.

²² Ralph Greis, “Aspects of Monastic Formation, Probation, and Education in St. Gregory Palamas,” in *SUBBTO* 67, no. 2 (2022): 296. Ralph Greis, OSB is the novice master of the Benedictine community at Abbey of Gerleve/Billerbeck in Germany.

The historical profile of Benedictine reading lists is divided between works written after the twentieth century (73%) and those written before the ninth century (23%), with no medieval texts included. The recommendations of the Rule of St Benedict are diligently adhered to: Cassian, Basil of Caesarea and Benedict of Nursia are found in three reading lists and the Sayings of Desert Fathers in two. The majority of texts represent the Benedictine tradition (44%), followed by Early Monastic writers (21%) and Cistercian authors (19%). Among the Cistercian authors with most mentions was Michael Casey, OCSO, a monk and scholar of Benedictine spirituality.

3.3 *Cistercians*

Both reading lists represent the Trappist tradition; contemplative communities of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. Their reading profiles are relatively more focused on the twentieth century and contemporary works compared to the other religious Orders in this study. But similarly, their novitiate reading still indicates a preference for their own monastic tradition with 60% of titles associated with Cistercian texts or authors.

Table 6 – Cistercian Novice Reading Lists

	Cistercian nuns 1		Cistercian monks 2		Total	
Time period:						
ca. 300 – 1000	1	10%	-	0%	1	2%
1000 – 1900	-	0%	5	10%	5	9%
1900 –	9	90%	43	90%	52	90%
Tradition:						
Cistercian	6	60%	29	60%	35	60%
Benedictine	2	20%	8	17%	10	17%

	Cistercian nuns 1		Cistercian monks 2		Total	
Magisterial	-	0%	5	10%	5	9%
Other	2	20%	6	13%	8	14%
Total	10	100%	48	100%	58	100%

Additional Commentaries

1: I must admit the book lists are in my head and not on paper. However, they are real lists and our postulants and novices do have certain areas of required reading. Naturally the spirituality of the monastic life is major, particularly the spirituality of our Cistercian Order. In that area we have our own excellent authors.

It is worth highlighting the intentional transmission of tradition between Cistercian readers and writers. On topics to be read: “Naturally the spirituality of the monastic life... particularly the spirituality of our Cistercian Order. In that area we have our own excellent authors.”

2: We do have some reading lists for the novitiate. But we do not say novices have to read all the books – they are just suggestions. We also have classes on certain texts and we largely advise scripture for *lectio divina*.

The full contribution from this monastery was a five-page list with two separate sections: “Novitiate Books / Resources” (48 titles) and “Monastic Initiation” (75). There was some overlap between the two sections. I have used the titles in the first one as more relevant for this particular survey. To give a general idea of the contents of each, the “Novitiate” list covers topics such as: Monastic Spirituality, Prayer, Monastic Texts, Other Books and Texts. The sections in “Monastic Initiation” may indicate further studies possibly for those who have already completed their Novitiate. These include:

1. Vocation and Spirituality: Spiritual Classics Must Read, Liturgy and Church History.

2. Intellectual Approach: Introduction to Philosophy, Scripture, Fathers of the Church, General Introduction to Theology.

In comparison with the Benedictine reading lists which included a relatively high share of primary sources from the early monastic period (27% of total mentions), the Cistercian approaches seem to introduce the early traditions mainly through secondary sources. Cassian's *Conferences* is the only primary source from the early period that appears in the Cistercian novice reading lists, representing 2% of their total mentions.

In comparison with the Trappist writer, Thomas Merton, there is little similarity in the historical profile of mentions. In the analysed book, Merton relied extensively on the earlier period primary sources while the Trappist novice reading focuses on modern secondary sources.

3.4 *Carthusians*

The Carthusian Charterhouse expresses a somewhat different perspective on noviciate reading:

There's no special list, but the recommendation to read the desert fathers and similar literature, but normally one is absolutely free whatsoever he likes... Carthusian spiritual life provides in contrary to other Orders an enormous freedom of personal choice, and that makes it so individual and precious!

Additional Commentary

1: Basics like the study and love of Scripture are assumed. We must do at least 30 minutes a day pondering Scripture. The Church encourages *lectio* by giving a plenary indulgence each day for only 30 prayerful reading of Scripture. Also all their priestly studies are based on the CCC [Catechism of the Catholic Church] so familiarity with it [is] necessary. The brother novices also follow all these lectures but essays and exams are not obligatory for them.

The distinct Carthusian semi-eremical tradition is discernible in their novice master's reply. Personal choice and individual freedom are highly valued. How does this rather short Carthusian 'required reading' list – consisting of Scriptures and Desert Fathers – compare with the Carthusian anonymous writer's mentions in the previous study? The Carthusian writer used three main reference points: 1) Scriptures; 2) early monastic and patristic writers; 3) Carthusian Statutes and other Carthusian sources. These altogether constituted 85% of his mentions. With the limited insight, we can conclude that the Carthusian writer and the novice readers are well aligned regarding the use of Scriptures and early fathers. Regarding the transmission of tradition, the same anonymous Carthusian writer is worth quoting here:

The transmission of a tradition is not accomplished by the handing down of doctrines and practices... There is much that is communicated by means other than words. The reality is much greater than what is written down and what we are able to learn by reading the texts. We must therefore guard against too bookish an approach to Carthusian life. It is a life to be lived.²³

The phrase "life to be lived" is of importance here; we will return to this topic at the end of this article.

4. Summary of Findings

Table 7 summarises the mentions by two or more monasteries by historical periods, in the order of frequency.

²³ Carthusian, *The Call of Silent Love*, 12-13.

Table 7 – Two or more mentions in novitiate reading lists

ca. 300 – 1000	Cassian, Desert Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, Basil of Caesarea
1000 – 1900	Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross
1900 –	Michael Casey, Esther de Waal, Thomas Merton, André Louf, Basil Hume, Mary Margaret Funk, Columba Marmion, Augustine Roberts, Terrence Kardong, Bernando Olivera, Columba Stewart, Adalbert de Vogüé

The first observation is that Benedict of Nursia’s original ‘recommended reading’ list seems to have endured the test of time. Cassian, Desert Fathers, Basil of Caesarea and Benedict hold their places as the most mentioned sources of the first millennium.

Several additional comments from the monasteries referred to *lectio divina* or Scriptures, but none included Old or New Testaments in their novitiate reading lists. This brings to mind the advice of Poemen, an old hermit, to Ammon, a young monk, in *Sayings*:

Ammon: If I go to my neighbour’s cell, or if he comes to mine, we are both afraid of telling each other silly tales which may harm our monastic purpose.

Poemen: You are right. Young men need to be on their guard.

Ammon: What about old men?

Poemen: Old men who make progress and are stable, do not find frivolous words in their mouths and so they do not say them.

Ammon: If I need to talk with my neighbour, do you think I should talk to him about the Scriptures or about the sayings and admonitions of our predecessors?

Poemen: If you can't keep silence, it is much better to talk about the sayings of the elders than about the Scriptures. For the danger is great.²⁴

Poemen's advice to the novices of his time indicates that monastic formation was best transmitted through the sayings of the elders. But as the religious continue their progress in the monastic path, they venture deeper into the Scriptures and into silence.

As for the period 1000 – 1900, only two names are mentioned two or more times: Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. They are well presented in the Carmelite readings lists but in no others.

The period after year 1900 is dominated by texts from the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions. The Benedictines with most mentions are: Basil Hume, Columba Marmion, Mary Margaret Funk, Terrence Kardong, Columba Stewart and Adalbert de Vogüé. The Cistercians all represent the Trappist tradition: Michael Casey, Thomas Merton, André Louf, Augustine Roberts and Bernardo Olivera. Michael Casey, OCSO, gathered overall the greatest number of mentions (20) across several titles.

Finally, cross-referencing the readers' and writers' most mentioned lists (Tables 3 and 7) five shared sources are identified: Desert Fathers, John Cassian, Basil of Caesarea, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. Could these be considered a definite 'Top 5 Must Read' of monastic literature? The answer depends on one's perspective. A researcher of contemplative traditions could certainly recommend them as excellent primary sources to read.

5. Transmission of Tradition in Early Monasticism

The first part of this article dealt with the transmission of monastic traditions today. The latter part of this article takes a different

²⁴ *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, trans. Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 122. From here on: *Sayings*.

perspective. We now explore, briefly, how this topic was approached by early monastics.

In the beginning, the teachings of the elders were collected, treasured and passed on verbally. Later, these ‘sayings’ were committed to writing. According to William Harmless, SJ, a scholar of early Church history, the purpose of remembering the sayings of the elders was to provide access to their spirituality and salvation:

The community, from all indications, took great pains to remember them accurately, for the sake of spirituality. The religious community remembered because it was convinced that remembering provided access to the holy, to salvation. Its concern was not past facts, but past wisdom that might serve the present quest.²⁵

Some of these sayings show an intriguing approach to books and reading:

Evagrius said that there was a brother who had no possessions except a Gospel book and he sold it in order to feed the poor. He said something worth remembering: “I have sold even the word that commands me to sell all and give to the poor.”²⁶

Theodore, surnamed Pherme, had three good books. He went to Macarius, and said, “I have three good books, and I am helped by reading them. Tell me what to do.” Macarius replied, “Reading books is good, but possessing nothing is more than anything.” When

²⁵ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 210-211. A similar reasoning is given by a contemporary Carthusian novice master in *The Call of Silent Love*: “It is not the text of the Statutes as such that interests us so much as the religious experience from which it is born. We are drinking in a tradition which, like the Gospel, was a living reality before being consigned to a text... Guigo set down in writing the customs of life that was being led in Chartreuse on the insistence of other foundations that wanted to follow the same way of observance, and not because there was a need to codify the observance”, 12.

²⁶ *Sayings*, 54.

he heard this, he went and sold the books, and gave the money to the poor.²⁷

Both of these cases result in the same radical action: the monk sells his book(s) and gives the money to the poor. What might have been the teaching here? One lesson can be the emphasis of poverty as a primary evangelical counsel, as indicated in the second saying: “Reading books is good, but possessing nothing is more than anything.” Another reason might be in the focus on ‘action’ rather than ‘reading’. The Rule of St Benedict reminds monks in Prologue 35 that “the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings.”²⁸ The correct course of action be: after the text has been read and memorised, the book can be sold. Thus the book becomes an object of ‘action’ rather than a personal ‘possession’ placed on a shelf. Furthermore, this transaction raises money for the poor and allows the tradition to be transmitted to the next reader of the book.²⁹

The importance of monastic ‘action’ is highlighted by William Harmless: “While the desert fathers chanted, recited, and chewed on biblical texts, they saw scripture less as something to be talked about than as something to be done. This squared with their general temperament: they were doers, not talkers.”³⁰

The emphasis for the early practitioners was indeed putting the word into ‘practice’. As Harmless puts it, after receiving the “word of salvation” from the elder, the monk’s real task of obedience would come later, from a lifetime of making the “word” his own. As an example, some brothers once approached Abba Felix and begged him to say a “word.” After some

²⁷ *Sayings*, 54.

²⁸ *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, Prologue 35, 18.

²⁹ Over time, monastic libraries enabled the distribution of books between readers. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, for example, in Chapter 48:14 states: “During the days of Lent, they should be free in the morning to read until the third hour, after which they will work at their assigned tasks until the end of the tenth hour. During this time of Lent each one is to receive a book from the library, and is to read the whole of it straight through”.

³⁰ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 245-246.

silence, he asked: “You wish to hear a word?” “Yes, abba,” they said. Then Felix replied: “There are no more words nowadays. When the brothers used to consult the old men and when they did what was said, God showed them how to speak. God has withdrawn the grace of the word from the old men and they do not find anything to say, because there are no longer any who carry their words out.” The failure of obedience could lead, or had led, to the loss of the charism itself.³¹

John Cassian records a similar demand to put the “words” into practice in the first conference, on Spiritual Knowledge, of Abbot Nesteros:

If you would prepare in your heart a holy tabernacle of spiritual knowledge, purge yourselves from the stain of all sins, and rid yourselves of the cares of this world. For it is an impossibility for the soul which is taken up even to a small extent with worldly troubles, to gain the gift of knowledge or to become the author of spiritual interpretation, and diligent in reading holy things... For this is the first practical step towards learning, to receive the regulations and opinions of all the Elders with an earnest heart... and endeavour rather to perform them than to teach them. For from teaching, the dangerous arrogance of vainglory, but from performing, the fruit of spiritual knowledge will flourish.³²

The Abbot’s conference, furthermore, warns against the pursuit of reading if its purpose is to gain the praise of men. Such a goal makes it impossible to be rewarded with the gift of true knowledge.

What might constitute the ‘true’ knowledge sought by the early monastic fathers? One systematic approach was presented by Evagrius Ponticus as a spiritual progress that starts with ascetic practice (to purge from passions and to acquire virtues) and moves towards mystical knowledge. The ultimate goal is to gain knowledge of the Trinity (Table 8).³³

³¹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 172-173.

³² John Cassian, *Conferences*, Conf. 14, Ch. IX. (Brookfield, WI: First Rate Publishers, 2016).

³³ The schema is found in Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes

Table 8 – Spiritual progress from ascetic practice to mystical knowledge according to Evagrius

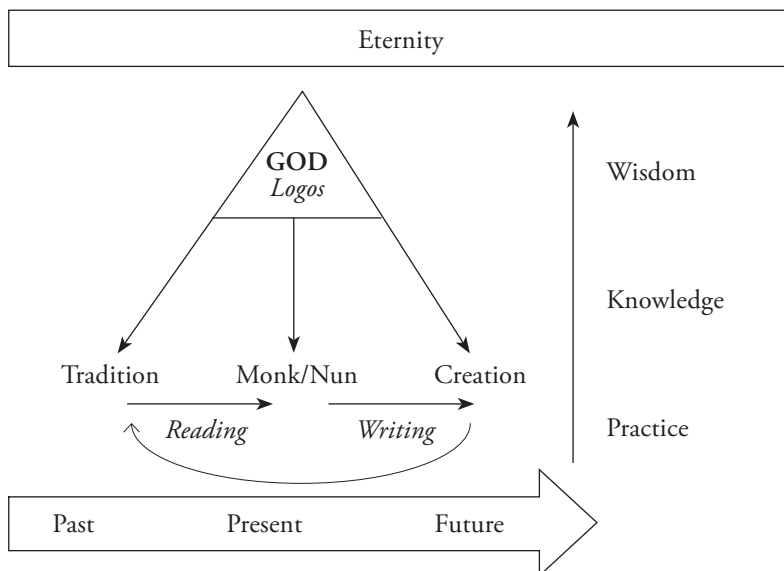
Ascetic Praticce (<i>praktike</i>)			Mystical Knowledge (<i>gnostike</i>)	
Beginning: Faith, fear of God	→	Goal: Passionlessness (<i>apatheia</i>)	Beginning: →	Goal: Knowledge of the Trinity (<i>theologia</i>)
Purpose (purgative): Cleansing of the passions	Purpose (positive): Acquire virtues	Signs: 1. Calm in the affairs of daily life 2. Tranquility when witnessing images in dreams 3. The spirit starts to see its own light	Purpose (purgative): Rid oneself of ignorance	Purpose (positive): Acquire knowledge
<u>The Eight Thoughts:</u> 1. Gluttony 2. Fornication 3. Love of money 4. Sadness 5. Anger 6. Acedia 7. Vainglory 8. Pride	<u>Virtues to be cultivated:</u> 1. Temperance 2. Charity 3. Continen- ce 4. Patience 5. Courage 6. Wisdom 7. Understan- ding 8. Prudence	Result of passionlessness: Love (<i>agape</i>)	Lower level Contemplation of nature (<i>physike</i>)	Higher level Knowledge of God (<i>theologike</i>)

From the views of early monastic practitioners then a bigger picture emerges. Fig. 2, as an extension of Fig. 1, adds another vertical level that is related to monastic reading and writing but also introduces an ascending monastic path: from practice to knowledge of God and eternal wisdom. This takes into account the importance of action and practice in reaching the ultimate goal of the monastic journey: salvation and kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God.³⁴

Bamberger (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 15-39. Table 8 is an adaptation from Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 346.

³⁴ On methods of ascent in monastic literature, see for example Hujanen, *Monastic Perspectives on Tem-*

Fig. 2 – Monastic reading and writing leading in relation to practice, knowledge and wisdom



The importance of monastic practice and spiritual knowledge established by the early monastic writers was reiterated by monastic founders through the following centuries. In a letter sent to Carthusian monks in Chartreux, Bruno of Cologne writes (around year 1100):

I am too full of joy to learn how in your case, who know neither how to read nor write, the omnipotent God writes with his own finger on your hearts the love and knowledge of his Holy Law. Yes, indeed, you demonstrate through your works what you love and what you know when you show generosity, truth and obedience.³⁵

porality, 135-140.

³⁵ Letter that our Venerable Father Bruno wrote in a wilderness in Calabria known as The Tower and which he addressed to his sons in Chartreuse (written in late 1099 or early 1100), in *Listening to Silence: An Anthology of Carthusian Writings*, ed. Robin Bruce Lockhart (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1997), 12.

In summary, reading and writing are important but love and knowledge can be put into practice also by those who are unable to read or write.

6. Conclusions

Monasteries are frequently compared to schools³⁶ and transformational journeys. Novitiate is only one part of the life-long patient learning process. Palladius of Galatia (ca. 363-431) summarises the need for continued education in the monastic school by linking learning and teaching:

For only the God of all is untaught, since He is self-originate and has none other before Him. But all other things are taught, since they are made and created... So men, who think they do not need teachers, or do not obey those who teach them in love, suffer from the disease of ignorance, the mother of arrogance... For teaching does not consist in words and syllables – sometimes men possess these who are as vile as can be – but in meritorious acts of character, cheerfulness, intrepidity, bravery, good temper; add to these unfailing boldness, which generates words like a flame of fire.³⁷

In conclusion, the two studies and the literature review on early approaches confirm the indispensable value of reading and writing in the transmission of monastic traditions. But what ultimately will keep the traditions alive is the process of ‘learning by doing’ that was specifically emphasised by the early monastics. Monastic reading and writing then combines with prayer and work, humility and obedience: a life that is truly loved and lived in line with the traditions.

³⁶ See for example, *The Rule of St. Benedict* in Prologue 45: “Therefore, we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service” and A Carthusian in *Call of Silent Live*: “The way marked by our fathers has been proven for nine centuries. We feel the same inspiration as they did. Let us enter their school with humility and docility”, 13.

³⁷ Palladius of Galatia, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, trans. W. L. Clarke (Great Britain: Aeterna Press, 2014), 19.

Monastic school is a slow and painful process of transformation. There are no shortcuts from practice to knowledge or wisdom. A novice enters into a life-long search for the truth, the pursuit of knowing and loving God. Paradoxically, one remains always at the foundational first steps of humility while gradually progressing; in monastic stability while on a dynamic transformational journey; in the simultaneous state of being and becoming.

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