

Meditatio: on the making of a pastor

Luther's famous dictum regarding the making of a theologian has a certain allure for contemporary ears, fascinated as we are by sound bites and slogans. *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio* - short, concise, and onomatopoeic. The Latin language, widely and diligently studied by countless generations of schoolboys and schoolgirls, has long since faded into quaint obscurity. Most of us navigate the labyrinths of the internet with ease, but we're absolutely baffled by the complexities of western theology's mother tongue.

Thus there's a strange delight in Luther's formula. Here is our window into a by-gone era. With the mere repetition of this magical phrase, we seem instantly transformed. Anyone who can master those three Latin words at least sounds like a theologian - even as he labors to become one. Here we meet a favorite temptation of the devil. The pitfall of seasoned pastors is the temptation to equate formulas with reality. Thus what begins as faithful orthodox confession degenerates into the empty mouthing of pious words. The result is a field day for the devil, who gleefully builds his chapel wherever Christ builds his church, as Luther warned. Whenever shepherds of Christ's own flock are seduced into becoming technocrats and CEO's on the one hand or mere museum keepers of empty tradition on the other, things go very badly for the sheep.

Meditatio is the antidote to all this. For meditation permeates both heart and mind with the living Word of God, which is the Spirit's sword against every aberration outside the church and all heresy within. But meditation demands life-long vigilance on the part of anyone who strives to be a theologian.

Oratio and *Tentatio*, in a sense, take care of themselves. The would-be theologian has no choice regarding them. Affliction [*tentatio*] goes with the territory in this fallen world, the repercussion of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. The cross comes in many sizes and shapes, but it comes surely and inevitably to every Christian.

Prayer [*oratio*] on the other hand, though it does not come naturally, lies close to the heart of the church's life. Every Lord's Day in the liturgy the church pours forth her prayer and praise in the very presence of God. And from the threads of the church's corporate prayer each Christian weaves his personal prayer.

But Meditation another matter. While the Christian can't live for long without being thrust into the arena of prayer or affliction, he can survive quite comfortably - perhaps even thrive very well - without meditation. I say "thrive" because movers and shakers are admired in our world, while contemplatives are scorned.

First a disclaimer. When I mention contemplation, some will immediately assume that I mean meditation as practiced among "spirituality" fans - not so much connecting with transcendent reality as it is getting in touch with self. The goal is not apprehension, but emptiness; not contemplation of truth, but a blank slate.

Meditation, as Luther practiced and advocated it, is quite another matter. It comes from deeper wells: not merely medieval monasticism, but also the church fathers and - still more profoundly - from the Holy Scriptures themselves. *With practice*, he wrote for Master Peter, his barber, *one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart.*

The goal of Christian meditation is not an empty mind, but a full heart; a heart filled with the fullness of Him who fills all in all. St. Paul includes it in his prayer for the Ephesians: *...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe.* [Ephesians 1:18ff.]

While Luther's path for spiritual formation was radically different than that of medieval Catholicism, it was rooted solidly in the mainstream of orthodox antiquity. Pastors at the dawn of the Twenty-first Century would do well to learn that path again, not merely from Dr. Luther, but from the Psalmist before him:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.*
[Psalm 1]

It is our Lord himself, of course, who is the exemplary Man of meditation. As He declared in the face of Satan's temptation, He found His sustenance not in bread alone, but in every word that proceeded from the mouth of God the Father. Day and night He pondered on the law of the LORD. Like a tree with roots sunk deep into living streams, He bore abundant fruit in this parched and weary world.

But Jesus is more than an example. Grafted into Him by our baptismal bath, we have put on Christ. As it was for Jesus, so it is with us. Planted into Him by faith, we draw water from the wells of salvation and yield abundant fruit. He is the vine, we are the branches. Like Jesus before us, we find our delight in the law of the LORD. Like Jesus, we bring forth abundant fruit - for the Vine always bears fruit in His branches. And one of the fruits He produces in us is meditation.

But here again a *caveat* for the zealous pastor: meditation is not the same as study. True enough, the rigor of pastoral work forces every novice theologian to delve deeply into the sacred Scriptures. But meditation is not simply a deeper stage of study, as if by pondering more diligently or thinking harder we arrive at meditation. Study has to do with the mind; meditation is a matter of the heart. The human brain is the organ used for

study; meditation is a more visceral activity. “Meditate” [Heb: *Hagah*] is a verb more organic than intellectual; it has connotations of mastication and digestion. The Psalmist invites us to “chew” on the Word of God, to turn it over and over in both mind and heart, repeating it aloud, mulling over it, savoring the rich nutrients placed within that Word by the Holy Spirit of God.

Thus mediation is located squarely between prayer and affliction. The best setting for meditation is not the study, but the sanctuary, the sick bed and the prayer desk. At its root, meditation calls for an open ear and an attentive heart. It has to do with learning God’s Word, to be sure. But that learning is by heart, not by rote. Such learning begins with the ear, takes root in the heart, and bears fruit in daily vocation. Thus at every turn the making of a theologian is carried on by the Word of God. What is begun with prayer is shaped by meditation and refined in affliction. These are not steps along the way, but three different aspects of one single path. Our delight is forever fixed on the law of the LORD, and on that law we meditate day and night.

Therefore whoever wants to learn the art of meditation must learn to pray the Psalms. The Psalter teaches us the rhythm of prayer: from God to us and then back again. In praying the Psalms we learn to pray by heart, first listening to His Word and then speaking back to God what He has given us to pray in quietness and in peace.

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
...let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in thy sight,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. [Psalm 19:7-8, 14]*

Silence is the place to begin. For most of us, that’s the hardest part. Shunning the fitful pace of our Martha-like lives, we must learn to be more Mary-like instead, sitting quietly before the Lord first to hear, and only then to speak. The Word which God speaks into our ears takes root in our heart and issues forth in prayer and praise. Thus meditation finds both its source and goal in prayer. What is true for us gathered together around pulpit and altar is just as true when we’re alone:

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. ...Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. [Introduction, *Lutheran Worship* (CPH, 1982), p. 6]

So Luther’s dictum finds timeless application. Sustained with prayer, rooted in meditation, and shaped by affliction, theologians of the 21st century will be as able for the task as those who’ve gone before. Shifting winds of doctrine can never shipwreck those who fix their course on God’s sure Word by these three coordinates: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.

Life in the parish is often hectic and hurried, but meditation is an anchor for harried souls in every place and circumstance. It is the secret to peace of mind and heart in our present chaotic, troubled times and beyond.

Filling both heart and mind with God's own living Word, we find not merely solace and comfort, but strength and peace as well. For those whose hearts and minds are stayed in Christ Jesus have the lasting peace of God which passes all understanding.

+ in the Name of the FATHER and of the SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT +

Harold L. Senkbeil, MDiv, STM, DD
Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, Indiana