

Behind Abbey Walls – Abbot Brian and Lectio Divina

This October marks a year since Abbot Brian Clarke, OSB passed away. He had served the school, nearby parishes, and the community as abbot for 20 years. For me, I learned about his life and how a monastic community celebrates a member's passing. When he was close to death, the monastic community gathered in his room to pray, celebrated the anointing of the sick, and sung a hymn to Mary (the Salve Regina). During the funeral mass, a large crowd filled the abbey church to celebrate his life. As a newcomer, the great unity displayed inspired me. I met his family, his nieces and nephews, who shared stories of family picnics on campus and frequent visits to the abbey. Even unto death, he witnessed to the value of a life of faith.

In the homily, Abbot Elias lauded Abbot Brian as a man who exuded Scripture, due to his practice of *lectio divina*. The practice of *lectio divina* is the reading of sacred texts with the intention of encountering Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Monasteries have always been associated with books. While Rome crumbled, the monasteries held onto manuscripts of important texts as beacons of the truth. As Bishop Barron characterizes them, the monasteries were the only light of the Dark Ages.

Although we know with St. Benedict that the “divine presence is everywhere” and many texts can foster an encounter, *lectio divina* especially refers to careful reading of Sacred Scripture. It forms part of the backbone of a monk's day. There is no one single way monks do lectio, but all involve significant time and rumination. For me, I find the time immediately on waking up to be a good, consistent time. Generally, I follow a familiar 4-step process (aided by a cup of tea). First, I read and try to make sense of literally what is being described (step 1). Sometimes I rely on an introduction or brief commentary on the book to give me context. Next, I read the chapters again for a verse that stands out and sometimes I copy it into a notebook. I try to look for symbolism in the text (like you might in an English class); or I reflect on instances from my own life the text reminds me of; or I connect this text to other parts of Scripture (step 2). After reading a few times, I let the words form a prayer in my mind and lift it up to God. For example, the prophets are always calling out Israel for their disobedience and idolatry, and I ask God to help me remove the idols I have set up in my own life. This step, in particular, fosters an encounter with Jesus in the Word, as I lift up my needs to Him (step 3). Lastly, I try to rest in this moment, that peaceful rest not from exhaustion but that comfort you feel when you can be around a good friend in silence (step 4).

From Abbot Brian's example, I know the effect a lifetime of being steeped in Scripture does to a soul. Monks have a privileged vocation to encounter Scripture deeply and often. We pray all the Psalms every two weeks, we celebrate Mass daily, and we take time with Scripture. If you are what you eat, then Abbot Brian became a living Bible through his frequent consumption of Scripture. When people met him, Abbot Brian introduced them to Christ easily because He flowed from the deepest parts of himself. As we commemorate a year since his passing, he continues to provide an example of perseverance in the monastic way of life, one that calls all of us, whatever our vocation, to seriously encounter Christ in Scripture.