

Discovering “God’s Rhythms”

Nourishing Christian Spirituality in a Technological Culture

Richard R. Gaillardetz

We live in a world of technological devices that shape our culture and influence how we look at life. Certain trends in contemporary spirituality suggest that the consumer impulse threatens to “colonize” spirituality. The author offers ways to cultivate “focal practices” to counter this trend.

“Spirituality” is one of those words in Christian discourse that everyone employs but which eludes rigorous definition. It names both a field of study and a vital dimension of human experience, namely the attempt to consciously align one’s life, in all of its concrete particulars, with the rhythm of the divine. The cultivation of a vital spirituality will require, then, two things at minimum: first, an attentive reflection on the particular shape of one’s own life; second, a contemplation of the rhythms of divine life. With this in mind, I would like to reflect on the implications for contemporary spirituality of three features of North American culture: (1) the technological shape of daily life; (2) consumerism and the process of commodification; (3) the emergence of a digital culture.

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Spirituality and the Technological Shape of Daily Life

The relationship between technology and contemporary Christianity is a fascinating one. A case can be made that Christianity has in fact underwritten the Western technological impulse. From the time of the Middle Ages up to the present, the birth and development of technology (the *artes mechanicae*) in Western civilization was closely tied to the Judeo-Christian heritage. Technology was thought to give expression to human dominion over the created order, the restoration of the divine image in humankind, and the graced perfection of humanity (Noble 1999).

How can we not view human innovation evident in technology as an expression of imagination and intellect that are themselves marks of the divine image within us? A total repudiation of technology would not only be futile; it would overlook the ways in which instances of technological ingenuity serve as marvelous manifestations of the creativity of the human spirit. Moreover, none of us can deny the many and profound benefits that modern technology has bequeathed to us: the alleviation of disease, the emergence of instantaneous global communications, the exponential increase in human access to and manipulation of information, etc. For those privileged enough to live in the “first world” and have access to modern technology, it is difficult to deny the many ways in which it has contributed to a more commodious lifestyle. However, our attraction to and fascination with modern technology and the ways in which our culture champions technology as the solution to all problems that bedevil the human race makes it all the more important that we also attend to the hidden and not always positive ways in which modern technology is reshaping our daily lives.

The Device Paradigm

Social philosopher Albert Borgmann has made an eloquent argument for a vast qualitative change having taken place in modern technology (Borgmann 1984). What modern technology offers us today is not merely more sophisticated “tools,” but rather “devices.” Where a tool might be thought of as technological artifact intended to help us more effectively engage our world, a device tries to relieve us from the need for engagement altogether. A band saw is a marvelously sophisticated tool that can be of great assistance for cabinetmakers in the practice of their craft. Put it in my hands, however, ignorant as I am regarding even the rudiments of woodworking, and the tool is useless. A conventional oven is a tool of great value in baking bread, but without a recipe, appropriate ingredients, and some minimal experience in the disciplines of baking, the oven itself is of little help. By contrast, a bread-making machine can be mastered by my six-year-old son. As a technological device, it demands virtually no discipline, no

training, no skills, no engagement in the process of baking a loaf of bread. The device, unlike the tool, gives me the thing I want—fresh-baked bread—without the need to learn any skills and, perhaps most importantly, without having to “waste” valuable time that can be spent on other things. A contrast between a piano and a CD player yields a similar analysis. Both are technological in character; both produce something that I desire, music. However, one requires extensive engagement, discipline, and effort; the other provides almost unlimited effortless access to the music I love.

What is often overlooked in the move from technological tools to devices is what Borgmann speaks of as the “focal” character of ordinary forms of human engagement, that is, our capacity to engage our world by way of characteristic

“focal practices.” These practices are routine ways in which we engage the larger world in our daily lives. Focal activities may be undertaken in pursuit of a desired good, but, and this is crucial, the desired good is internal to the practice itself. These practices often require some at least rudimentary cultivation of skills and sustained attentiveness. There are obvious affinities between Borgmann’s description of focal practices and the view of practices developed by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, although for Borgmann such activities are not essentially communal in character (MacIntyre 1984, 187). Focal activities might include gardening, hiking, cooking, painting, playing a musical instrument, writing, and so on. The ways in which these practices orient us toward our world are threatened by the impetus toward disburdenment and disengagement encouraged by technological devices.

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The cultural change that modern, device-oriented technology places before us is not located in any particular device. Surely we can,

any of us, enjoy the pleasures of a bread-making machine, a television show, or CD player and experience no great harm. I, for one, have no intention of selling my washing machine and clothes dryer. No, the true impact of modern technology lies in the way in which we are confronted not just with individual devices but with what Borgmann refers to as a “device paradigm.” In other words, he contends that the modern technological device is beginning to shape our culture and the way we look at *all* areas of our lives. It is one thing to appreciate the washing machine as a technological device because it disburdens me and provides the things I desire—in this instance, clean clothes—with little or no

extended engagement. It is another thing to live in a world in which disburdenment, disengagement, and the commodification of goods become ultimate values governing our lives. When watching television becomes the dominant leisure activity, when e-mail becomes the dominant mode of public discourse, when a dazzling, multi-media worship service becomes the dominant form of religious encounter, we are far beyond a discernment about the use of individual devices. We have entered a situation in which the device shapes our very encounter with our world. The dominant, device-oriented shape of our culture stands as a challenge to the cultivation of authentic contemporary spirituality.

Cultivating a “Focal” Spirituality

If the wholesale repudiation of our technological culture is not a viable option, then what is the alternative? What is required to flourish in a device-oriented world is the conscious cultivation of vital focal practices to be sustained in the face of more efficient, cost-effective alternatives. These practices offer the possibility of “clearing a space” in our lives for the emergence of grace and blessing that always come to us as surprise and gift. Norman Maclean offers a wonderful evocation of the spiritual dimension of focal practices in his autobiographical novel *A River Runs Through It*. There he writes of the way in which his father, a Presbyterian minister, taught Norman and his brother both the truths of the Christian faith and the sublime beauty of fly-fishing. His father insisted that one must first master the craft of fly-fishing before actually being allowed onto the river:

If our father had his say, nobody who did not know how to fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching him. . . . My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy (Maclean 1976, 2–4).

Maclean wonderfully depicts the central characteristics of a “leisure” activity as a focal practice. Fly-fishing demands discipline and attentiveness to the moment. It incorporates skills that can only be acquired through an interpersonal, tutelary relationship. It has clear and even daunting standards of excellence. It invites the participant into a world of engagement with nature that, in its very richness, introduces an element of unpredictability and openness that is vital to the experience of fishing. The success of a fishing excursion depends on factors largely outside of the fisherman’s control: weather, river flow, etc. Indeed, a good deal of the joy of fishing comes from successfully adapting to these variables. Clearly the joys of fly-fishing, for Maclean, involve much more than the acquisition

of fresh fish! While on the face of it this passage has Pelagian overtones (the idea that we must earn grace), I take it to suggest simply that we must become engaged in disciplined practices that open us up to the horizons of grace in our lives. In a culture saturated with marketing strategies promising a more effortless, commodious life through the incorporation of various technological devices into our lives, an authentic spirituality must be counter-cultural in its determination to maintain a certain time and labor intensive *inefficiency* in the cultivation of focal practices.

The Focal Practices of the Church

Our daily existence holds forth many opportunities for recovering and retaining the focal character of our lives. We mentioned but a few of these above: gardening, fishing, playing music, etc. Christians will also privilege a set of focal practices associated with membership in a religious community. These practices shape us in untold ways as we seek the transformed vision capable of discerning the demands of Christian discipleship in our daily lives. These ecclesial practices help us rediscover the God who can be encountered in the ordinary and mundane. Let us consider two.

Keeping the Sabbath

One of the most ancient religious practices of the Judeo-Christian tradition centers around the celebration of the Sabbath. Doubtless, important changes took place as Christians re-appropriated the Jewish notion of Sabbath and gave to it a new significance. But a shared view of Sabbath for Jews and Christians is concerned with the sanctification of time.

We live in a culture in which time has become our most prized commodity. In that culture, the notion of setting aside a day of rest, a day in which time might not be so much spent as *received as gift* seems radically counter-cultural. This past fall, my two oldest sons and I raced out of Mass after communion so that we could get to their early afternoon soccer game. As we were driving to the game I could not shake the idea that I had somehow allowed our family to lose contact with one of our most ancient Christian practices, setting aside one day for rest and delight in the company of others, that we might learn to receive each day of our lives as the gift that it is. The practice of Sabbath keeping, I believe, is at the heart of a whole spirituality that values the recovery of time not as a commodity but as a gift (Bass 2000, 45–77). We certainly must avoid a legalistic observance of the Sabbath of the kind that Jesus combated. The point of the Sabbath, particularly for Christians, is that the Sabbath is now not one day in seven, but the “eighth day,” the day that transforms all days. To “keep the Sabbath” is less about a scrupulous observance of Sunday activities than it is the disciplined

practice of embracing time in an utterly new way. We do well to ask ourselves, in the midst of all of our planning, whether in the business of our programs and initiatives we have forgotten the need to sanctify time itself. In our modern age, this may be the most radical of all Christian practices.

Eucharist

Closely related to Sabbath-keeping is a second ancient Christian practice: the corporate, weekly celebration of the “breaking of the bread.” For two thousand years Christians have gathered together, ordinarily under the presidency of an apostolic minister, to hear the Word of God proclaimed and to be nourished by the Bread of Life. We dare to believe that the faithful practice of this ancient action not only nourishes us but transforms us and impels out into the world in mission.

In his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, Pope John Paul II referred to the Church as a “school of communion” (#43). In the celebration of the Eucharist we are most deeply schooled in the life of communion. There we confess our sins and are reminded that in our sinfulness we cannot, any of us, afford the hubris of standing in judgment of another. There we hear God’s Word proclaimed and are reminded that we are not the masters of God’s Word but its servants. At the eucharistic banquet we make peace with one another before we approach God’s table. And there the humble gifts of our lives are offered as bread and wine and become for us the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There, St. Augustine tells us, “we become what we receive”—the Body of Christ.

These two practices, like so many others we could consider (e.g., almsgiving, hospitality), faithfully undertaken, call us to transformed lives capable of recognizing the graced dimensions of daily existence.

The Pervasive Influence of Modern Consumerism

The impact of technology on modern life in the Western world has been conjoined with the unleashing of a voracious consumerism by our capitalist society. Just as an analysis of technology that limits itself to an assessment of individual devices is inadequate, so too is the tendency to think the antidote to consumerism lies merely in dampening our consumptive urges. “Buying less” does not solve the problem. The challenges presented to us by modern consumerism do not lie in the enjoyment of the goods of creation. We might consider the biblical admonition offered us in 1 Timothy 6:17: “Tell the rich in the present age not to be proud and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth but rather on God, who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment.”

This passage counsels us that, while a preoccupation with wealth as an end in itself is clearly wrong, the enjoyment of the goods of creation is not. If there is

an enduring value underlying modern consumerism, surely it is the affirmation of the pleasures offered us by the created order. The difficulties which our consumerist culture presents to us do not consist in the enjoyment of the goods of creation but in the fact that the enjoyment of these goods is frustrated at every turn by the process of commodification.

The Process of Commodification

“Commodification” occurs whenever a particular good is extracted from the context in which it was produced such that this good can now be quantified and measured. Commodification makes goods subject to economic exchange, manipulation, and control. When goods become commodities, the good is stripped of its particularity, that is, the way in which its “goodness” is derived, in part, from the particular context out of which it emerges. The bread-making machine renders the good of a fresh-baked loaf into something of a commodity. Follow the directions and every loaf will come out the same. With no investment of time or labor into the baking process, the loaf no longer manifests itself as the fruit of human care and effort. It is another food product—nothing more, nothing less. The precious good of my son’s flawed performance of a Chopin étude offers a sense of parental delight that cannot be measured. In like manner, my enjoyment of the local chamber orchestra’s upcoming performance of Mozart’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* will be altogether particular. The experience will be shaped by my weeks of anticipation, by the quality of the musicianship, the ambience of the concert hall, etc. That performance will offer a particular good of unknown value. In striking contrast is the all too predictable enjoyment of a digitally mastered professional recording of the same piece. In the latter instance, a musical performance has become commodified, transformed into a product that cannot be greeted, after the first playing, with anything approaching the anticipation that awaits a live performance. Lost is the subtle but tangible engagement between performers and audience and the ever hovering question of what the circumstances of this evening might bring about as musicians practice their art as best as the moment allows them. One attends a concert never quite sure whether they will be treated to a perfunctory, rote performance, or a magical evening. It is this openness to an uncertain future, the way in which the grace of an evening concert cannot be programmed or manipulated but only beckoned, that separates a concert event from an evening lying on the floor in front of my electronic sound system. I do not wish to suggest that listening to prerecorded music is utterly without its pleasures; it is not. I am suggesting that the lack of context, diminished anticipation, ubiquity, and predictable perfections of recorded music changes the listening experience and weakens our capacity to be engaged by the music in new and surprising ways.

This process of commodification, one of the by-products of modern capitalism, is one of the most pervasive social forces in our society. As Vincent Miller has observed, this process of commodification has instigated a monumental shift in the mode of human existence from “being” to “having” (Miller 2000, 281). Miller’s analysis of the phenomenon of consumerism and the processes of commodification is both probing and a little dispiriting. He notes that the pervasive power of commodification lies in the way in which this process “pre-interprets” areas of our lives that we do not think of as subject to economic calculus. In other words, we know that we are dealing with the logic of consumerism and commodities when we march down a supermarket aisle and comparison shop for breakfast cereal. We are also aware of its effects when we find ourselves inundated with marketing ads on television, billboards, commercial websites, and the like. Commodification is more powerful, however, in the instances in which we are blind to its influence, as in the subtle ways it shapes our choice of marriage partners or churches. By transforming goods and values into “products” that can be compared and exchanged, commodification changes our relationship to these realities.

Consider the consequences of our cultural preoccupation with the maximization of choice for an understanding of the marriage commitment. When we are encouraged to trade in our car every few years for a newer model, does not this mentality influence us when we experience the inevitable difficulties that commitment to any one individual will entail? Is not the flourishing pornography industry but the logical consequence of the technological tendency to offer us the goods we desire (in this case the delights of sexual pleasure) purged of all of the depth, texture, and “friction” that comes with any meaningful, committed human relationship?

Certain disquieting trends in contemporary spirituality suggest that this consumerist impulse has “colonized” spirituality as well. In our technologically oriented, consumerist culture, the spiritual seeker often turns to “technique” to encounter the transcendent, whether it be some form of meditation or through a particular dietary discipline. In this way, religious experience is assigned its proper “place” together with the other commodified experiences of our world associated with meals or entertainment. Spirituality becomes another marketable product carefully designed and displayed to fit into our busy lives with a minimum of inconvenience.

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Miller offers the example of the best-selling album *Chant*, recorded by the monks of Santo Domingo and which earned \$77 million in its first year of release (Miller 2000, 288). Here liturgical chant is extracted from its ritual context and turned into a commodity. The content of the music might appear identical to chants actually sung in the monastic liturgy, but it has now become a musical product that plays on religious nostalgia while demanding nothing in the way of ritual participation. Catholicism hardly has a corner on the market when it comes to the commodification of religion. In Evangelical Protestantism the “church growth” movement encourages the use of “seeker services,” worship experiences that are carefully constructed to demand as little as possible participation by those attending. The “seekers” are offered a highly entertaining, packaged version of the Christian faith, with little to challenge them.

Recovering a Spirituality of Gift

Authentic Christian spirituality must resist these processes. When religion and the encounter with God is reduced to a set of distinct experiences or encounters with the divine that can be cultivated, programmed, and manipulated, the more quotidian, ordinary realm of human existence diminishes in importance. Grace cannot be neatly extracted, packaged, and sold in ever more appealing ways as a commodity intended to satisfy the spiritual consumer. Christian spirituality demands more than listening to a set of tapes or working on exercises found in a spiritual handbook.

What our times demand is a recovery of the theological concept of gift. Indeed, the ancient Christian belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation from nothing,” was concerned not with speculations on an ancient version of the Big Bang theory but with the conviction that creation itself, human existence itself, is not the product of some metaphysical necessity but is the completely unmerited gift of God. One can read the doctrine of the Trinity as a propositional articulation of this very insight—God is “altogether gift” (Downey 2000).

No biblical story captures this better than that of the Israelites being fed manna in the desert as told in Exodus 16. As the story goes, God provides for the hungry Israelites by offering them manna which they were to collect for themselves each morning. As long as they arose each morning and accepted the gift of daily “bread,” what they collected, whether large or small in quantity, was sufficient for their needs. But when they tried to hoard the manna so that they might not have to arise early each morning, the stored manna rotted. This is a story about divine gift, about a God who graciously provides for the people. But it is also a story about the human inclination to turn gifts into commodities that we no longer accept in gratitude but hoard and manipulate for our convenience.

We discussed above the importance of the ecclesial practice of the Eucharist. We might recall here the ways in which its celebration stirs in us a renewed appreciation for the surprising rhythms disclosed in the One who is revealed as Gift, Giver, and Giving. We Christians look to the Eucharist as that privileged place wherein we can rediscover the divine rhythm of gift giving and receiving as the deep truth of our lives. Every Sunday Christians gather around the table of the Lord to enter into Christ's eternal offering of himself as gift for the world. When Christians bring their humble gifts of bread and wine to the table, gifts which "earth has given and human hands have made," they are being drawn into a ritual practice governed by the grammar of gift giving and receiving. In our consumerist culture Christians must take care to sustain the counter-cultural character of the Eucharist as the celebration of the liberating experience of receiving God as pure gift and being called to be gift to and for one another.

The Emergence of a Digital Culture

Humans are uniquely symbol-making creatures who constitute themselves in the process of communication. While it is possible to view human communication as the mere exchange of information, further reflection suggests that the processes of communication engage us at a much deeper level, establishing a relational bond between the one who initiates communication and those with whom one wishes to communicate. Communication constitutes us as relational beings. We discover our identity in our need to share ourselves with others. The media we employ in our attempts at communication are not incidental; they influence what can and cannot be communicated and shape even the substance of what is communicated. Walter Ong has demonstrated the ways in which profound cultural changes have accompanied shifts in communications media as human civilization moved from an oral culture to a chirographic culture (one that can communicate through the written word) to a typographic culture (print) to an electronic culture (Ong 1982).

The Digitization of the Word

One of the features of this modern electronic culture is the digitization of the Word. Digitization is not merely the manifestation of words in a new form; it changes our relationship to words themselves because it encourages a sense of both the immediacy and relative disposability of the word. On the face of it, this appears to be an odd claim. After all, are not spoken words inherently lacking in permanence?

In oral communication, words, once spoken, give way to either more words or silence. But then the spoken word, when effective, does not entirely disappear. The spoken word can only endure when the hearer engages in an attentive listening that ponders what is heard. If the listener experiences a lapse of attention, the words are lost, never to be recovered. The spoken word demands a contemplative hearing captured in the evocative biblical phrase describing Mary, the mother of Jesus: “Mary kept all of these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). The spoken word endures in the “pondering heart.” The written word, on the other hand, does possess a greater permanence or durability relative to the spoken word. One can return, time and again, to a particular passage. This allows for not merely a reflection on the written word but a detailed analysis

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of it. As Neil Postman has noted, the chirographic and typographic cultures made possible not just the contemplation of the word but also gave rise to a kind of linear and analytic mode of thought as complex argument could be articulated and debated in ways that purely oral discourse would not allow (Postman 1984, 16–63). The relative permanence of written and/or printed words also encouraged, in their own way, the cultivation of a kind of contemplative attitude. Significantly, pre-modern, literate cultures often held together the dual modalities of the spoken and written word as even the written word was generally read aloud. In classical Western cul-

tures, the practice of reading silently to oneself was virtually unknown. Naomi Baron writes: “In what are now modern-day France and England, reading aloud remained the norm in both ecclesiastical and lay society up through the twelfth century (longer in courtly circles)” (Baron 2000, 33).

The digitized word, at least as manifested in electronic documents, e-mail correspondence, instant messaging, and the like, shares certain characteristics with both the spoken and written word, while departing from both in significant ways. The digitized word possesses a relative permanence much like the written or printed word. I can read several times over an e-mail message or electronic document if its meaning is not initially clear. On the other hand, a digitized text does not easily evoke the same tactile sense of permanence and tangibility elicited by the printed word. The experience of enjoying the smell of a new book, the crispness of its pages, the beauty of its cover art, the quality of its binding and paper—all help constitute the experience of reading the printed word. Even the relatively disposable daily newspaper offers a tactile encounter with the printed word not duplicated by an electronic text. Our resentment of junk mail may confirm this. Junk mail violates our impulse to treasure the printed word.

The sensibilities that communication by way of a written or printed word encourages are not so easily sustained by the digitized word. The lost art of letter writing in which a short note lovingly written on a small card by hand, or carefully composed over a typewriter, has given way to the instantaneous communication of e-mail. The electronic medium of e-mail, with its intoxicating sense of immediacy, discourages the careful pondering over the words we might choose to express ourselves. Quick e-mails, instant messages (“IM,” as my students refer to it), and memos “fired off” with little consideration, often filled with typos and grammatical errors, have replaced the carefully composed letter. Indeed, the syntactical structure of most e-mail communication more closely resembles that of the spoken word than those syntactical structures we associate with written English (Baron 2000, 247–59).

Along with the spoken word the digital text possesses a certain ephemeral quality. Digitized texts can appear or disappear with a keystroke. Indeed, e-mail has made correspondence itself utterly disposable. No longer are letters from our beloved folded and unfolded to be re-read and treasured in private moments. At the same time, the digitized word seems to lack the demand for sustained attentiveness compelled by the exigencies of the spoken word.

The Recovery of Spiritual Reading and the Poetic Word

In response to the tendencies encouraged by the digitized word, there is something to be said for the retrieval of spiritual reading as a focal practice. Presupposed in this ancient practice is a kind of spirituality of the word worth further consideration. The sacramental function of words derives from their poetic capacity. In poetry human words can lift our gaze beyond the literal and conventional to the inexpressible “more” in life and of God who is the source of all life. From the perspective of Christian faith, because of the Incarnation in which God has spoken God’s very being as “Word” into human history, all “words” have the potential of bearing God to us.

At the same time, and this may seem paradoxical, the lover of words also knows that all words limp. They reach out to the infinite, to God who is Holy Mystery, and yet never grasp or circumscribe that Mystery. Our human words, and this includes the human (even if inspired) words of the Scriptures, bring us to our God while never capturing the divine reality. In their brokenness, in their inadequacy, like the love poem written to our beloved that still fails to bear all we wish to express, our words remind us that we are called to encounter God ultimately not in words and concepts, moral maxims and doctrinal definitions, but as Holy, Gracious Mystery. Yet words are necessary. Karl Rahner once wrote of the importance of human words spoken to the human person about God:

Hence words must be spoken to him, which are such that he recognizes that they are uttered by those whom he must take seriously, and that he sees that these words call upon him to decide whether he dismisses them as meaningless or strives to listen to them long enough in truth and love—till he understands that their whole meaning is to utter the unutterable, to make the nameless mystery touch his heart gently. . . . Christianity needs such words; it needs practice in learning to hear such words. For all its words would be misunderstood, if they were not heard as words of the mystery, as the coming of the blessed, gripping, incomprehensibility of the holy. For they speak of God. And if God's incomprehensibility does not grip us in a word, if it does not draw us on into his superluminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our homely, close-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home, we have misunderstood or failed to understand the words of Christianity (Rahner 1966, 359).

Even the sacred words of Scripture ultimately are intended to draw us to that spiritual place wherein in silence we adore the one who comes to us in love.

I fear that alongside the obvious benefits that the digitization of the word has wrought (e.g., unparalleled access to information), has come an instrumentalization or functionalizing of the word in which its poetic and sacramental power is put at risk. There may have been a certain cultural inevitability to this development. Be that as it may, this process suggests the contemporary need to recover some of the ancient power of the *read* or *spoken* word as something other than a disposable commodity. In consequence, one of the more important spiritual challenges of our age may be something as simple as the recovery of the value of spiritual reading. By “spiritual reading” I certainly wish to include the value of reading spiritual literature (the Scriptures, theology, devotional materials, etc.), but I would also include the cultivation of any reading that allows us to be immersed in the poetics of the word. The poetry of Seamus Heaney or a novel by Oscar Hijuelos can inspire within us a sense of wonder, a hunger for meaning and truth, a yearning for insight that feeds the soul.

There is also value in recovering that ancient form of monastic prayer known as *lectio divina* or “sacred reading.” Here the Scriptures or some other spiritual text were read with care and deliberation—always out loud. The spiritual power of this practice derived, I believe, from the bodily experience of actually uttering the words with one's mouth and hearing them with one's ears. It suggested a kind of *ruminatio* in which the words were digested by the spirit through the means of the bodily senses. To learn a passage “by heart” was not merely to memorize it but to allow it to take root in the deepest recesses of one's being.

As Christians we believe in a God whose very being is defined by the process of communication. God is the utterance of an eternal Word of Love, God is the Word itself spoken for all time and which, in the fullness of time, was spoken in

Jesus of Nazareth, and God is the effective hearing of that Word in our hearts. With the prophet Isaiah, we celebrate the effectiveness of God's Word in our history:

For just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
And do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
Giving seed to him who sows
and bread to him who eats,
So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth:
It shall not return to me void,
but shall do my will
achieving the end for which I sent it

(Isa 55:10-11).

Conclusion

In Maclean's spiritual ruminations on the practice of fly-fishing he noted that, "As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty" (Maclean 1976, 2). This is the task of any authentic spirituality; the discovery of God's rhythms and the ability to align one's daily life to those rhythms. This task requires an ability to hear those rhythms within the cacophony of a culture obsessed with consumption, efficiency and convenience. We allow ourselves to be drawn into the life of Christian community in the hope that, by the faithful engagement in the distinctive practices of communal life—the keeping of Sabbath, the breaking of the bread, the giving of alms, the offering of hospitality, *lectio divina*—we might cultivate the recognition of the gentle rhythms of God and so learn to abide in the Holy Mystery in all that we do.

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