

Reading Between the Lines

Many years ago I listened to an Australian scripture scholar describe how he would sit in his tiny, poorly lit room in Rome working at his doctoral thesis, poring over some linguistic technicality. Dogged by feelings of isolation, at times he found himself questioning the relevance of the task. Amidst all the pressing pastoral issues in the world (why wasn't he out there feeding the poor?!) did this contentious point in ancient Greek linguistics really matter? And yet, at the level of faith, he entrusted himself to the conviction that yes, it did matter; that this too was a service and that in some mysterious way the scholarship to which he was committed was making a contribution to the life and mission of the Church.

When I observe how many lives this man has touched over the years via his books, articles, talks and homilies, I doubt that anybody today would question his contribution. But in a finite, agonizing moment of impatience or loneliness, it is understandable that his confidence should waver. Like countless thinkers in the history of the Church, the gift of his scholarship is also the gift of his courage, his vocation, his love for the body of Christ.

I have thought of this story from time to time as I have pursued my own studies in theology over the years. As a student I so often experience

feelings of sheer gratitude for the wealth of scholarship which has shaped, and continues to shape, our Church. Whether your experience of studying the Catholic faith is an adult education unit or a doctoral dissertation, I'm sure you will understand what I mean. For instance, it is an incredible gift, don't you think, to be able to walk into a library, to pull out a book or article and access a gem of insight from what has been a person's life's work.

Think about it. In order to turn the pages of that book in your hands, some academic out there – famous or otherwise – has had to spend years working through one degree after another, immersed in texts and navigating a way through a maze of intellectual pathways, pondering mind-bending questions, recovering from dead-ends and setbacks, discarding drafts, starting over, and possibly bearing lonely nights and disappointments in the process.

Then one day a book emerges, which is met with acclaim or controversy or silence or something in between, and then sits on a shelf in a library. A concrete contribution to the academic enterprise; and a symbol of so much more.

And then along we come. We students (perhaps fresh-faced, relatively ignorant, hopefully enthusiastic) pluck out a nice juicy quote for an assignment... 'As Thomas Aquinas says... As Henri de Lubac points out... As Elizabeth Johnson describes...'

(They would cringe at our stuttering use of their well-crafted texts!) And so goes the enterprise called 'study'.

To walk into a theological library, to be surrounded by everything from encyclopedias to time-honored summas to journals of every kind, is to be immersed in the thinking, praying, questioning, believing, proclaiming church. Even those thinkers who were (or are to be) proved 'wrong' have their part to play, awakening the Church to new questions and clarifications which otherwise would never have been explored. In the hushed corridors of printed matter (is the silence of a library a kind of reverence?) one 'hears' a symphony of passionate voices. Generations of believers have lived and died to bring us all this. All this! This gift of knowledge and insight, of their life and love. And we students have access to it. Incredible! Praise God! Our gratitude itself is part of our academic strivings. For theology is ultimately doxology. •

