

“ I would give this book an A+, to quote the last item in appendix B: ‘A one hundred percent. A rarity which might only be glanced a few times,’ even in our fine world of classical education. I fully intend to use *The Age of Martha* as part of the required reading list in the Classical Liberal Arts major, my new undergraduate program at The Master’s University. We all need this book, and we need to read it leisurely.”

—Grant Horner, PhD

Founder and Director of The Master’s University in Italy Program

“ If our students are to find a harmony of active and restful learning, then teachers, administrators, and parents must find it first and model it. O’Donnell exhorts us to learn how to *be* before we *do*, and to gaze with a single eye without distraction, that we might become what we behold. Citing a rich list of models from Augustine to Josef Pieper, he shows how we might recover a kind of rooted-tree stability and weight that only comes from leisurely learning and reflection.

By leisurely reading this book, any educator will be helped and inspired to put the *scholé* back into school.”

—from the foreword by Christopher A. Perrin, PhD

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# *The Age of Martha:*

A CALL TO  
CONTEMPLATIVE  
LEARNING  
IN A  
FRENZIED  
CULTURE



Devin O'Donnell

Editor: Stephen Turley, PhD





*The Age of Martha:  
A Call to Contemplative Learning in a Frenzied Culture*

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# DEDICATION

To Allison

Wise in work and lovely in leisure,  
thank you for making our house into a  
home; in feast or in fast, it remains a place  
of rest, where springs not fail, where flies no  
sharp and sided hail.

And to my children

May your olive shoots blossom and grow  
into trees planted by living water. May you  
bring forth fruit in your season.



# EPIGRAPH

*Inquietum est cor nostrum,  
donec requiescat in te.*<sup>1</sup>

—Saint Augustine

First, and above all, it is necessary for Western man to recover the use of his higher spiritual faculties—his powers of contemplation—which have become atrophied by centuries of neglect during which the mind and will of Western man was concentrated on the conquest of power—political, economic and technological.<sup>2</sup>

—Christopher Dawson

*Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus;  
exaltabor in gentibus et exaltabor in terra.*<sup>3</sup>

—Psalm 45:11

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1. Translation: “Our heart is restless, until it rests in you.”

2. Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education*, 202, quoted in Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012), 111.

3. Josef Pieper’s translation: “Have leisure and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, and I will be exalted in the earth.”





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# FOREWORD

Most modern education is frenetic. Our word “frenetic” is derived from the Greek *phrenitikos* and *phrenitis*, an “inflammation of the brain.” This Greek word can even mean “insanity.” Given what education should be, most modern education is neither sane nor healthy.

Modern educators are runners; in fact, we are often sprinters. We dash about. With inflamed brains, we run here and there, even as we prod our students to do the same. We are very much in touch with our curricula and the root idea of curriculum, for it means a race course, the path set before us on which we . . . run.

Academic running need not be a problem—students should acquire strength to travel through a good classical curriculum of study. It becomes problematic when we *only* run, and thus many students are anxious throughout much of their curriculum. Any good runner does run a lot. But any good runner rests as much as he runs.

The important harmony of running and resting is a chief aim of Devin O'Donnell's book *The Age of Martha*. He knows that contemporary education is discordant, full of anxious activity but nearly devoid of rest. He reminds us that this was the error that Martha made when Christ visited her and her sister Mary at home (Luke 10). Martha was running about, “troubled about many things” (presumably in the kitchen), when she should have been sitting, resting, and enjoying conversation with Jesus, along with her sister Mary.

Martha erred not because she was busy, but because she was busy at a time when she should have rested. We learn from Martha and Mary that there is a proper time for running but also for resting. Our current age resembles Martha. We have forgotten how to be like Mary.

O'Donnell pairs the restful disposition of Mary with the traditional concept of contemplation and leisure, best captured by the Greek word *scholé*. The Greek word means something akin to “undistracted time to study the things that are most worthwhile.” It is a great irony that *scholé* is the root for our word “school.” There is little *scholé* in our schools.

If our students are to find a harmony of active and restful learning, then teachers, administrators, and parents must find it first and model it. O'Donnell exhorts us to learn how to *be* before we *do*, and to gaze with a single eye without distraction, that we might become what we behold. Citing a rich list of models from Augustine to Josef Pieper, he shows how we might recover a kind of rooted-tree stability and weight that only comes from leisurely learning and reflection.

By leisurely reading this book, any educator will be helped and inspired to put the *scholé* back into school.

Christopher A. Perrin, PhD

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We know that he who has been forgiven much loves much. We also know that he who has been given much has himself much to give. If one finds any wisdom in these pages, therefore, it will not have begun with me. And if these pages impart any beatitude of Goodness, Truth, or Beauty, it will only be because I am able to pass on that which I received. Some teachers and tutors are near to us in proximity, and to those who have walked closely with me, I am forever grateful. But there are also those who teach us from afar; among these, I must mention my gratitude for Father Patrick Henry Reardon and Anthony Esolen. My humble thanks is not enough to repay the debt I owe to them and to others, who by their books, writings, lectures, or sermons have greatly contributed to my discipleship at a distance. I am particularly thankful for the friendship, guidance, and scholarly exhortation of Dr. Stephen Turley; I am grateful for his support and for those first conversations in the dark hours of a Florida morning. Thank you to Grant Horner for his encouragement and constructive review of this book. I am also very thankful to Classical Academic Press for the opportunity to add my weak and husky voice to the choir of greater voices that have come before.

Furthermore, it would be wrong to suggest that I am a lone voice crying out in the wilderness to make way for leisure. I am not the first to discuss leisure in relation to education, or even as it relates specifically to Christian classical education. Nor will I be the last. Many voices have preceded mine, calling us back to Lady Wisdom and reminding us of the *telos* of

our labors. For years now, Dr. Christopher Perrin has urged schools and home educators to reconsider their task in light of rest and leisure. Thank you to Robyn Burlew and Steve Byrd at the Veritas School in Richmond, Virginia. Others too have reminded us that Christian classical education is not about doing better than the state schools but about the formation of virtue in the soul of the student. I should be remiss not to thank the friends and scholars at the CiRCE Institute, for whom the subject of rest in education has been a constant refrain. Some have pointed out the practical means for what academic leisure might look like in the home, while other voices have admonished us to reconsider the practices of our classroom in order to better form those virtues. And, of course, still other voices call out to us endlessly from the past. Let me state my gratitude again. I can only hope my own voice finds harmony within the greater chorus. *Abyssus abyssum invocat.* Deep calls unto deep. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Finally, I must plainly state two fundamental premises of this book. The first premise is this: The intellectual life is part of the calling of every Christian. The second is like unto it: “Discipleship” and “education” cannot be separated. They are part of the same ministry, because they are part of the same masonry; they both build the kingdom of God by building up the people of God. Without plainly stating these assumptions, which will be defended throughout, I fear some within the modern renaissance of classical Christian learning might not understand the greater purpose of this book, which is the meek attempt to state a philosophy of academics rooted in contemplation and worship, imagination and doxology.

# INTRODUCTION

The renewal of classical learning is alive and well. But most educators laboring in that renewal would likely agree that we still have much to do. How can we teach logic successfully (and not just say we did)? How can we help parents who don't know a lick of Latin? Is there such a thing as a standard rhetoric text? How can we teach our children if there is so much to learn ourselves? That's just the beginning. Then there is the SAT preparation to consider, the College Board standards, and the remaining challenges for homeschools and day schools to fit all the academic rigor of antique study into the complicated bureaucracy of what defines a complete education today. And for some, this still does not begin to account for the task of situating classical learning into the larger mission of Christian discipleship. How are we to fulfill Saint Paul's command to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"?<sup>1</sup> It is indeed overwhelming. It seems there is no end to the work that lies before us. Although the renewal of classical learning is flourishing, we still have much to do.

However, all this talk of *doing* has possibly had unintended consequences. We know all about *doing* in our modern age. We live in a busy-ing time, where *doing* is not just the norm; it's the boast of modern life. We can perform several functions on our smartphones, while "listening" to someone talk to us, while "enjoying" our favorite song in the background, while "studying" for history, while driving to multiple appointments in the same day. We want our students to be involved in leadership meetings,

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1. Ephesians 6:4.

plays, music recitals, sports games. We want to believe it's possible to have it all, because we think that's what is meant by living a *full* life. The funny thing is that in all our doing, we have not considered well enough how this affects our education. The incessant activity of daily life, Stratford Caldecott suggests, is one of the main hindrances to a healthy and flourishing life. In his book on the classical trivium, Caldecott notes, "We have been educating ourselves for *doing* rather than for *being*."<sup>2</sup> The effects of this on family life are such that the home has become more like a gas station or an airline terminal, a place we are simply passing through, rather than a destination in itself and a space where we find consolation and rest. Similarly, our schools have become places of information, rather than *formation*, where academic culture has turned into a frenetic management of getting through curricula, rather than a sustained commitment to mastery of disciplines and ideals.

At a time when progressive education resembles the cramped confines of a sweatshop, when many universities have become little more than degree factories, when Sabbath customs cease from social life, when noise and intellectual distractions crowd every public space, perhaps we need to think less about what to *do* next. What about the things we need to stop doing? In other words, it is not enough to simply have the right "tools" for learning. We have lost more than a system of education, or even a moral standard; it is the life of culture itself that we have lost. It is the shared understanding of rest and the cultural memory of leisure that we have lost, a bygone spiritual attitude, which was present in earlier times and which allowed classical learning to flourish in spite of tumult and famine and great civic collapse.

It is the argument of this book that modern classical education must recover and relearn that lost spiritual attitude, and that if

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2. Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012), 11.



we truly are to rebuild the ruins, we must then rehabilitate the cultural memory of leisure. In his seminal work, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, philosopher Josef Pieper makes undoubtedly the greatest defense for a return to leisure in education and worship. Pieper argues that classical learning is synonymous with leisure because it affords us time to contemplate reality, to master not only subjects but also ourselves. The fact is we cannot have *school* without *scholé*, as the etymology suggests: “Leisure in Greek is *skole*, and in Latin *schola*, the English ‘school.’”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Pieper notes that the “word we use to designate where we educate and teach is derived from a word which means leisure.” This usually comes as a shock to most people. But if he felt compelled to remind his audience in 1952 of the origin of the word “school,” how much more are we today in need of that same admonishment?

In one sense, it really might seem like folly to try to add to Pieper’s insights, or to attempt a further treatise on the matter. But too few people have read his works or know of him, a fact that remains true even within the renaissance of classical education. Without leisure, the temptation is to form the habits of simply checking the box that says we read this book or have taken that course. Our present ignorance in regard to the word “leisure” only proves that we need to return to its true meaning; we shall simply have to *re-remember*, another humble objective of this book. I am contending for the recovery of leisure in classical schools especially, but my commentary is by no means limited to schools. In the end, I am seeking to provide all educators, parents, and students a Christian philosophy of academics. Simply put, we must put the *scholé* back into *school*.

A final note before we begin. Understanding *scholé* is not an easy task today. However odd or paradoxical it may seem, leisure in teaching and learning takes some work, a subject we will discuss

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3. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 2.

at greater length in the following chapter. The contemplative life is not a formula or a twelve-step program. And neither is leisure. The principles and practices of *scholé* will require us to be honest about how we ourselves have learned, about some of the assumptions we bring with us, and about the preconditions of our learning. Understanding leisure will force us to ask challenging questions: What would it require to really master something? How much time? And what is an academic institution supposed to do with its time anyway? Is a school leader simply to make sure all the trains are on time leaving the station, that students safely get from class to class? And how much are homeschoolers supposed to get done in their schooling? Don't they have standards too? How can a proper understanding of leisure reconfigure and reorganize our academic priorities?

These are the questions we are asking, searching for what we might call a Christian philosophy of academics. And we will look not only to the wisdom of other thinkers or to the beauty of history and literature for the answers. We will ultimately look to Holy Scripture. Thus, the title of this book is taken from the scene at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), perhaps one of the most undervalued and potentially misjudged scenes in all the Gospels; what Christ has to teach these sisters is one of the most important lessons for education, for both the present and the future. It is not too much to say that human civilization depends upon it. We have lived too long in the Age of Martha. Perhaps we can remember a different age, even a different sense of time altogether, where sustained moments of quiet were readily available and “a still small voice” was yet audible over the din and clamor of the earthquake or the fire of modern distraction.<sup>4</sup>

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4. See 1 Kings 19:11-12.



# CHAPTER ONE

## The Hard Work of Leisure: School and Culture without Rest

“But what about Toad?” asked the Mole anxiously, as they set off together. “We can’t leave him here, sitting in the middle of the road by himself, in the distracted state he’s in! It’s not safe. Supposing another Thing were to come along?”

—Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*<sup>1</sup>

As suggested in the introduction, finding leisure and true rest can be surprisingly hard work. And that is the main subject of this chapter. But before we discuss the hard work of leisure, I would like us to consider a few important and foundational stories. Remember that stories provide us not merely with practical knowledge but with what some have called “poetic knowledge,” a meaning and understanding that inspires and directs our affections, desires, and loves. The narratives I want us to consider here contain scenes and images that will inform our understanding of *scholé* because they help us make sense of who we are as worshipping creatures made in the image of God. Only then can we make better sense of the “difficulty” of *scholé*. In conclusion, I discuss an old motto of monastic life and reflect on how those simple goals can help us reimagine our aims as both students and educators. Let us begin.

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1. Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 46.

# I: ONLY ONE THING NEEDED

In our present state of educational culture, there are those who might find it difficult to reconcile the classical preference for a life of contemplation with the apparent simplicity of the Christian life. What has leisure to do with being a Christian? After all, the disciples were fishermen and rustics, simple laboring men whose faithful witness contains none of the erudition or elitism of the academy. Can one really defend *scholé* and leisure as part of the Christian calling?

Traditionally, the Christian response to the question has been an emphatic *yes*.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see in this chapter, many great minds and doctors of the Church have noticed a scriptural preference for contemplation, and that the Hebrew culture itself expressed a peculiar emphasis on leisure in relation to divine worship and human habits. Thus, the contemplative tradition of antiquity was in no way alien or incompatible with the teachings of Christ or the Church. Indeed, the classical *paideia*—the educational program during the time of Jesus—was in this respect especially complementary to the aims of discipleship; *scholé* was part of what created and sustained the culture. Consider a story from Scripture.

In one of the most famous vignettes of the Gospels, we find evidence of this scriptural preference for leisure. In teaching what is most important in life, Jesus allows us to conceive of the soul's relation to human activity and academic life. In this scene, Jesus is visiting the sisters Martha and Mary. Ostensibly, Martha appears to be productive, active, and even diligent. She is engaged in hospitality. We find Martha working tirelessly to prepare for Jesus, while Mary, on the other hand, seems idle. Mary is sitting and still; she appears lazy, weak, unproductive. Naturally, Martha

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2. Perhaps the finest and most recent “yes” to this question has been given in the book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* by Robert Louis Wilken (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

complains to Jesus that she's doing all the work, because she is, in fact, doing all the work. Martha assumes Jesus will take her side and tell her sister to roll up her sleeves and help out in the labor. But there is no small amount of irony in this story, and we find our expectations overturned. It is Martha who is "careful and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:41), and this is not a positive sort of "carefulness." The older meaning of this word is to be full of cares and fears concerning the future. One who is anxious and fearful is not fully attending to the present, and as it pertains to learning, therefore, anyone in such a state of restlessness is unteachable. Thus, Jesus rebukes Martha, not Mary. We might pause here to reflect on our own circumstances. Surely we are more like Martha today than we are Mary. But how can anyone learn well in such a restless state of worry? Are the noble aims of the liberal arts tradition achievable in an Age of Martha? Perhaps a bit more context will help us to answer these questions.

The story of Mary and Martha has always fascinated readers but is often reduced to Sunday-school moralisms, such as Martha was not sincere enough in her love for Jesus. But there is more to this episode than sincerity, more even than the virtue of piety. In reading this story, medievals saw in Martha and Mary two allegorical modes of human life: the active life and the contemplative life. And although these might seem like an oversimplification, these significances are not without scriptural precedent; ancient and medieval readers saw, for instance, that Mary and Martha are the antitypes to Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah.<sup>3</sup> Tradition held that Rachel and Leah were signs; they stand for things beyond their literal meanings. In his commentary on the book of Job, for instance, Saint Gregory compares the typological associations between Rachel and Mary, Leah and Martha:

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3. To the medievals, the story of Rachel and Leah was more than a love story, what moderns might see merely as an awkward or comical romance.

After the embrace of Leah, Jacob attains to Rachel, in that every one that is perfect is first joined to an active life in productiveness, and afterwards united to a contemplative life in rest. For that the life of contemplation is less indeed in time, but greater in value than the active, we are shown by the words of the Holy Gospel, wherein two women are described to have acted in different ways.<sup>4</sup>

Here Saint Gregory draws deeply from the hermeneutical well of antiquarian learning, expanding upon the symbolic nature of these sisters, points of significance that Augustine and Origen had already established before him.<sup>5</sup> A typological reading is able to see more of the *fullness* of the Scriptures. Note, for instance, that if Jacob represents man, then his wives analogically stand for the two expressions of man's responsibility, the command given by God in Eden to both tend the garden and name things in it. Adam was therefore gardener and poet, worker and thinker, farmer and mythmaker. Leah stands for the life of work that Jacob endures for the first seven years, Rachel for the life of contemplation that he receives with joy afterwards. Jacob deems Rachel well worth his service to Laban for another seven years, because he loved Rachel more than he did Leah and "preferred the love of the latter before the former" (Genesis 29:30, DR). What, then, is the relationship between work and contemplation, toil and reflection, action and thought, hand and head?

Rachel's "form and beauty" possess the greater measure of the transcendental qualities of being, which satisfy the soul of man more than labor for its own sake. In contrast, Leah's "weak eyes" were not

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4. Saint Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job: or Morals in the Book of Job* (Lexington, KY: Ex Fontibus Company, 2012), 6.61.

5. C. S. Lewis tells us that the medieval mind was alive with "a principle of plenitude." Books, for instance, were not merely storage devices of data, and the void of space in the marginalia of parchments was to be as populated as the heavens are with spirits and as the woods are with sprites. Thus, the Bible too contained more in it than mere grammatical and historical meanings.

merely a literal description of physical sight, as if she simply needed glasses. When the ancients spoke of vision and seeing and eyes, it often referred to what was in them and not necessarily how they saw. The strange judgment of Leah as “weak-eyed” was taken as a sign of her *intellectus*, the quality and strength of her mind’s eye, the philosophic vision, the quality of imaginative receptivity. Nor was it simply that Leah wasn’t smart. There is something more. And to explain what that something was, Saint Gregory defends his reading with reference to the typological equivalent of Leah and Rachel, which we find in the New Testament, the sisters Mary and Martha:

For that the life of contemplation is less indeed in time [i.e., age], but greater in value [*merito*] than the active, we are shewn by the words of the Holy Gospel, wherein two women are described to have acted in different ways. For Mary sat at our Redeemer’s feet, hearing his words, but Martha eagerly prosecuted bodily services; and when Martha made complaint against Mary’s inactivity, she heard the words, *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her* [Luke 10, 41. 42]. For what is set forth by Mary, who sitting down gave ear to the words of our Lord, saving the life of contemplation? and what by Martha, so busied with outward services, saving the life of action? Now Martha’s concern is not reproved, but that of Mary is even commended. For the merits of the active are great, but of the contemplative, far better.<sup>6</sup>

Note Gregory’s point, that the “concern” of Martha is not reproved. In other words, it is not the good of her hospitality that Jesus reproves; rather, Jesus addresses Martha’s disregard for a potentially higher and more blessed activity. Although she pursues a

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6. Saint Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, 6.61.

good in the care and preparation for a guest, the Lord will not allow her to make a lower good equal to that of a higher one, and according to Gregory, that higher good is the activity of contemplation.

From this perspective, it does seem clear that Christ points out something that the soul of man needs, a kind of reflective beatitude we might call *scholé*. And we can see this even in Christ's own life, balancing the labor of his ministry with the rhythms of prayer, feasting, and fasting. We see this early on as well. When Joseph and Mary lose the boy Jesus, they later find him sitting in the temple, discussing theological matters with the doctors. When Christ is first tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he defends the merits of his fast by pointing to the fact that man is not simply a bag of matter, nor even a hungry animal. Man does not live by utilitarian food alone. Man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This means that man is made for more than an existence of laboring and consuming on the earth.

What makes us human, therefore, is crucial to understanding the importance of *scholé*. In his response to temptation, Christ teaches plainly that the stomach does not rule the body. In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis makes a similar point, particularly in reference to Plato:

As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the "spirited element." "The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat, as Alanus tells us, of Magnanimity," of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.<sup>7</sup>

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7. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 24–25.



The psalmist tells us man was made a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:6). But it is not much lower. Lewis explains for us how the ancients saw the anatomy of a human as far more than the sum of its parts. In spite of the large measure of biological DNA we might share with dogs and cats and monkeys and rodents, it is that remaining percentage that changes everything, however small it may be. The visible or invisible parts of the soul and intellect set us apart insofar as they bear the likeness of God. And it is this part, what the medievals called the *intellectus*, which education must address.

In further consideration of the scene between Martha and Mary, we find that it is not unique. Jesus felt it necessary to address similar themes early on in his ministry. In chapters 5–7 of Saint Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus introduces several paradoxes of the kingdom of heaven and ironies of the faith, many of which seem to our jaded perception now almost hackneyed and stale. Just as a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, so our familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount can sometimes blind us from noticing just how radical and shocking Jesus’s pronouncements really are. In Matthew 6, the Good Teacher comes to two related themes, storing up “Treasures in Heaven” and the command “Do Not Worry.” Luke’s Gospel expands on these ideas at greater length. Jesus cautions, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6:34). Matthew Henry says, “There is scarcely any sin against which our Lord Jesus more warns his disciples, than disquieting, distracting, distrustful cares about the things of this life.”<sup>8</sup>

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8. In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, as one heads toward Communion, the choir and congregation sing, “Let us now lay aside all earthly cares that we may receive the King of all.” It is called the “Cherubikon,” or the Cherubic Hymn, which attends part of the Great Entrance.

Consider the themes of worry and distraction in relation to the episode of Mary and Martha. When Jesus tells his disciples not to worry, he uses the same word in his description of Martha:

Be not *solicitous* therefore, saying, What shall we eat: or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the heathens seek. For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Vulgate*, the Latin is *solliciti*, literally shaking with anxious activity. Just as “daily bread” is a metonymy for food, or the “sweat of thy brow” is metonymy for toil, so the food, drink, and clothing that Jesus refers to are metonymic symbols for parts of a whole; they stand for the material things in life that we need or want. Jesus felt it necessary to address our pursuit of these material things, knowing that it was a *potential* problem and distraction from what was most important. We already know that “man shall not live by bread alone” (Matthew 4:4), but here Jesus makes the incredible claim that man’s physical needs are subordinate to higher (*metaphysical*) needs.

Some of us might be asking ourselves, *But we need to eat and drink, right?* We are men and not angels, after all. Clearly. Yes, we must eat and drink, and thank God too. It is precisely the leisure of eating and drinking that separates it from the feeding frenzy of animals. In these passages, Jesus means to point out that man’s appetites and desires should never be directed exclusively to material concerns, that man’s effort and care and work should not attend only to his bodily satisfaction. This is not Platonic. Notice that Jesus does not condemn food, drink, or clothing; rather, he draws our attention to the stunning irony that even the “splendor” of Solomon was outdone by the unhurried lilies in the beauteous garb of ephemeral decor. But this teaching is not limited to the Gospels only; it permeates the New Testament Epistles too.

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9. Matthew 6:31-32, DR.

Saint Paul counsels the Philippians not to worry but to pray, and to commit their needs and desires to God: “Be nothing *sollicitous*,” he cautions (*nihil solliciti*); “but in every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your petitions be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6-7, DR). Fittingly, Saint Peter says, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5:7). The Latin reveals the continuity of this idea in the Scriptures: *omnem sollicitudinem vestram proicientes in eum*, literally “scatter all your cares [*sollicitudinem*] upon him.” Apparently, therefore, we as disciples of Christ are called to have different concerns about material things, different ways of apprehending those goods, perhaps even a different type of consumption and desire. So what is that “one thing needed”?

Here we come to the purposes of *scholé*: discerning what is most valuable in life and what we are ultimately made for. In returning to the scene of Martha and Mary, then, we find a great irony. The one who appears productive is found lacking, and the one who appears lazy is actually engaged in the highest activity. For our purposes, it is a narrative illustration of being at rest in the providence of God because it affords two educational blessings: First, leisure affords us a more tractable posture of the soul in its aim to learn, and second, it affords us the ability to achieve the almost forgotten objective of *mastery*. Today we like to think that we can do it all—learn languages, master mathematics, understand all sciences, read the entire Western canon of Great Books—and still reflect upon how those things relate to God or how such knowledge informs our own virtue. But whether or not we wish to admit it, we cannot do it all well. In recent years, Dr. Christopher Perrin has lectured on this concept by pointing back to that medieval fragment of wisdom, *multum non multa*, which counsels us to know “much, not many.” If mastery really is our aim, and we are not simply paying lip service to some educational standard

for accreditation or state approval, then we cannot equally master every subject available. It is difficult to master a few things, let alone many, and one finds rest even in admitting one's own limitations. We cannot do it all well.

The reason is that the business of education is serious, the most important work done on earth, as R. L. Dabney says. In the Christian study of the liberal arts, we discover the mind, soul, and will of God; and in discovering the person of God, we discover our own minds, souls, and wills. And the results of education are felt in eternity. In light of this, we cannot justify our efforts in mediocrity with Chesterton's famous, and often misunderstood, "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly." No, it will not do to have as our model a scatterbrained and restless jack-of-all-trades who is master of none, least of which is his own soul. This is why Kenneth Grahame's Mr. Toad is such a remarkable character, because his distractible nature is so identifiable with our own. Many things come along in life, and we attempt to try our hand at them all at once. But to set about trying to do everything, what the Elizabethan called a *Johannes factotum*, a "Johnny-do-it-all," will only serve to send us further away from that "one thing needed" and ever toward the frustrated exasperation of Martha.

Whether or not we wish to admit it, therefore, it is easier to be more attentive to the things of God and to the affairs of the soul when in a state of leisure and contemplation. That is the point of this story in the Gospels. Martha is restless even in her attempt to do what is right. Perhaps the same admonishment that Martha receives is also found in the command, "Be still and see that I am God" (Psalm 45:11, DR). To fully grasp this psalmist's words here, consider how the Latin Vulgate takes this familiar verse and gives us a very different perspective: *vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus*.<sup>10</sup> We can at least recognize the English derivative in the surprising

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10. Psalm 45:11 in the Vulgate.

command to “vacate,” or as Pieper puts it, to “have leisure and know that I am God.”<sup>11</sup> This one command might aptly summarize the importance of leisure and of school as *scholé*. We cannot rightly *know* things, if we are not still. This is that one thing needed.

## II: *AD ASTRA PER ASPERA*: TO THE STARS THROUGH DIFFICULTY<sup>12</sup>

But what about hard work? How does *scholé* relate to the rigor of the liberal arts tradition? This is an important question, and one we need to address here. The truth is that we always have work to do. The to-do lists that occupy our thoughts and actions never cease. “All things are full of labour,” says Solomon; “man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8). There is always more to see, to hear, and “of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Solomon adds, “And much study is a weariness of the flesh.” Thus, the first lesson we must learn is that our earthly labors never end. At some point, therefore, there is a law of diminishing returns; the paradox of hard work is that we might achieve more the less we do. If work is never finished and there is no conceivable end to getting stuff done, then we must ask what is the point of all our labor. Let’s consider this now: What are we working for anyway?

There is and always has been a negative aspect to the notion of work, and that is *toil*, or what we might call work for work’s sake. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans thought of work exclusively in positive terms, as many of the Western languages bear witness. Pieper suggests that the Latin word *otium* means both “leisure”

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11. Pieper, *Leisure*, xxv (epigraph).

12. This is a common Latin phrase suggesting that glory comes only through hardship. Similar expressions occur in several of the classical authors.

and “peace,” but the word meaning “business” or “employment” or even “trouble” is *negotium*, where we get our English word “negotiate.”<sup>13</sup> The Latin *labora*, meaning “work,” shares the root verb *laboro*, meaning “I toil,” or “suffer.” Even the Romance languages of Europe, such as the French, *travailler*, and the Spanish, *trabajo*, have their origin in the rather ghastly Latin root, the *tripalium*, a three-pronged instrument of torture. In Greek, the negative prefix *a-* (meaning “without”) was put in front of *scholé* to form the word for “work.” We might translate the Greek word for work simply as “*un-leisure*.” Plato, for instance, tells his students to turn from *ascholia* to *scholé*. Professor Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, who has written extensively on the subject of leisure and Western culture, notes the influence Plato’s vision of leisure had on Greek culture:

Directly contrasting leisure (σχολή) with work (ἀσχολία), Plato taught that working too much was unwise—indeed, this was one of the primary teachings of the Academy. In working more than necessary, taking excessive care of business, chasing after unnecessary wealth, excessive reputation and pleasures and so on, people made bad use of their freedom, choosing to become “voluntary slaves” to their baser nature. Idleness was equally unwise. Leisure was not simply “free time” for excessive sleep, woolgathering or inactivity. The sign of an educated person was active leisure; playing sports and music, engaging in public debate, doing philosophy. The closer one came to one’s essential self and the Truth, the more energized the soul became. Education meant “turning the eye of the soul” upward, toward a person’s authentic nature and toward Truth. Acquiring the discipline and skills necessary to do the Liberal Arts was difficult. Students had to work at

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13. This relationship is contestable, however. Kostas Kalimtzis, in his recent book *The Concept of Scholé: Leisure as a Political End* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), argues that the pairing of *scholé* and *ascholia* is not really very analogous to the pairing of *otium* and *negotium*.

their lessons. Nevertheless, the goal of academic work was freedom.<sup>14</sup>

This does not necessarily mean Plato looked down on labor; to him what mattered was the *telos*, the end and purpose, of that labor. Aristotle expresses a similar and paradoxical idea when he says, “We are un-leisurely (*ascholia*) in order to have leisure (*scholê*).”<sup>15</sup> What are we working for again? A paycheck? The weekend? Perhaps for more work? Aristotle suggests that the purpose of work is to afford us the space and time for reflection, praise, worship, all other activities that make our lives richer by elevating our thoughts and desires. In other words, there is a sense that work serves leisure, not the other way around.

This does not mean that work is evil. As we saw earlier, God gave work to do before the Fall, and it was good. An early Christian view of education was to, in some sense, recover the good that was lost in the Fall, and that would include the realm of work. Evil work is evil and good work is good. Since it is, therefore, a difference in kind and not degree, then it is simply a question of the kind of work our schools should be doing. For educators, this means we must be discerning regarding the purpose of our schoolwork. What assignments are best for students? How should we even understand grades? What kind of courses should we offer? How important is standardized testing as a governing benchmark? What are the best tools for assessment? The Age of Martha needs to remember Mary, and the traditional vision of *scholê* forces us to reconsider and reimagine all these questions.

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14. Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, “The History of Western Leisure,” in *A Handbook of Leisure Studies*, ed. Chris Rojek, Susan M. Shaw, and A. J. Veal (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 64, <https://docslide.net/documents/a-handbook-of-leisure-studies-2.html>. Hunnicutt cites Plato’s *Apology*: 23, 36, 38. His work “Plato on Leisure, Play, and Learning” (Iowa University) elucidates this as well. He notes that the English and German words have equally negative associations.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. William Kaufman (New York: Dover, 1998), 10.7.6.

Even if there really is biblical preference for a more contemplative life, we could easily use such arguments as tidy excuses to shirk our earthly responsibilities. What about laziness, for instance? As it is, we live in a society where the average young person likely doesn't know the meaning of good hard labor. Wouldn't leisure make provision for sloth and slack?

In a recent article called "The Necessity of Hard Work," Douglas Wilson notes that those involved in classical Christian education—parents, students, board members, educators, and the like—should constantly feel "simultaneously encouraged and overwhelmed."<sup>16</sup> In reforming education, Wilson explains, to feel only encouraged or only overwhelmed would be a fault. When we accomplish difficult things, then the glory goes to God. "God wants your homeschooling efforts to have trouble," writes Wilson. "He wants your newly found classical academy to go through hard times. This is not because he likes to torment us, but rather because he knows that in this world nothing good comes easily." Wilson is right, and the same could be said to students as well. *Ad astra per aspera*, or "To the stars through difficulty." If one does indeed reach the stars "through difficulty" (*per aspera*), then God must be in it. Upon hearing that the English won the battle of Agincourt, in spite of overwhelming odds, King Henry cries,

O God, thy arm was here;  
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,  
Ascribe we all!

. . . Take it, God,  
For it is none but thine!<sup>17</sup>

God wants us to do hard things so that he receives praise and honor. When prosperity comes to any Christian endeavor, it

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16. Douglas Wilson, "The Necessity of Hard Work," *2015 Resource Catalogue* (Moscow, ID: Logos Press, 2015), 2.

17. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 4.8.110–116 (Folger edition).



doubtless comes through hard work. But the community of a successful school or the parents of a well-educated child cannot boast of their labor. We can only ever say, “*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*,” that is, “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give the glory” (Psalm 115:1). As parents, board members, administrators, teachers, and students, our work is ultimately to be faithful to God in the little things and in the big things. Work we must. But our work must be purposeful, our efforts calibrated to worship, and our gains received in praise.

The question remains: If hard work is a good thing, then how does this square with leisure and *scholé*? This brings us to our next point. We have forgotten how difficult it is to achieve these ideals. We might assume *scholé* and leisure have something vaguely to do with our feelings, that when we are at leisure, we *feel* good. But leisure is not immediately synonymous with pleasure; it doesn’t simply mean “taking it easy.” Nor does leisure directly imply a lack or absence of the will. Rather, leisure has to do with a right orientation of the human will, from which might flow any number of physical or mental actions.

“Leisure has had a bad press,” notes English philosopher Roger Scruton in his introduction to Pieper’s *Leisure*.<sup>18</sup> “For the Puritan it is the source of vice; for the egalitarian a sign of privilege.” But these represent errors at different extremes. “We mistake leisure for idleness,” Scruton explains, “and work for creativity. Of course work *may* be creative. But only when it is informed by leisure.”<sup>19</sup> And though it might come as a surprise, though it might even seem anachronistic, those work-loving Puritans did understand this. Jonathan Edwards once exhorted his hearers in a sermon, “Labor to get thoroughly convinced that there is something else

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18. Roger Scruton, “Introduction” in Pieper, *Leisure*, xi.

19. Scruton, “Introduction” in Pieper, *Leisure*, xii.

needs caring for more than this world.”<sup>20</sup> Edwards is not proclaiming anything new but only echoing the scriptural paradox of work and leisure.<sup>21</sup> In Matthew 11:30, Jesus tells all those who are weary and heavy laden, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Similarly, we are promised “rest” in Hebrews 4. At the same time, we know that there is a cost of discipleship and that the Christian life is more demanding, not less, and is anything but complacent. Thus, we are called to work, but we’re also called to care for transcendent realities, to prepare our souls for eternity. One way of preparing the soul is the practice of contemplation, which often describes the hard work of leisure, and Pieper notes that the “work” of the contemplative life is the “highest fulfillment of what it means to be human.” But for some of us, the word “contemplation” might sound unappealing; it strikes us as elitist or pretentious. Are parents investing their hard-earned money just so their children can become poor philosophers?

This is perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of contemplation. Once again, leisure does not mean lazy. Such judgments would be reductive and simplistic. Anyone who has ever tried to pray for more than five minutes or tried to concentrate for a sustained period of time will testify to this. “Leisure,” Pieper writes, “requires superhuman grace.”<sup>22</sup> Our word “leisure,” incidentally, is related to the word “license,” connoting license, freedom, or “free time.” Attending well to a single task is difficult enough. When Jesus cautions, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6:34), it is a truth that also applies to the business of teaching and learning. *Scholé* is not the cessation of work. It is, as Scruton says, a different kind of labor; we might add, a higher

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20. Quoted in Nathan Schneider, “More Noble Exercise,” *Lapham’s Quarterly*, December 10, 2004, <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/more-noble-exercise>.

21. Recall that we have already encountered this in Scripture. On the one hand, we have the stunning metonymy, “By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread.” On the other, we have Christ’s rebuke to the devil, “Thou shalt not live by bread alone.”

22. Pieper, *Leisure*, 32.

kind of labor. This does not mean that the priest is better than the parishioner. Nor does it mean that the office of the scholar is nobler than that of the mother.

The story of Martha and Mary suggests that the “one thing needed” applies to us all. If that “one thing needed” is leisure, then it is part of the calling of every Christian. Again, we are tempted to see Martha bearing the brunt of the labor, suffering the hardest task. But there is nothing in the scene to suggest that Mary’s activity is any less arduous than Martha’s. It may be true that Mary’s intellectual gaze was a lighter burden than her sister’s scullery task. But just because it might have been easier in that moment does not mean that the ability to listen is an easy task all the time. We wrongly assume that sitting at Jesus’s feet in *scholé* is an easy task, when it might have taken years for Mary to train herself to focus; she might have had to “pay” the currency of her attention in the exchange of learning from her Lord. And if it was difficult for Mary, how much more might it be for us to sit down to the labor of leisure today?

This brings us to another strange paradox: Sometimes it is easier and more enjoyable to be “busy” than it is to be still. Simply “doing stuff” is not always productive, just as reading many books might be less beneficial than reading a few good books. Here Pieper brings to light a rather startling connection: laziness (sloth) and restlessness both stem from the same sin. We tend to think laziness is the opposite of busyness, but the truth is that they flow from the same iniquity, the same infirmity of soul: *acedia*. *Acedia* is what is known as a cardinal vice, that is, a sin that stands in opposition to the cardinal virtues. Saint Thomas Aquinas regards it as a sin “against the third commandment.”<sup>23</sup> It is an infection of the will, an unwillingness to recognize what is most important and to act accordingly. In a sense, *acedia* resists

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23. Pieper, *Leisure*, 25.

the call to “be still and know” that God is God. *Acedia* is a kind of idleness that is “the utter absence of leisure” and is “the refusal to acquiesce to one’s own being.”<sup>24</sup> It is marked by a lack of calm, a discontented attitude, a despairing heart. *Acedia* is not simply the couch potato, addicted to television, burying his hand in the Doritos bag, so lazy he cannot again bring his hand to his mouth, as Solomon describes.<sup>25</sup> *Acedia* can also manifest itself as the meritorious achiever, who is always at the gym, addicted to posting photos of recent CrossFit challenges, checking all the boxes of worldly success. Or perhaps we see it in the old-fashioned “workaholic,” who cannot stop doing, doing, doing, building the kingdom of her own business.

Like all faults, *acedia* creates a void of the Good; it is a depression, a concave of the soul. The point here is that being occupied with the activity of constant work is no refuge from the sin of sloth. A life without rest ultimately breaks the commandment to keep the Sabbath. “Such is the deeper meaning of the Sabbath,” writes Roger Scruton, “the call to stand back from getting and spending, to enter the condition of contemplation in which subject and object coalesce, to be useful beyond utility, and so to see through the veil of appetite to the sacred core of our being.”<sup>26</sup> Without *scholé*, we lose the opportunity to realize our fullest human potential.

The old saying “There ain’t no rest for the wicked” is as much practical as it is theological. The wicked have no rest because, as Psalm 1 describes them, they are “like chaff” compared to the trees of righteousness. The translation of the Latin Vulgate reads that the wicked are “dust,” rendering them already dead, since we know it is to dust that we return. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the wicked would be driven over the face of the earth like

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24. Pieper, *Leisure*, 25.

25. Proverbs 19:24.

26. Roger Scruton, *Our Church* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 93.

tumbleweed. When Satan presents himself to God in the exposition of the book of Job, he does not come from a state of rest or leisure. Rather, Satan comes in a state of *acedia* and fundamental unrest, “going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it” (Job 2:2). And yet this is a frightening account of how we often feel. Is not a similar description of our own days going to and fro in traffic, going busily from one thing to the next? It is hard to slow down. And when we refuse to be still, God in His mercy will sometimes make us, as when we might get physically sick simply because of “stress,” the invisible exhaustion of soul that touches the body. Leisure, therefore, can be hard work. Sometimes *scholé* can only be achieved “through difficulty” (*per aspera*), especially if one lives in an Age of Martha.

### III: *ORA ET LABORA*: PRAY AND WORK

So far, we have considered Scripture’s instruction on anxiousness and busyness. We have considered Christ’s own teaching in the particular story of Mary and Martha. The image of Martha is the most apt depiction of our time. We live in the Age of Martha. Education has followed suit. It has taken on either the low standards of laziness or the busied distraction of hyperactivity. But learning in either case is troubled and diminished. We cannot learn well in distraction. What we need is a return to the focused attention of *scholé*, and we see this in the example of Mary. In this last section, we will examine an approach to work and leisure from the perspective of the medieval monastery. The monastery has often borne the brunt of modern criticism that it is too contemplative or escapist, and that it is a retreat from the real work of life. But Chesterton and others have defended it as a place where the

real work of culture was happening.<sup>27</sup> In 1927, he argued that the new “Dark Ages” in which we are now living is like the Flood.

Noah had a house boat which seems to have contained many other things besides the obvious household pets. And many wild birds of exotic plumage and many wild beasts of almost fabulous fantasy, many arts counted pagan and sciences counted rationalistic may come to roost or burrow in such stormy seasons in the shelter of the convent or the home.<sup>28</sup>

Rod Dreher argues something similar to this in his recent book *The Benedict Option*, noting that it was Benedict and monastic life that preserved Western civilization and restored it from decay. Thus, the monastery (and by extension, the home) becomes a paradoxical place where seemingly insignificant communities transformed culture. In monastic life, we find both the activity of hard physical labor and the activity of contemplation, a harmony of both these different kinds of labor. In the scholastic monastery, the rigor of bodily work was balanced with the rhythms of rest and learning in *scholé*.

Many in recent years have called our attention to the principles and practices of monastic life, especially as it relates to recovering a better Christian education. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, for instance, James K. A. Smith warns us that education should not simply concern our worldviews but also our habits and desires, loyalties and loves. These, he argues, show a deeper knowledge about who we are and what we value, because our loves communicate more about what matters than merely the ability to articulate the right answer or fill in the right bubble. Thus, education is primarily a process of formation rather than of *information*. Christians should not simply be informed about the nature of God’s kingdom but

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27. G. K. Chesterton, “The New Dark Ages,” *G. K.’s Weekly*, May 21, 1927, *The Distributist Review*, April 22, 2016, <http://distributistreview.com/new-dark-ages/>.

28. Chesterton, “New Dark Ages.”

should also learn to desire it, as his title suggests. Education, therefore, is about forming humans fit for the kingdom of God. Smith cautions, however, that the secular society in which we now live contains highly formative practices that run contrary to this end. Most of us regularly feel the busyness of modern existence; most of us suffer the ubiquity of advertising; and most of us can't help but participate in the almost incessant consumerism of daily American life. All such practices, Smith argues, "educate" us and our children in deeper ways than we realize. These "secular liturgies" form habits that affect who we are, direct what we love, and supply us with images of the good life.<sup>29</sup> As a solution to all this, Smith suggests that "monasticism" and its practices provide the proper counterformational response to our secular age, an Age of Martha, worried and anxious about many things.<sup>30</sup> And this brings us back to the final section in this chapter. For our purposes, we will consider monastic life as it offers a fitting picture of the practices of leisure and *scholé* that counterbalance what can so easily become a life consumed with work and doing.

Take Saint Benedict, for instance. In the early sixth century, he composed a set of rules for monastic communities. It is from this *Rule of Saint Benedict* that others would later distill the enjoining phrase *ora et labora*, "pray and work," which became the unofficial motto for almost all monasteries living under prescribed orders. Because monastic communities cultivated worship and piety, it is not surprising that they also became the houses of learning in the early Middle Ages, some of which continue that work even today. Benedict warns that "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specific periods for manual labor as well

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29. Smith uses the term "secular liturgies" repeatedly to reinforce the fact that we are formed not merely by the data we consume but by our habits and environment. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 89.

30. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 209–210.

as for prayerful reading.”<sup>31</sup> Saint Benedict doesn’t have his head stuck in the clouds. He addresses the need for our earthly duties: “The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business in the monastery, for such service increases reward and fosters love.”<sup>32</sup> And again, he makes concession for the necessary work of the day: “Indeed, the abbot may decide that they should continue to eat dinner at noon every day if they have work in the fields or if the summer heat remains extreme.”<sup>33</sup> But Benedict is wise enough to know that work cannot be all there is. Labor alone cannot sustain us, and Benedict encourages taking time for the activity of reading books as well.

Anyone living in a world not yet made soft with technology would be no stranger to bodily toils. Thus, the monk who might know the greatest of physical labors might also know the greatest of mental leisure; and it is possible that even the fustiest anchorite then would have known more manual labor than a tradesman of today. It is true that the monks often chose places of great pastoral beauty to set up their monasteries. But some might suppose they did this to escape from the world and, like Rip Van Winkle, to avoid their chores and disappear into the woods. But Cardinal Newman points out, “the monks were not so soft” as some might think. Although they might have preferred landscapes of pastoral beauty to the bustling movement and industry of the city, and though there was certainly an emphasis on contemplation: “They were not dreamy sentimentalists, to fall in love with melancholy winds and purling rills, and waterfalls and nodding groves.” Newman writes that “their poetry was the poetry of hard work and hard fare,

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31. 48.1. Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 69.

32. 35.1–2. Benedict, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 57.

33. 41.4. Benedict, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 63.



unselfish hearts and charitable hands.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, leisure is not simply an emphasis on theoretical knowledge. Nor is *scholé* exclusively limited to mental activity, for “there are bodily exercises which are liberal,” writes Newman, “and mental exercises which are not so.”<sup>35</sup> For educators, therefore, this means we might need to be aware of teaching through more creative means. We might need to offer more imaginative kinds of courses, ones that invoke artistic and rhetorical expressions in the making of beautiful things. The old woodshop class, for instance, might have actually promoted a great deal of undistracted and focused attention. It might even hew closer to leisure than a modern English class. How one approaches the old “shop class” can be an example of *scholé* insofar as it promotes reflection and thought and makes something that blesses other people. And this is to say nothing of how such courses of manual labor might help us recover the virtue of mastery in education, a subject we discuss in later chapters.

As creatures made in the likeness of God, therefore, we all live “to pray and to work.” These two activities express the fundamental urges of what it means to be human. Indeed, all human endeavor can be subsumed in that monkish mandate, *ora et labora*, for this again expresses man’s primeval calling in Eden. In the allegorical sense, therefore, the sisters in the Gospel story came to symbolize these two chief activities of monastic life. Mary represented *orare*, the life given to prayer, contemplation, and cultivation of the mind, soul, and body, while Martha represented *laborare*, the practical work and manual labor in the life of man. Though Jesus praises Mary, it is important to note that Martha’s activity is not condemned. It is her attitude toward her sister’s activity of leisure that is condemned. Jesus does not censure

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34. John Henry Newman, “The Mission of St. Benedict,” in *Historical Sketches*, vol. 2 (New York: Longman’s Green and Co., 1912), 253.

35. John Henry Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1852), 186.

physical labor. He simply addresses what is lacking in Martha; Martha is perfectly welcome to glorify God in doing housework, mopping, sweeping, and doing the work of hospitality; but she is not welcome to file complaint against Mary, who was fulfilling her highest human potential. Both Mary and Martha bear the *imago Dei*. That means that earthly work, therefore, is not a bad thing; as we have already established, it is a good thing. Man's practical and earthly industry is part of God's calling. But only *part*. We are also called to heavenly labors; we are also called to be "anxious for nothing" and to "be still and know" that God is God. *Scholé* is the work that fulfills our higher purpose. As educators and students, we need to examine the kind of labor to which we are giving ourselves. If we look back on our educational experience and find that it was consumed with checking boxes, punctuated by anxiety over getting through material, and unattended by any sense of joy, then school will have become a burden, and we will find on our lips the bitter complaints of Martha.

In the end, there will always be *laborare*, the call "to work" in this world. In contrast to this, I have suggested that the monastic duty of *orare*, "to pray," represents an activity that demonstrates another kind of work, a true leisure that is neither lazy nor busy. In prayer, we are not idle; rather, our deepest being becomes active in reflection and supplication, imitation and adoration. We will return to the subject of prayer later, considering in the final chapter how *orare* fulfills man's highest activity. Let us now conclude with a parting image of Mary and Martha and with a final reflection.

It is well known that the medieval imagination transfigured the classical imagination; but the story of Mary and Martha is not furthering of the ancient elitism between slaves and masters, patricians and plebs. Mary and Martha are sisters, equal yet depicting for us the two different modes of human existence. Dante himself brings out this theme in *Purgatory*. In a dream, Dante beholds a woman gathering flowers in a meadowland:

Let anyone who may demand my name  
Know I am Leah, and I go to make  
Myself a garland by my lovely hands.  
Here I adorn myself for the delight  
I will enjoy when looking in my glass.  
My sister Rachel never leaves that sight  
But gazes at her glass the whole day through.  
She for her lovely eyes, I for my hands—  
Her yearning is to see, and mine to do.<sup>36</sup>

Whether we, like Martha, do with our hands the useful *work* of the world, or whether we, like Mary, sit at the feet of Jesus to pray and gaze with the eyes of high contemplation, we do such things to glorify God by fulfilling our fullest human potential, the original calling to be both gardener and poet, worker and thinker, farmer and mythmaker.

In summary, if we wish to know what matters most in education, then we must first know what matters most in human life. We see this clearly in the story of Mary and Martha, where Christ teaches us what is “needful” and essential for human existence. This is why learned men and women throughout the ages have found this story particularly instructive in the business of learning. Martha’s example reminds us how easy it is to lose sight of what is truly essential because we are prone to distraction. We are busy with doing, and frenetic with worry, worried and troubled about many things. But Mary’s example shows us a better way; she demonstrates true learning, a sanctified *scholé* that accomplishes the higher purposes for which she was made. We have also learned that work is not bad. On the contrary, work—even hard work—is a gift. But when that work becomes our master, when *labora* subordinates and eclipses *ora*, when work is unaccompanied by purposeful Sabbath and leisure, we are then cut off from being

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36. Dante, *Purgatory*, trans. and ed. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2003), canto 27.100–108.

fully human, restrained from fulfilling our potential as the images of God. Thus, *scholé* is neither laziness nor distracted busyness. The rhythms of monastic life are alternatives to what Josef Pieper calls the “total work” of modern life;<sup>37</sup> in the medieval dialectic of “work and prayer,” we can hope to fulfill not only our earthly tasks but also our highest heavenly calling in reflection and remembrance of transcendent things.

As we have seen, the fullness of the human person must involve leisure, which recalibrates our understanding of what is most important in school. *Scholé* reconfigures how we relate to academics. It informs not just what we learn or the kinds of courses we study; it governs and blesses *how* we teach and learn. In *scholé*, we afford students the opportunity to achieve those loftier goals of not merely knowing the Truth but of doing that which is True, not merely of recognizing the Good but of embodying Virtue, not merely of talking about Beauty but of desiring and creating the Beautiful. Whether at home or in the classroom, our schools must make time and space for learning to flourish. But what do we mean by “take time”? This is the subject of our next chapter, where we will examine *scholé* in terms of time.

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37. Pieper, *Leisure*, 2.

# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. We know that all Scripture promotes contemplation and reflection, and not just the New Testament. The Psalms, for instance, tell us to consider our own mortality by “number[ing] our days” (Psalm 90:12), and we are told that man is blessed when his “delight is in the law of the LORD” and when he “meditates day and night” on that law (Psalm 1:2). What other Scriptures come to mind that might promote leisure?
2. All schools look a bit different. In what ways does your school or homeschool look more like Mary or Martha?
3. How does leisure recalibrate your understanding of what is most important in your school? How does leisure shape how you teach and how students learn?
4. There are so many courses of study to choose from. In what ways can *scholé* reconfigure how you structure your academic program?
5. In the balanced tension between the practical and the philosophical activities of school, how can your educational program recognize the need for slowing down and cutting out distractions? What kinds of courses reinforce an experience of Martha? What kinds of courses promote an experience of Mary?
6. Beyond adding Bible courses, how can your students engage in practices that form some desire to “be still and know” that God is God?
7. If the medieval world was so much more attentive to the imitation of Mary, what are some practices from medieval education that we can adopt in order to foster a proper sense of rest and leisure in learning? (Hint: *Lectio divina* could be a start.)