NIMBLE AS THE PEN OF A Scribe: Toward A THEOLOGY OF WRITING

PART II: SCRIBES: THREE MOMENTS IN TIME

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_Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of the household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old._ Matthew 13:52

Scribes and calligraphers, novelists, poets and writers of all kinds have received a charism of writing appropriate to their circumstances. Each in his or her own way, time and place uses writing to seek God, to draw closer to him and to enable others to hear his call as well. Their experience illustrates and confirms how God has been present to a writer or scribe in the people and materials in which she has created a new written word. Therefore, each of the scribes or communities of scribes discussed below illustrates the sacramental nature of writing, another important aspect of a theology of writing. Through the writing, God is present to the writer and, through the writer, to the wider community.

I. The Scribes of the Torah

The Torah scrolls in any synagogue up to the present day must be written by hand by a trained scribe. Writing a scroll of the Torah requires total concentration on the part of the scribe, total dedication of the mind and heart to the words being formed through his hand before his very eyes. One source for that training is found within the Talmud, Judaism’s collection of ancient rabbinical writings. The Talmud contains the Masseketh Soferim, a tractate that pulls together numerous details about writing a Torah scroll. An examination of those details reveals not only how the writing shapes the scribe but how it also shapes the entire community and becomes a sacrament of God’s presence.

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The service of a scribe is of primary importance for a Jewish community; his work is done for the sake of the people. When a scroll is completed, the entire congregation for whom it is intended gathers to celebrate, and each member of the congregation is invited to write one of the final letters on the scroll. Rabbi Menachem Youlus, a rabbi deeply involved in recovering and restoring Torah scrolls damaged in the Holocaust, explains that one of the commandments of the law is that every person ought to write a Torah scroll, so if “somebody fills in a letter in a Torah, it’s as if they wrote the entire Torah by themselves.” Because of the history of these restored scrolls, the larger Jewish community beyond the synagogue for whom a restored scroll is intended is particularly present. Neil Yerman, another scribe involved in the restoration efforts, was keenly aware of those who had died as he worked on a scroll from the Polish town of Ostrow in which 9,000 Jews were killed in the course of three days. “I feel in a way,” he explains, “there are 9,000 people with me every time I’m in the scrolls, and they’re watching and whispering. They’re with me.” The scroll which is being repaired is given new life, and through the scroll, new life is given to its former community as well. Rabbi Jerome David of Temple Emmanuel in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, the recipients of this restored scroll, echoes Yerman’s words: “In restoring a letter, you restore a name. You give birth to a name; you give birth to a life. So in a sense, the community is starting to live again.” Torah is living; Torah is life. This restoration project builds on the reality that Torah unites the Jewish people across time and around the world, even, or perhaps especially, when the Torah is drawn from the most unspeakable of tragedies.

The experiences of Torah and the writing of a Torah scroll are related to the understanding of the sacramental principle in the Jewish-Christian tradition. Through the sacramental principle, God who is not visible is experienced in a tangible way through our material human existence. Thus, as the traditional formulation of the Council of Trent puts it, a sacrament is the visible form of an

2 Ibid., 617.
3 Shortly before we went to press with this article, Rabbi Youlus was convicted of fraud in regard to his claims of discovering lost torahs. We do not believe, however, that this invalidates his statements about the holiness of the Torah quoted by Sr. Hilda in this article. Editor.
6 Ibid.

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invisible grace. While the seven sacraments of the Church are events in which God’s presence may be experienced in a more intense way, many other concrete actions can impart the presence of God’s grace, including the act of writing, as is illustrated by this first example of those who write a Torah scroll. Herbert Vorgrimler describes two basic kinds of sacraments, and different aspects of writing a Torah scroll seem to fit in each category. First, there are those sacraments that have significance for an individual person and are “determined by the particular situation” (12). Even when a community participates in the completion of a Torah scroll, relatively few people serve as Torah scribes or have the experience of extensive work on such a project. However, the work of the Torah scribes also fits with Vorgrimler’s second kind of sacrament, “those [symbols] that are recognized within a faith tradition as the special places and events in which the presence of God is to be found” (12). The Torah is certainly one of those places in the Jewish tradition, and the work of the scribes helps to bring the Torah, the presence of God, to the people. The illustration of the scribes of the Torah becomes even richer when the details included in the Masseketh Soferim are examined further; these details outline how the sacramentality of writing may be experienced.

Writing a scroll of the Torah involves more than copying the letters; if a man cannot read and comprehend the words he writes, he may not work on a scroll. Even if a scribe was a perfect copyist, it would not be enough; comprehension is required. God is present in these words as they are written, and without the requisite literacy, the scribe cannot be fully present to God in that moment, a profoundly sacramental moment. He must bring the words into himself, much in the manner that George Steiner describes. An intimacy with the words he is writing, an intimacy channeled through his reading and comprehension, is not just an outcome of the words but a prerequisite. This intimacy is even more intense when the scribe writes the Tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters transiterated as YHWH, which are used to signify the ineffable name of God. The scribe is forbidden to respond if someone attempts to interrupt his work. Even if the king enters the room, he must not be drawn away from the point at which the parchment, the pen, the name of God and his own self meet. Throughout the process

9 See Part I of this article, ABR, 63:1, p. 25 ff.
10 “Masseketh,” 233.
of writing an entire scroll, an attitude of devotion is maintained; some scribes may even go as far as immersing themselves in ritual baths before they write the divine name.11

The work demands the very best of the scribe in terms of his devotion and prayer, and that demand for the very best is also reflected in the quality of the materials he uses. A scroll can only be written on the skins of ritually clean animals, as well as sewn together with their sinews.12 In the Masseketh Soferim, the skill of the person is included among the requirements for high quality materials for making a scroll: "It is obligatory . . . to write a beautiful scroll of the Torah with choice ink, with a fine reed pen [used] by an expert penman, on well-finished parchments, on deer skins, and to wrap it in precious silks, for Scripture states, 'This is my God and I will glorify Him,' which means, perform the commandments in a beautiful manner to His glory" (225). God meets the scribe through these beautiful tools and materials, and the scribe meets God with as much concentration and purity of heart as he possibly can. Rabbi Menachem Youlous also describes the centrality of the attention of a scribe: "What makes you a terrific scribe is not necessarily your handwriting. The most important thing is your total focus, your total intent—that what it is you’re doing is only for God’s sake."13 The work and glory of God is worthy of the best possible materials and the best possible attention of the scribe.

Youlous' comment also seems to harmonize with writing as a charism. His explanation may serve as a check against the temptations to pride that writing may stir up, particularly if a writer enjoys any kind of success, whether it is big or small. With the example of the scribes of the Torah at hand, those temptations may not seem so attractive because of the witness the scribes give to focusing on God first. Then the next essay, the next poem or novel, would not be used to replicate her previous success. It would be discerned as the next work to which she is called by the circumstances in which God has placed her. The training of the writer’s attention for the purpose of discernment and service would remain her focus.

Simone Weil, in her essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,"14 explains how the focus on God through the work at hand is developed by all of a student’s studies.

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11 Werblowsky 617.
12 "Masseketh," 211.
13 "Belief," see note 3 above.
Keeping in mind the example of the scribes of the Torah, Weil’s words can also apply to the situation of other writers, regardless of the genre or subject they are pursuing. Weil explains that a true understanding of a student’s school studies includes the understanding of prayer as a person learning to focus his attention on God. The ultimate reason for a student’s studies is not academic success, as important as that may be, but the training of his attention. “Our deep purpose,” explains Weil, “should aim solely at increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer; as, when we write, we draw the shape of the letter on the paper, not with a view to the shape, but with a view to the idea we want to express” (47). Once a school exercise is completed, his improved attention can also help him grow in humility as he gives his mistakes his full attention instead of giving in to the temptation to brush them aside.

By attention Weil does not mean the kind of effort that includes scrunched up foreheads and an undue tiredness. When students are tired, she rightly points out, they really cannot pay attention at all, and in the end, a short amount of untired attention is better than hours “of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: ‘I have worked well!’” (49). This kind of attention is straining more than anything else. Weil’s kind of attention is an openness to the chemistry experiment, the geometry problem, the passage to be translated, that allows the object to fully enter our mind; we “suspend our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (49). Once the object is before the student, finding the truth the object has to offer is not, in the end, necessarily the result of her diligent search, but of her willingness to wait and to listen.

Love of God and love of neighbor are naturally intertwined; therefore, Weil concludes her essay by explaining how the attention developed in a student’s studies is also developed so as to give a neighbor what he needs the most in a time of suffering. Certainly the neighbor needs material comfort if that is the nature of his suffering, though, of course, suffering can happen in many ways, on many levels. Regardless of the nature of his suffering, what he needs the most is “a recognition that the sufferer exists . . . as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction” (50). The open attention that the student learned to cultivate in her studies can now be turned toward her suffering neighbor. An attention that chooses to empty itself for the love of God and the sake of the neighbor turns out to be a precious part of work in the world.
This attention is not the result of perfect school work but of the training of a student’s attention in the pursuit of perfect school work. Even if the work has been done poorly, it still has trained the student’s attention so that he could, perhaps in unforeseen ways, help his neighbor. Weil explains:

So it comes about that, paradoxical as it may seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them. Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need”. (52)

This attention is so precious that Weil concludes her essay by comparing it to the pearl of great price. Schoolwork is the field that contains the pearl, and the effort the student puts into that work is all the more important for the value of what he may find.

Weil’s essay helps to further connect the example of the scribes of the Torah with a writer’s own experience. Most writers will never work on a project that has the formally religious importance of a Torah scroll, a piece of writing that is literally the word of God and is intended for use within a community’s worship. Most writers, though, have experienced pieces of writing that fail in one way or another, regardless of how much time is devoted to them. All writers have pieces that they, in the end, need to abandon. However, they can certainly take up the example of the attention of the scribes on God and the understanding that what makes a person a great writer is not entirely the resulting work but the quality of that attention. Writing as an act and a steady practice is well suited to cultivating such attention.

II. The Lindisfarne Gospels

The Lindisfarne Gospels, which are now located in the British Library in London, are among the finest and most well-documented illuminated manuscripts of Western civilization. This astounding manuscript, written in honor of Saint Cuthbert and within the context of a monastic community, beautifully illustrates that aspect of writing which encourages communion between the writer and the reader and among the living and the dead. Around 635 CE Saint Aidan founded the Monastery of Lindisfarne on an outcrop of land known as Holy Island.
Aidan was a well-loved bishop and traveled all over Northumbria, helping to establish Christianity in the area through his preaching and baptizing. Saint Cuthbert, a future abbot of Lindisfarne, was born at approximately the same time that Aidan arrived in Northumbria. Because of his holy life and care for the poor, monks and pilgrims continually sought out Cuthbert. With a book like the Lindisfarne Gospels, the beauty of the manuscript can divert attention from the truth that underlies the work. However, Sister Benedicta Ward, in a short work on Saint Cuthbert, states that “With that overwhelmingly beautiful book, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the most beautiful thing about it is not its decoration but its content, the Gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ.” Just as a saint such as Cuthbert is venerated because of how his life reveals the life of Christ, people should strive to understand the prayer and dedication behind the Lindisfarne Gospels because its content is the life of Christ, the Word of Life.

The physical details of the Lindisfarne Gospels as described by Janet Backhouse are indeed remarkable, and just a few of those details can be mentioned here. The manuscript contains 258 leaves that required at least 129 large pieces of vellum (27). While the boundaries for the areas of writing were marked by pricking the surface of the vellum, there is no evidence that the scribe used any kind of template to create the complicated carpet pages, sheets of solid decoration placed at the beginning of each Gospel (28). The materials for the pigments include red and white lead, yellow ocher, gall, indigo, and kermes. Kermes is a red dye gathered from the insects that live on a particular oak tree in the Mediterranean. The most unusual ink was obtained from blue lapis lazuli; its only source during the time of the Lindisfarne Gospels was the foothills of the Himalayas (32). The decorated pages include fifteen fully decorated pages, including its famous carpet pages and sixteen pages decorated with canon tables (33). The most prominent motif used in the decorated pages is zoomorphic interlace with its “elongated, almost serpentine bodies, and legs, ears, and tails that are all stretched out to form parts of the pattern” (47). Lastly, the decorated pages include a multitude a tiny red dots of lead; while this feature is found in other insular manuscripts, the Lindisfarne Gospels contain the most outstanding example of its use (51).

Near the middle of the tenth century, Aldred, another monk, added the Anglo-Saxon gloss of the text of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and the

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16 Ibid., 7.
gloss is the earliest extant translation of the Gospels into any form of English (17). Aldred also wrote the colophon on the last page:

Eadforth, Bishop of the Lindisfarne Church, originally wrote this book, for God and for Saint Cuthbert, and—jointly—for all the saints whose relics are in the Island. And Ethelwald, Bishop of the Lindisfarne islanders, impressed it on the outside and covered it—as he well knew how to do. And Billforth, the anchorite, forged the ornaments which are on it on the outside and adorned it with gold and with gems and also with gilded-over silver—pure metal. And Aldred, unworthy and most miserable priest, glossed it in English between the lines with the help of God and Saint Cuthbert. (7)

Aldred touches on each of the men who helped to create, preserve, and explicate this incredible Gospel book. Little is known about any of them outside of their work on the Lindisfarne Gospels, yet their work stands as a testimony not only to their skill and dedication to God but to their different layers of connections to community as well. Aldred explains that the Lindisfarne Gospels began with Eadforth’s dedication not just to Saint Cuthbert but to all the saints who had lived on Holy Island, and Aldred asked for Saint Cuthbert’s intercession during his work. He adds that he held a particular intention as he glossed each Gospel: Matthew for God and Saint Cuthbert, Mark for the bishop, Luke for his monastic community, and John for the sake of his own soul (16). Aldred’s explanations are more than the intricacies of history; they are also a beautiful example of the expansiveness of the communion of saints. This communion includes all the members of the Church, a communion made possible through the Eucharist. It extends through the living and the dead in their prayers. Through their prayers the dead know of the living, and the living may help the dead. Aldred honors ecclesial communion with the bishop through Mark’s Gospel and his communion with his own brethren who supported him as he worked with Luke. The details of the colophon serve as an example for all writers and scribes, an example of how their work may also become a participation in the communion of saints, the saints who made their current life and work possible, the saints-in-the-making among whom they live, and all the saints to come.

Michelle Brown, a contemporary expert on the Lindisfarne Gospels, discusses how all the details of the manuscript’s creation also urge its readers and viewers to reflect on the incarnational nature of
their writing, a key aspect of a theology of writing and the sacramental nature of writing. As did the various manuscripts of the Scriptures before it, the Lindisfarne Gospels became a reality through the integration of human work, physical materials, and divine inspiration. The scribe used the skins of animals and the dyes of plants, applied himself to an extremely physically taxing task, and surely prayed for strength of mind and body so he could continue. As in the incarnation of Jesus, the divine and human meet. Looking to separate the two would be a grave mistake, for an underlying understanding of the sacramental nature of the world, including the act of writing, is that “a separation of reality into sacred and profane realms is impossible.”

Through the work of the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Word again takes shape through the material world and spreads to peoples far beyond the place where the Word found in the Lindisfarne Gospels began. When the human body of Jesus is “filled and enlivened by the Spirit [.] it is spiritual (pneumatic) and thus freed from the limitations of time and space” (18). In their own way, those who worked on the Lindisfarne Gospels were, through the inspiration of the Spirit, also taken beyond the limitations of time and space as they took up their part in bringing the Word to men and women in a new place.

Those who worked on the Lindisfarne Gospels saw themselves as participating in the evangelical and missionary work of the Four Evangelists. They used their lives to bring the Word to others, and they did so through tasks that required a “heroic feat of patience and of spiritual and physical endurance.” To help explicate what such a feat may have meant to those who took it up, Michelle Brown suggests extending “the metaphor of the scholar-priest to that of the scribe-priest.” Those who created the Lindisfarne Gospels are part of the tradition of Bede and Cassiodorus, both of whom see the scribe working for the sake of the Kingdom and as an act of humility (397). Taking place as it did within the context of Celtic monasticism, the “apostolic service,” the actual physical work of the scribe who created the Lindisfarne Gospels, “may have been seen as a solitary undertaking on behalf of the community, rather than a communal

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19 Vorgrimler, note 6 above, 17.
collaboration” (398). Brown proposes another analogy to add to that of the scribe-priest, that of an artist-scribe who is dedicated to “such an exceptional, spiritually charged project” and who may be compared to the hermit or anchorite; the desert of the artist-scribe is the physical endurance, prayer, and sacrifice required by such an extensive and difficult project (398). As discussed above, the communal aspect was also present in the work of the Lindisfarne Gospels, even when the community was not physically present due to the scribe’s physical isolation. Additionally, without all of those who would view the final work, the Lindisfarne Gospels would lose much of its meaning.

When the manuscript was completed, the Lindisfarne Gospels were placed on the altar so as to be viewed by the pilgrims who came to honor Cuthbert’s relics. The manuscript was never intended for a library but was to be counted among the utensils and materials used for worship. The Lindisfarne Gospels were intended to be “contemplated as a portal of prayer” by those who saw it (400). In the end, what could be seen as a highly interior activity of a scribe or craftsman focused on the work before him becomes a sacramental and missionary activity of the highest order. “Its presence on the altar,” explains Brown, “symbolically evoked the very presence of God and celebrated the tradition of transmission of the Gospels and their use in preaching and prayer” (400). The scribe may work for his own sanctification, yet that is accomplished within the wider community in which the work is done for the sake of the sanctification of all those who may come into contact with the scribe’s work as well. Through that work, the scribes and craftsmen were teachers and preachers, reaching those who traveled long distances to visit Lindisfarne. Their work also reaches beyond their own lifetimes so that many others could be as moved by the grace present in their work as were those first pilgrims.

In the scribes and artisans who created the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Church today has a beautiful illustration of the role of the community in the life and work of the writer or scribe. While the larger community, the living and the dead, inspired their work, their present community must have also sustained their work, both in terms of material support and in the confirmation of their calling to do this work. Sister Emmanuel Pieper, a contemporary Benedictine whose visual art often involves letters and words, spoke with several of her sisters as she attempted to answer the question “What does it mean to
have an artist in community?"22 One sister replied that having an artist in the community helps all of the community members to understand the nature of the particular work they have been given to do, that each sister uses her talents to articulate and give shape to “everything that breathes of the human” (82). If this is true of everyone, then what is the specific significance of the artist? Sister Emmanuel’s conferee replies, “It means that a person of creativity and depth has found goodness, truth, beauty, and order here and yearns to express these for the joy of all” (82). Like the work of any community member, the artist takes in the entire life of the community, its work, its prayer, and all of the stories that are told in and among the two, and offers them back to the community and the world.

The work of the Lindisfarne Gospels confirms that those who created it found the presence and joy of God in their time and place and among their own people. Sister Emmanuel and the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels echo the words at the beginning of the First Letter of John: “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1:3-4). They each engage in their work, in their writing, so as to attest to the new life they have experienced, a new life that is not whole until it has been passed on to others. For the writer who understands her work through the Paschal Mystery, the communion made possible by and that extends beyond her writing makes her joy complete.

III. The Saint John’s Bible

Manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels are not only found in the past; the new millennium marked the beginning of work on the Saint John’s Bible. This project embodies, in a contemporary context, several of the previously mentioned aspects of a theology of writing: the concept of a charism, the prayer and focus of the scribe, the sacramentality of writing, and the communion of saints.

Saint John’s University, a ministry of the Benedictine monastery of Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, commissioned the Saint John’s Bible and thus called the scribe Donald Jackson to put his artistic charism at the service of a new project. During the ceremony

in which Jackson was commissioned to serve as the artistic director and primary scribe for the Saint John’s Bible, Brother Dietrich Reinhart remembered the words of one of his monastic confreres, words addressed to a gathering of calligraphers that had taken place at Saint John’s University: “[B]y cultivating the art of writing [the calligrapher] reminds us all of the pure joy of a creation good in all its designs and superlatively good in the endowments of the human mind. For beauty bears witness to joy, joy in making, joy in being.”

In this work and its joy, Donald Jackson and his team join the scribes of the Torah, the scribes and artisans of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Sister Emmanuel Pieper and her community. They, too, have found and shared the joy of the Word in a new time and place and used their charism to shape that joy into a gift for the larger community.

As with the Lindisfarne Gospels, the details of the Saint John’s Bible are intricate and many; just a few may be described here. Perhaps most significant is the collaborative nature of the work. As Jackson gathered the team of calligraphers and artists that would work on the Saint John’s Bible in Wales, they were preparing to work in a way that none of them had fully experienced before, working as a team rather than as individual artists. According to Christopher Calderhead, they would be practicing their craft in a new way, “in a collaborative workshop setting. None of the team had ever worked in a major scriptorium like this.”

There had not been a scriptorium like this since the “invention of moveable type.” Moveable type had completely changed the nature of producing a book, making a scriptorium obsolete, and participating in the project would mean creating a new scriptorium for this time and place. Jackson described his role as that of a conductor for this group of artists, each of whom would also serve as a soloist through various illuminations.

The materials Jackson and his team used would be both old and new. The team “used all the resources available to make something which is grounded in the ancient tradition of calligraphy, yet which is also entirely up-to-date.” For instance, the first material that needed to be addressed was the writing surface, the vellum. As with the scrolls of the Torah and the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Saint John’s Bible would literally be written on flesh. Preparing the skins for writing was “an incredibly subtle and delicate job” (61). Once they obtained the proper

25 The Illuminator and a Bible for the 21st Century, DVD (BBC Video, 2005).
26 Calderhead 38.
vellum, it had to be carefully sanded, a challenging task since each skin has a slightly different texture on the hair side and the flesh side, as well as from one end to the other. Another element for the manuscript was gold leaf. Gold leaf is a difficult material with which to work, yet it is worth the effort because of how it catches the surrounding light. Gold leaf was key to the medieval illuminated manuscripts and is key to the Saint John’s Bible as well: “Turn a gold-bespecked page in a dim room and you will see. The page will flash to life,” a life that already echoed in the flesh upon which the gold was applied (131).

As he has reflected on the tools and materials of calligraphy associated with this project, Jackson primarily focused on the energy of the emotions that he hopes would connect those doing the work with those who will experience it once it is completed. This, too, is an experience of the communion of saints. Concerning the gold of the illuminations, he says “Light is responsive, and it’s capable of picking up emotions from inside me and putting them on that page, energy that comes from the soles of my feet right to the top of my head.”27 He makes similar comments about the emotions involved in his work when he speaks of the rest of the materials involved in the project. Once all of the materials have been found and prepared, the words come to life. “Once that happens,” Jackson explains, “that marriage of ink, of pen, and of surface perfectly prepared, you get... a marriage of the senses that enables you to make beautiful marks from your heart.”28 The contents of the heart are given expression, are incarnated, through that written word, and life is given to a project that will be shared with many others in the years to come.

It has become a commonplace to state that at the present time many people hesitate to claim they are religious even if they regard themselves as spiritual. Clearly the monastic community that commissioned the Saint John’s Bible would consider itself religious, but this would not necessarily be so for those who wrote the text and created the illuminations. Jackson hesitates to describe himself as a religious person; he defines a religious person as “somebody who’s worked hard to create that space in their lives and will commit to a regular religious practice.”29 He explains that, through the process of directing and participating in the Saint John’s Bible, he discovered he is a spiritual person. “There is no question,” he explains, “that the closest I have ever got to God is when I am doing calligraphy.”30

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27 The Illuminator.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Jackson’s reflection points out that the sacramental aspect of writing is alive and active even when it is not explicitly recognized. Jackson’s use of the gifts God has given him, his use of the practice of writing, brings him closer to God even when he does not consider himself religious in a traditional sense.

Given the way writing has been an act of prayer for the scribes of the Torah and an act of communion for those who created the Lindisfarne Gospels, it is not surprising that Jackson might experience his work in a similar manner today. He explains that when the commission for the Saint John’s Bible was offered to him, he saw it as the task for which he has “been preparing his whole life.” Writers are being led by the Spirit in all the steps toward their major works, whatever those works may be, and whether they are consciously aware of such movements of the Spirit or not. They are always being prepared for the next step, the next surprise.

IV.

Investigating these three moments of writing with the scribes of the Torah, the monks of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Donald Jackson and his scribal team, illuminates some of the details that may be included in a theology of writing. For a larger historical perspective in which to frame this discussion, John W. O’Malley and his book *Four Cultures of the West* is useful. In this work, he describes four major cultures, four major modes of thinking and activity that have shaped and continue to shape life in the West. Each culture originated in antiquity, found a Christian character with the rise of Christiandom, and is present in a more secular form today.

O’Malley explains that the four cultures, the prophetic, the academic, the literary, and the artistic, are like four Gulf Streams that have continually flowed through Western civilization (6). He does not claim that these four cultures explain all that Western civilization contains; other additional currents can be identified, yet these are the primary currents in Western life and thought. O’Malley invites the reader to take up the same invitation that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux gave to his monks in his sermon on the Song of Songs, to take up the text he has put before the reader so she can read the book of her own experience though the lens offered by that text (228). Therefore,

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31 *The Saint John’s Bible* (note 22).
O’Malley’s four cultures may be examined for the insight they may provide into a theology of writing as well.

Writing, like Western civilization as O’Malley describes it, is a vast ocean. Its forms and purposes are as variable as the people who use and create with it, and hopefully much more can be added to what is contained in this work about a theology of writing. For the purposes of this work, this section will focus on writing within cultures three and four, literary culture and artistic culture. Writing is certainly a major part of the prophetic culture and the academic culture; much of their work could not be accomplished without the tool of writing and the power it holds to move people to take action or to communicate ideas, hypotheses, and discoveries. Many prophetic and academic pieces of writing can also be profoundly beautiful. However, and with the acknowledgement that this is a very broad generalization, within cultures three and four writing is more explicitly connected to the appreciation of human life and treasured for its beauty.

O’Malley describes culture three as the culture of poetry, rhetoric, and the common good. It is grounded in the understanding that a student immerses himself in the study of poetry and rhetoric for the sake of shaping his character into that of a true gentleman capable of becoming a servant leader in his community. The study of literature would “reveal the complexity of the human situation” (129). Students need to learn how to work with complexity, with all of the layers people bring to any given situation. They need to learn to address questions that contain many areas of gray. Those who become political leaders need to understand true complexity if they are to be effective and pastoral (133).

The sense of pursuing studies with the purpose of shaping the student’s character and making the student more capable of public service was also taken up by Christian leaders, particularly bishops, after Constantine’s recognition of Christianity. The civic duties the bishops received with that recognition, and the “course in management” they would need, were not covered in the New Testament; however, “rhetorical education implicitly advertised itself to be precisely such a course” (139). The rhetorical education that many of the men received before they held a Church office would teach them how to speak and write for the public, as well as provide them with the means to communicate with their brother bishops who resided at a great distance. Oratory, explains O’Malley, “implicitly suggested how to get people to work together for a common goal” (139). Then as now, these are crucial skills for any bishop, any servant of the Church.
Today, O'Malley explains, culture three will not necessarily be found in a school or university because it is too expansive to be contained by such an institution. Culture three's "real home is in the larger world. Culture three is Homer, who never went to school, and then Sophocles, Virgil, Bernard, Dante, Shakespeare, Molière, Eliot and Austen, Wilde and Joyce, Faulkner and Hemingway, as well as their successors up to the present" (173). According to O'Malley, people read these writers now not so much to be trained as gentlemen but for the pleasure they give, and because they help people reflect upon the complexity of their own experience. Culture three helps people to identify and more fully understand the intricacies of human living and through that understanding, to love and to serve.

Culture four is the culture of art and performance. Unlike the first three cultures O'Malley discusses, culture four is primarily visual rather than verbal. "Words that come a little closer to capturing the essence of the culture," explains O'Malley, "are pleasure and play" (187). Culture four captures that part of human life that is gesture and movement, color and light. In terms of Christianity, culture four is often the culture of which more people are aware because there are so many churches and other structures, ancient and new, which are part of the material culture of Christianity. Beginning with Constantine's acceptance of Christianity, cities could begin to take on a Christian shape (188). Regular services in the cathedral included processions that moved into the streets, and as the Christian liturgy took the place of pagan rites, Christianity became the common thread that held society together, even in a literal and physical sense.33

Beginning with the iconoclast controversy, culture four has faced a long run of tests and trials. The worth of sacred images was eventually defended by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. Throughout the Middle Ages, even during the most difficult times, Christians continued to develop their material culture, particularly through monastic communities. Their production included "illuminated manuscripts, goldwork and enameling, ivory carving, and gem engraving whose quality in some ways has never been equaled" (200). These beautiful pieces were religious in nature and often intended for the liturgy.

The visual culture four within the churches was stripped down during the Reformation, yet the arts exploded elsewhere during the Baroque period. "The arts burst out of the confines of the church, school, and court to continue and even intensify the great civic/
religious spectacles of earlier eras” explains O’Malley (229). All levels of society became involved with the arts, and generally speaking anyone who had the means to be a patron of this great outpouring of sculpture, painting, music, and dance usually did so. In the current time, culture four does not have such a pervasive reach, though O’Malley admits “a huge exception must perhaps be made for its popular forms, commercialized though they often are” (232). Today culture four tends to be set apart, existing in a museum, gallery, or concert hall rather than in people’s homes or on the street. When art has a place in people’s lives, “its place is not where they live, work, or often, even where they worship” (239). People leave home and work to see some art, but they rarely bring it back with them.

What may these two cultures, that of poetry, rhetoric, and the common good, and that of art and performance, contribute to an understanding of the three moments of time described above and to a theology of writing? First, culture three’s emphasis on respect for ancient texts and serving others can certainly be found with the scribes of the Torah, the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Jackson and the Saint John’s Bible. They are a deep part of culture three because of their focus on reproducing and preserving the Word of God for their contemporaries and for future generations. They did and do their part in bringing the past into the present, of bringing the story and history of salvation to bear on their own times and circumstances. The contemporary scribes involved in rescuing and restoring scrolls damaged during the Holocaust are a clear instance of this, not only in the scrolls themselves but in all of the events and people their presence represents. The story of the people who first wrote and prayed with the scrolls now being reintroduced into Jewish congregations is joined with those who pray with them now. The men of the Lindisfarne Gospels honored not only the Scriptures but the life of Saint Cuthbert as well. The pilgrims who came to Lindisfarne would also see Saint Cuthbert’s remains placed in the floor of the church and would learn of the connection between this holy man and the beautiful book they saw on the altar. Lastly, one of the primary purposes for creating the Saint John’s Bible was to bring treasures of the past, both the Scriptures and the scriptal and artistic techniques used to create this work, into conversation with the present.

Each of these works is also reflected in culture three’s emphasis on study for the purpose of service that is offered to the Church and the world at large. While the work of the scribes of the Torah is focused

34 Ibid., 232.
more on their own congregations, learning about the story of those involved in restoring scrolls from the Holocaust can benefit everyone. This work demonstrates another way in which new life can rise from devastating death. One explicit purpose of the Lindisfarne Gospels was to be of service to the pilgrims that came to Lindisfarne; those who created it saw themselves as participating in the same ministry as the four original evangelists. Because they were at the service of the Gospel, they were at the service of all of those who visited their community.

Lastly, Donald Jackson and the monks of Saint John’s Abbey put their talents and resources at the service of the scholarly community and the general public. The scholars had a once in a lifetime chance to see a handwritten Bible come to life, and the public would have a handwritten Bible made for their own time and place. Their work, in turn, helps those who encounter the Saint John’s Bible to do their own work as well. “We are writing with hearts, minds, and hands,” Jackson explained, “but it won’t mean anything unless you use your hearts and minds. Our job is over, but yours is just beginning.” Perhaps as with all good service, those who receive the Saint John’s Bible in one way or another will be encouraged to sustain the service in which they are already engaged as well as to seek new ways of building up the Kingdom of God.

Culture three emphasizes the power and influence words have to explore humanity in all of its complexity, to encourage people in their service to one another, and to relate people to the past. These aspects, however, are not necessarily directly linked to the physical form of the words. Whether they are contained in a poorly preserved manuscript, a stunning illumination, or are shared verbally, the words retain their power. In part, culture three takes words and puts them to work for a larger purpose, even as large as the glorification of God. However, given their intensely visible nature, these three scribes and their work may perhaps be more suitable to art and performance, to culture four, for here the emphasis is not so much on the verbal but on the visual and on the encounter with the Word that the visual makes possible.

The scribes of the Torah emphasize the visual in that the biblical text they are inscribing on the vellum must be letter-perfect; any mistakes must be carefully removed and redone. The words of the Torah are brought to the people verbally during the services of the

synagogue, but the place of the Torah scrolls within the synagogue is still profoundly physical and visual. The scrolls are kept in special cases and wrapped in beautiful cloths, and when the scrolls are processed through the synagogue, the people physically respond with a touch or a kiss. The website for Save-a-Torah contains a photograph of a New York City rabbi who has unrolled the two ends of a large, restored Torah scroll and is holding it high above his head for the congregation to see, new life recovered from the ruins of horrific death. The physical beauty of the scrolls and the rabbi’s physical gesture make this point more powerfully than perhaps any verbal explanation could. While the restoration of such scrolls can be difficult, technical work, this visual point demonstrates how it is much more a work of the heart and spirit.

The overwhelming physical beauty of the Lindisfarne Gospels clearly places it within the material culture of art and performance. Not only is the text itself and the first letters of each Gospel brought to life through illumination, but the carpet pages preceding each Gospel contain nothing but intricate illumination. The placement of the Gospel book on the altar also finds a home within performance because performance includes all aspects of the liturgy. In a Christian context, culture four began to take hold as communities large and small built cathedrals and chapels and furnished them with beautifully crafted vestments, utensils of the altar, and liturgical books. The Lindisfarne Gospels were a part of this larger movement to glorify God through material culture.

As with the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Saint John’s Bible puts the highest value on the visual, whether it is the text itself or the illuminations. Unlike earlier eras in which those viewing an illuminated manuscript may not have been able to read the text, almost all of those viewing the Saint John’s Bible are literate. The illuminations are intimately connected to the Biblical text and are drawn from it. The activities found within culture four are even found within the play of the light on the gold within the illuminations. The illuminations give their most brilliant performance when the page is turned and the light moves over the work.


*Keep my commandments and live, keep my teachings as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers, write them on the tablet of your heart.* Proverbs 7:2b-3

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Thus far, this work has primarily focused on writing as a physical act, the movement of putting words on a page. This section will also look at writing more as movement of the mind, an act of composing or searching for the right word to convey the meaning a writer hears in his heart. This section will attempt to account for the interior experience of writing as reflected in the discussion of the scribes of the Torah and the experience of Donald Jackson. Such an accounting is also key for a theology of writing. The act of writing is complex, yet hopefully by moving between these two ways of exploring writing that complexity may be honored even if it cannot be fully described here.

In considering this more internal word, some of the work of Karl Rahner is helpful. In his discussion of the relationship between poetry and Christian people, he explains that because Christianity is a religion in which Sacred Scriptures are proclaimed, it naturally has “an intrinsic relationship” to words and “hence cannot be without such a special relationship to the poetic word.” Of course anything that is part of a person’s experience may be an experience of God and his grace, yet because of this relationship between human words and the Word, words outside of Scripture may have a special place in preparing a person for the moment when she first hears the Gospel “through official preaching” (35). This hearing of the Gospel is the most powerful word of all for it contains “the incomprehensible, the nameless, silent power that rules all but is itself unruled . . . in a word: the abiding mystery which we call God, the beginning who is still there when we end” (388). All the words people use, those they receive from others as well as those they are given through the process of their own writing, can help lead them to the Word of the Scriptures, opening them to the understanding of words as trustworthy and capable of leading them to love.

The Church hopes that people will be brought to God through the Scriptures, and Rahner points out several prerequisites concerning words and language that are necessary for this process. People can cultivate and encourage these practices and qualities not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others that they reach through their words, whether those words are written or oral. First, a person must develop an “ear for the word where the silent mystery makes itself

unmistakably heard," the grounding in God from which "all words come" (360). Silence grounds words rather than the other way around, and perhaps a level of ease with silence is necessary to hear any good word. Second, the heart of a person must be "a reverent heart which longs for the striking word" (360). Truly listening to the Scriptures and other good words means people must make themselves vulnerable, yet they should accept and even long for that vulnerability because of the greater life to which it may lead them. To understand the Gospel, a person must also have the ability to "hear the word which unites" (361). The very essence of Christianity requires this because "it speaks only of one thing, the mystery of love, which wishes to strike home to the heart of man as judgment and salvation" (361). This word brings order out of chaos; it reveals the true pattern and meaning of a person’s life and work, the mystery of love revealed in the cross. Lastly, a person must have a "capacity for recognizing the inexpressible mystery in the word which speaks of its bodily form." With the beginning of a comprehension of the incarnate, she develops the possibility of accepting the Word made flesh.

According to Rahner, the deep connection between Christianity and poetry has several important implications. The first implication is the sheer necessity of poetry, a point shared by all those firmly rooted in O’Malley’s culture three. Christianity and the poetic word rise and fall together and must be defended together. The poetic word must be defended "because we must defend what is human, since God himself has assumed it into his eternal reality" (364). Since mature Christianity and great poetry "share an inner kinship," mature Christians will be open to the poetry that addresses all of their humanity: "man redeemed or in need of redemption and capable of redemption" (365). She will not need easy answers but will be able to ponder the mystery of God and though that mystery, the mystery of the human person. Lastly, a mature Christian with a well-developed sense of the poetic will also be able to "distinguish the banalities of the every day from the lofty and sacred utterance of poetry" (367). Because he understands the difference, he may also make an effort to gently educate others concerning "this discernment of spirits" (367). Part of this discernment is recognizing that sheer joy has its place in poetry, that the best work need not be reserved for disaster and tragedy. Rather, he can recognize that "an ultimate seriousness can be simple, relaxed, sweet, and joyful" (367). The strongest and most

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37 Ibid., 361.
beautiful words can be those that, as they acknowledge the difficulties and pain in human life, celebrate and give final emphasis to its joy.

If a writer seeks to see her own work as evangelization, she may also need to apply a version of Rahner’s prerequisites to her writing. She, too, must be grounded in a respect for the silence that precedes all words and pray that her words may not obscure or infringe upon that fundamental quiet. Second, she must be willing to be struck by the words given to her during the act of composing for the sake of her own conversion and that of others as well. An awareness of such a conversion would not necessarily take place as the work is being done; the writer’s focus could certainly be on other aspects of the work. However, she could still strive to maintain that openness to conversion whenever the next step in that conversion may happen to occur. In this sense she allows the writing to work on her rather than it always being the other way around.

Seeing her work as an instrument of words that unite could be key to understanding her writing as a ministry and as evangelization even though her immediate goal is to write the best piece that she possibly can. The author Katherine Paterson beautifully illustrated the power of words that unify in her Velma Varner Lecture in 1979. She explains how people recognize such words in their own reading and thus may strive to offer the same through their own work. After calling forth a number of her favorite books, both classic and contemporary, she briefly explains what makes them important, what makes them good:

There are countless others — really good books. Good or even great because they make the right connections. They pull together for us a world that is falling apart. They are the words that integrate us, stretch us, judge us, comfort us and heal us. They are the words that mirror the Word of creation, bring order out of chaos.38

As Paterson explains, bringing about unity is not necessarily easy or painless; it can push people beyond what they perceive as their limitations. Such words can require a judgment of people’s sins, yet they can also help to heal the damage done by the same. Finding or creating such words becomes an act of hope done for the children in a person’s life and anyone else who may read them. As Paterson explains to her listeners, “I know as you do that words can be used

for evil as well as good. But we must take that risk” (128). All writers and scribes take that risk since the work that leaves their hands can contain their own sinfulness or could be misused in any number of ways. However, looking further into the faith can also address this risk and hesitation because the one who became God incarnate also used words and used them profoundly. Words gained a new depth and trustworthiness.

II.

Dei Verbum, one of the sixteen documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, offers a way to further explore the trustworthiness of words. This document is important to a theology of writing because it discusses the Word of God, Divine Revelation. O’Malley also discusses Dei Verbum within the context of the culture of poetry and rhetoric. He refers to the composition of the documents of the Council as a time when “culture three had a moment of brilliance in the religious sphere.”39 The styles of culture three and of the documents of Vatican Council II emphasize discourse; this stands in contrast to the academic modes of culture two, which include the revival of Thomism that preceded the Council and that had shaped scholarship and seminary education. Rather than continuing the style of thinking of culture two, the Vatican Council II documents “manifest many of the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric, for they want to raise appreciation for the issues at stake and celebrate them.”40 In Dei Verbum, the Council celebrates the goodness of God revealing himself to humanity and the place that Scripture has in the life of all the faithful. In celebrating this, Dei Verbum makes a solid contribution to a theology of writing and how the questions of those who engage in writing may delve further into the Paschal Mystery and invite others to do the same.

In the first chapter of the document entitled “Revelation Itself,” the human words of Jesus are included in the revelation that is the Paschal Mystery. “To see Jesus is to see his Father,” and part of the totality of that seeing is the words Jesus spoke as a man.41 The Council includes his words as it outlines the ways Jesus revealed the Father, culminating in his death and resurrection:

40 Ibid., 176.
“Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through the whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth” (DV 4).

Jesus’ words are part of how Jesus revealed the Father and revealed his divine nature. As he did with every aspect of humanity, Jesus moved human words into a new key when he became a man. Human words gained a new depth and power as a part of his life. He was present to his first disciples and is present to people now, in part, through his words. A point further in the document that specifically addresses Scripture also emphasizes the connection between words and the Incarnation. Language and the writing that springs from it are a central part of humanity; therefore, writing becomes another way for God to take on human form. God’s truth and wisdom can be found in the world, in part through the Scriptures: “For the words of God expressed in human language have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men” (DV 13). God’s infinite wisdom is incredibly condensed when people encounter it through human words and writing, and just as when people encounter the face of Christ in another human person, they must have the faith to discern his face and all of its implications in the Word they hear and read.

The second chapter, “Handing on Divine Revelation,” also emphasizes the place of writing as a part of the commission Christ gave to preach the Gospel, to share its saving truth with the world. That commission is naturally associated with the twelve apostles, but as is noted in Dei Verbum, “The commission was fulfilled, too, by those apostles and apostolic men, who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing” (7). As explained in the previous section, the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels viewed their work as a continuation of that done by these apostolic men. The scribes of the Torah are also certainly spreading the Word of God, as are Donald Jackson, his team of scribes, and the Benedictine monks who commissioned the Saint John’s Bible. The work done by all of these people, individually and collectively, has helped the Gospel to reach around the world and be incarnated in their own time and place. The observations in chapter 5 of Dei Verbum on the New Testament build on this sense of the apostolic writers being
commissioned for their work. They were commissioned not for their own sake but for the sake of service, for the sake of the world. Their intention was to take up what they had witnessed or learned from other witnesses so that “we might know ‘the truth’ concerning those matters about which we have been instructed” (19). Certainly writing that has such a direct connection to passing on the Gospels to new generations is service. The same assumption could also perhaps be made about any writing with a connection to the Gospel, any writing that is pursued with a spiritual purpose. Ultimately, such writing is meant to be shared in some way. This need not be limited to the larger or more standard forms of publication. A small community newsletter, a poem shared with a friend, an essay posted on a bulletin board, each of these is in its own way a manner of publication, of sharing the word that has been soaked in prayer, in God.

At the center of Dei Verbum is its discussion of the Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of the Scriptures. Everything in the Scriptures was placed there through the Holy Spirit, and as with the Incarnation itself, the process and the result involved both the human and the divine. God chose particular people through whom the Good News would be composed, “and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted” (11). Both aspects of the composition of the Scriptures must be respected; the writers were not merely taking dictation, nor could they write anything that would have been contrary to God’s intentions. As at the Annunciation, through the human and the divine the Word came into the world.

III.

Walter Ong, S.J., was a wide-ranging scholar whose work contributed to a number of disciplines, including literacy studies. Through his work, the path of the Paschal Mystery as it takes shape in the life of an individual writer becomes more evident. One area of his work focuses on how changes in the media for communications affect how we think. According to Ong, humanity’s most important developments, culturally and in terms of consciousness, are deeply related to the move from an oral culture to manuscript culture, with another major shift building on the first, the move from manuscripts to print and electronic media.
As Ong explains, "Only the tiniest fraction of languages have ever been written and ever will be." As large as the place that writing holds in most of the world today and with those religions that have sacred scriptures, it is still important to note the essentially oral nature of language, as well as the personal nature of language inherent in orality. Other people need to be present to create live, spoken words, but writing can bridge vast distances. The development of writing made possible all of the other language-related technologies that followed it, technologies that continue to connect people over time and space, making the world seem smaller and more complex at the same time. According to Ong, while writing is one among many technologies that have dramatically shaped human thought and society, "once writing takes over, it appears to be the most crucial development of all" (156). Writing developed relatively recently, only about 6000 years ago, and with that, people were able to reshape how they see and interact with the world.

Ong honors the connection between people and their tools, their technology. He uses the example of playing a musical instrument to illustrate this connection; a musician must know her instrument well, its capabilities, its limitations and how it responds under different conditions. Particularly with wind instruments, an instrument can almost become an extension of the body, of the musician's very breath. "I instance the modern orchestra here," explains Ong, "to make the point that writing is an even more deeply interiorized technology than the performance of instrumental music is" (153). Writing as a technology reaches even further than the depths of music to the depths of the embodied interpretations that George Steiner describes. "Technology exercises its most significant effects and its most real presence," explains Ong, "not in the external world, but within the mind, within consciousness. . . . The external product designed by consciousness somehow enters consciousness, to affect the way we think." Therefore as a technology, writing has had a profound influence on the way people think about and experience the world.

In essence, writing creates separation and distance among ideas, people, and across time and space. Writing encourages "objectivity" because it separates the known, the object, from the knower, the

subject. Several other divisions follow this basic divide, including that between data and interpretation, word and sound, and the writer and the reader. Writing also separates the word in its original orality, from “the plenum of existence” (158). The context for a spoken word includes the space in which it is heard, the occasion for speaking, whether formal or casual, and all of the nonverbal communication that surrounds spoken words. For the most part, the context for the written word is other words (158).

Writing creates other broad divisions within society as well. With writing develops civil, religious, and commercial administration, which can operate separately from social activities. It also separates “academic learning (mathēsis and mathēma) from wisdom (sophia)” (162). Because of this separation, abstract thought can become even more distanced from the context within which it originally arose. As this division has developed and continues to develop, writing becomes more and more removed from sound, and resides “in the space world of sight” (161). Writing is something seen rather than heard. Lastly, Ong suggests that the deepest division created through the technology of writing is “the effect of writing when it separates being from time” (163). Words, which in their oral form had carried breath and motion, are stilled: “Becoming becomes being” and “the mobile oral world has been supplanted by the quiescent text.” The word that was fluid is now fixed. All of the previous separations are drawn into and included in this final one; it is also the one that gives the written word the power it has to transform people’s thought and their lives.

Because writing allows people to store, organize, and retrieve vast amounts of information far beyond that of their memories, new ways of thinking and new questions are possible. People can ponder the past, consider the future, and compare what they and others used to think to what they think and believe now. They can possess the thoughts of others whom they will never meet face to face. Certainly the passing on of thoughts and stories happens in an oral culture, yet writing extends this in directions and to a depth that would not happen otherwise. The greatest extension of writing today, the computer, “has made it possible to assemble almost instantaneously details which in the past would have taken thousands of years to work up, and thousands more to work through.” Humanity’s understanding of the world is broader and deeper than ever because of the changes writing

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44 Ong, “Writing” 156.
45 Ibid., 163.
46 Ong, “Technology” 199.
has brought. How far may writing ultimately move the thought of humanity? Even as it creates divisions, the additional reflection writing can provide "unites the knower and the known more consciously and more articulately" and ultimately is "a consciousness-raising and humanizing technology." Humanity has only begun to explore how it will reshape thought and thus the world.

Writing and the new thinking it makes possible also contributes to human freedom. Writing or any other form of technology will not on its own make humanity free; only the truth can accomplish that. However, writing as a technology has a place as humanity approaches greater freedom if it is used properly. Writing works for humanity's freedom when it helps people make more informed "and thus potentially freer choices." More information, though, can also make decisions excruciating, since sometimes "a choice is much easier if its consequences are uncertain and harder if its consequences are exactly and surely known" (202). The freedom made possible in part by writing is not easy, and people should not expect it to be so.

As Ong points out, though, advanced forms of the technology of writing need not necessarily create distance from the truth, from the presence of Jesus Christ. Evil may become manifest at any time in a person's life, and "that is why good must penetrate all, be Catholic in the strict sense" (208). As a Christian, as a Catholic, a person's task is to open her heart to Christ in all aspects of her life. The examples discussed in the previous section have looked at the work of some writers and scribes that are especially beautiful. However, a full theology of writing would need to account for those circumstances in which writing advances truth and freedom without its physical beauty being very evident. Ong explains: "The Son of God became man to enter Catholic-fashion-through-the-whole-into-history, in which mankind would naturally and inevitably move to the high-technology culture with which men and women henceforth will have to live" (208). Perhaps not everyone would agree with Ong that the creation and centrality of high technology was natural, inevitable, or even entirely desirable. However, this point must be taken seriously if a theology of writing is to be of use to a wider range of people. The work of the scribes of the Torah, the scribes and illuminators of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and those who created the Saint John's Bible can be considered emblematic of what takes place among a

47 Ong, "Writing" 167.
48 Ong, "Technology" 201.
person, his materials, and his God. However, writers engage with words in a variety of ways, and all of them should be acknowledged in a theology of writing as well. If a writer or scribe understands her work as a vocation, that vocation could unfold in many ways and be intertwined with all kinds of technology, depending on her particular circumstances.

How may a writer who is already grounded in and committed to the Christian and Catholic tradition use Ong's work to be grounded even more deeply in that tradition, in the Paschal Mystery? Ong addresses this question in an essay entitled “Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book.” Ong points out how the Bible itself exists only as a text, as a written word, even though some parts were preceded by an oral tradition. The Bible in its entirety has never existed as anything other than a text, unlike other ancient works of literature such as The Odyssey that had a fully oral existence. Given the association of wind and breath with the Holy Spirit, the oral word may seem more closely linked to life and the written word to death.

Ong describes writing and print, though, as carrying its own special fruitfulness; the letter does, in the end, give life. Even in highly chirographic cultures, oral culture is never quite left entirely behind, and it retains its own beauty. However, oral cultures are also “typically formulaic and conservative of wholes, not analytic and dissecting” (150). As discussed above, writing and print make whole new modes of thought possible, thus reshaping and expanding how people experience the world. Yet, it is only when the oral word dies that these new experiences are possible: “The word reduced to an inscribed surface, then resurrected, has potential, new fecundities, even regarding our relationship to the oral word, which are forever denied to the purely oral word. The word must die and be resurrected if it is to come into its own.” If in the course of human history words had remained oral, people would not have known the full influence and beauty of the Word.

The path of human language, human words, follows that of the Word of God, of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since the existence of any text in the present time is in its own way a resurrection of the oral word that finds new life when read aloud in a new time and place, can this influence how writers and others deeply involved

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50 Ibid., 150.
with words understand their reception of the Word of God? Can it be lived as a reflection of Jesus’ own resurrection? Ong asks: “Given that writing is not just a visual equivalent of speech and that there is a psychological progression from orality to a literate culture, how necessary was it that the Good News of the death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Lord itself had to die and be buried in a text in order to come to a later, resurrected life throughout history?” (161).

The oral word, while always primary (words are first and foremost sound) could not remain as it was if the Good News was to have a place in the literate, highly textual cultures of today and if the Word was to become universal. Perhaps some of the beauty and immediacy of the oral word is lost but much more was gained.

The three representative sets of scribes from the previous section take part in the death and resurrection of the word that Ong describes; each one is a link in the chain that has brought the Gospel into the present day. Though they are working within the Jewish tradition, the scribes repairing Torah scrolls damaged in the Holocaust experience new life in the Torah they restore and in the congregations to whom those scrolls are given. The scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels perhaps most clearly viewed themselves as directly linked to the work of the Evangelists, the first men to take the oral Word and commit it to writing. The pilgrims who came to Lindisfarne encountered the Word, written and illuminated, on an entirely different level. Lastly, Jackson and the monks of Saint John’s Abbey intended to create a Bible that would, through the written word, speak to the contemporary world.

The path of death and life Ong describes is also carried in the work of each individual writer and scribe working today. The move from an interior oral word to a text happens when each one begins her first draft and continues as she revises and edits. This move may seem more explicit for those who write poetry, words with a more explicit connection with their natural oral sound, yet it holds true for all writers. Narratives, whether they are fiction or nonfiction, begin as words, ideas in a person’s mind and heart. A writer may give those stories a brief life by speaking about them with another person; however, if she commits those stories to the page, they receive a broader and potentially richer new life. As a writer works through the revision process, the narrative is reshaped, perhaps into a form very different from that which was originally intended, a fine instance of the distance Ong explains that writing introduces into a person’s thought. When she is willing to make the commitment to much work and further attention, this distance enables her to reach deeper insight.
into the right form for each piece and the life it is supposed to live. This requires a dying on the part of the writer as well, a detachment from the form of her original idea. This does not preclude faithfulness to the work, but is an essential part of it. Once the words leave the orality that lives in her mind, they begin to have a new life of their own, on the page and in the people who will read them. In this way, the writer inserts her life and work further into the Paschal Mystery each time she begins or continues to compose.

IV.

A person’s moral life flows directly from the Paschal Mystery and her participation in it, beginning with her baptism and continuing through the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments and spilling over into all of the events of her life. Because of the Paschal Mystery, because of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, each person may become a child of the Father. Eternal life with God is her ultimate happiness and final end. In the choices she makes, she chooses as she does because of that life in God. If, as Gregory of Nyssa has said, friendship with God is the only thing worth desiring, then the choices made by writers and scribes must be consistent with that desire.

Karl Rahner develops a short discussion of the moral life of the writer in his essay, “The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living.” Rahner explains that no matter how haltingly a person accepts the claims that Christianity makes on him, the claims remain and it is in the light of those claims that any person who is a writer must live and work. Every human act, including that of writing, has a moral quality; virtue is at stake whenever a writer is presented with a choice. Some of these choices are offered to the writer through her work, and she in turn offers choices to her readers. “In the very act of saying or writing something, or alternatively of listening to or reading something,” explains Rahner, “our specifically human qualities are engaged” (115). A person’s freedom to choose or not, read or write or not, is engaged. With the availability of these choices comes the responsibility to choose in a manner consistent with her Christian calling. For those with the charism for writing, that responsibility also includes putting their gift at the service of the Church and the world in the most constructive manner possible.

Rahner discusses several levels of responsibility that a writer holds, responsibilities consistent with writing as a charism. His first responsibility is truthfulness, the certainty that his words are in agreement with his beliefs and convictions. To behave otherwise is to engage in deceit. Next, he is responsible for the ways in which his words will affect those who read or hear his work. This does not mean he should be necessarily or always held accountable for ways in which people may intentionally misuse his work, or that he would take an unnecessarily sunny view of life and only offer his readers what they think they want to hear. The writer can, though, offer difficult truths that challenge readers to grow in love and compassion, toward a fuller view of God and their humanity, and if his readers choose to take up his challenge, it will be to their advantage and hopefully have a constructive effect on their lives (115).

Next, the writer is responsible for offering his writing in a way that is appropriate to the "general intellectual environment" that he shares with his readers or listeners (115). This is simply giving proper attention to genre and making sensible choices in regard to it. Form is important and also linked to the next responsibility Rahner mentions. The writer is responsible for doing everything he can to ensure that he is understood by his readers. This, explains Rahner, is a "duty of love" (116). Love includes a concern and respect for the intellectual capacities of the readers. If a writer is convinced that the content of his work meets a true need, he will want to render it in the appropriate language. Meeting the needs of his audience can also mean offering more complexity when he discerns that his readers are ready for it.

Lastly, writers have a duty to offer their work to others because the work is relevant to the lives of their readers here and now (116). A writer may receive much pleasure from the process of her work, and in some respects, she may be writing what she herself needs to hear. A portion of her writing may be done only for herself and be read for the purpose of her spiritual growth. However, when writing is understood as a charism, service to the larger community is always the final goal. A writer working within the context of a spiritual purpose, mission, and service will offer the good words her community needs—to challenge, to celebrate, and to offer solace and consolation.

The moral responsibility of the writer is also revealed when the connections between the writer's work and the Incarnation are considered again. Essentially, the Incarnation is a beautiful specificity, God becoming a man at a particular time and place and within a certain community, and that specificity should also be reflected in
the writer’s work. In her essay, “Abstract Language vs. the Incarnate Word,” Joyce Little emphatically discusses this point and its cultural significance. Language shapes how people see reality, and the current use of language in America is so abstract that it makes it much more difficult for people to accept and live the reality of the Incarnation.

She sees this abstraction taking place for two primary reasons. First, the average English speaker has a very limited vocabulary, and language “such as this is abstract not in the scientific or philosophical sense but in the repetitive and lackluster sense” (48). A vivid and life-changing experience loses much of its power when the person who had the experience lacks the words to fully share it with others, and this loss is a loss for everyone. Secondly, academic science “exercises such an enormous influence on how we think and on how we perceive reality” that all of the other academic disciplines seem to strive to express their truths in the same abstract language, whether such language is appropriate or not (150). This is exactly the danger George Steiner illustrates with his parable of the secondary city, and theology and other spiritual writing are as susceptible to this pitfall as any secular discipline.

Good use of language, explains Little, is direct and specific, colorful, imaginative and lucid. Writing that embodies these characteristics is not only good writing but is writing that holds “a view of reality that is consistent with the Catholic faith” precisely because of the Incarnation. Even at creation, God brought things into existence through his words, “and the things he spoke into existence were direct, specific and concrete” (54). When men and women lose their relationship with creation because of abstract language and processes, they abstract themselves from their own humanity, their own flesh, especially in the areas of sexuality and death (55). These areas of life become demystified and discussed in terms that leave people out of touch, literally and figuratively, with their own living flesh. To assist in preventing this demystification from going any further than it has already, writers and scribes of all kinds can seek to use “those good words which, like God’s own creative and salvific word . . . seek to speak the truth about a world that is concrete, not abstract, and about human beings who are ensouled bodies, not souls possessing bodies” (62). Thus a Catholic writer has an obligation to seek such words in all of her work; to do so is integral to her faith.

CONCLUSION

All theology is autobiography, and all spirituality is pilgrimage.
W. Paul Jones

For both we and our words are in his hand, as well as all prudence and knowledge of crafts.
Wisdom 7:16

Having stood at the side of writers and scribes, philosophers and theologians, historians and Council Fathers, we may now consider how this path has deepened our understanding of the writer's life in the Paschal Mystery. First, George Steiner's understanding of enacted interpretation is key. The best interpreters of art and writing are other artists and writers. Just as we learn the depth and wonder of the Paschal Mystery by immersing and committing ourselves to living it, we learn the depths of a piece of writing by immersing ourselves in it, taking it into ourselves rather than holding it at a distance, by learning it from the inside out. We should keep in mind as well that, as Steiner points out, this is not only available to those who write on a regular basis. It can be as simple as memorizing a poem. Years ago I memorized Emily Dickinson's short poem "Tell all the Truth, but tell it Slant," and her words have returned to mind just at the time I needed them on many occasions since. Thus her words are enacted, incarnated, in my own body and breath.

From the writers and scribes discussed, we see that writing is a path to holiness and sanctity, particularly when a man or woman experiences and discerns writing as a charism of the Holy Spirit. As she grows in her work, the writer or scribe experiences her work as a calling from God, and the circumstances that enable her to fulfill that calling will eventually be revealed to her. This may happen in unexpected ways, and perhaps in ways that seem small rather than more public or prominent, but it happens nonetheless. Every writer has her purpose, and if God is calling her to the practice of writing, she will answer that calling to the best of her ability so as to be who God intended her to be. The charism of a writer grows from the life of a community, including its life of prayer: the sacraments, the Liturgy.


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of the Hours, and lectio divina. While this may be particularly true for a monastic community, we have also seen other examples. Donald Jackson does not describe his work as prayer, but he does say that working with paper, pen, and ink is the closest he has come to God. The work of a writer is a response to her experience of a particular time and place; the joys and difficulties she includes in her work, implicitly or explicitly, are also the joys and difficulties of the community.

As the details of her calling develop, her work also brings her into a larger community of writers. We see this in both the culture of poetry and rhetoric and the culture of art and performance as described by John O’Malley. Just as no one is a Christian in isolation, a writer does not truly accomplish his or her work in isolation. In one sense, the work is solitary because at a given moment, the writer is usually the only one putting the words on the page. Without others who are dedicated to the practice of writing, though, a writer can become stuck in her own misconceptions or methods. She will need good honest readers to help her see her work with fresh eyes. The writer will also eventually need editors and a publisher at some point even if that publisher is the local copy shop. The nature of each of these roles, other writers, editors, publishers, will vary according to the purposes the writer has in mind. However, each new person that she brings into the process and the practice of her writing is a new opportunity to experience the communion of saints.

As that communion unfolds among writers, it also unfolds among a writer and all those who read, hear, or view her work. We have seen many instances of this, perhaps most explicitly with the Lindisfarne Gospels, since the men who created it knew that many pilgrims coming to their area would see it. After the work and the writer have died one death so as to commit the writing to the page, the writer’s work may receive new life through the welcome offered by its readers. This does not mean they necessarily agree with or immediately understand everything the writer is trying to convey. It does mean they treat the writer with the same courtesy they would extend to a visitor to their home or a guest at their table. Should they find something good and worthy in the writer’s work, the readers can continue the work and deepen the communion made possible by that work as they share the joy they have discovered in the words of another.

Lastly, a theology of writing must include an understanding of writing in terms of service and stewardship. This includes a deep respect for the tools of writing, and as Walter Ong explains, the
distance those tools make possible, a distance that increases the power of writing to extend and improve our thinking and storytelling. We have seen some examples of beautiful and fascinating tools and materials, particularly those used in the making of the Saint John’s Bible. We can also extend this respect to include everything we may use in the process of writing, everything from scratch paper, ballpoint pens, and paper clips to computers, the internet, and the colored ink that creates the cover of a newly published book. Each object and material is respected for the sake of those who produced it, as well as for its capacity for good or harm. Each object is respected as a vessel of the altar.

The writer also engages in stewardship as she makes the best use of her God-given talents and the experiences God has given her. The act of writing can bring much pleasure to the writer; receiving an idea or an image and seeing it take shape on the page is one of the most satisfying movements of the mind I have experienced. At times the writing may be done solely for the sake of the writer, such as in the context of a prayer journal. However, when she accepts writing as a charism, as a vocation, she also offers her writing for the benefit of others. Such an offering is a gesture of respect for her community because the writer must be a good steward of what she has experienced with the community. Such material need not be lost. It can be remembered, developed, and loved so that it may be offered back to the community from which it came, a community that may then take it up again for further reflection.

Writing can also be done as an act of direct assistance as the writer responds to requests or commissions big and small, such as work done for a community publication or for a special occasion. Claude Peifer’s discussion of monastic industries develops this point. The writer is a worker, putting her talents at the disposal of the community’s need to earn a living while also maintaining the monastic schedule. She may also offer people a piece of work they did not know they needed or wanted until it was given to them. As Karl Rahner explains, part of helping people be open to the Word of God is offering them other good words, writing of clarity, honesty, and truthfulness. Explicitly or implicitly, the one who writes also evangelizes. Within this evangelization is also the moral responsibility of the writer to respect the audience she is addressing and to be as concrete and specific as possible. When she honors each aspect of a theology of writing: calling and sanctity, community and communion, service and stewardship,
she honors the presence of Christ in her listeners, her readers, and in each subject of her work.