NIMBLE AS THE PEN OF A SCRIBE: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF WRITING – Part I

Hilda Kleiman, O.S.B.

To the king I must speak the song I have made, my tongue as nimble as the pen of a scribe. Psalm 45:1-2

INTRODUCTION

How may the act of writing contribute to our understanding of the Paschal Mystery, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? How may it contribute to our Christian life after we have been brought into the Paschal Mystery through our baptism? Within the Catholic tradition, how has writing been pursued and who has reflected on its Christian meaning? How might that reflection be furthered, and what may it reveal about how writers live and work today?

As I began exploring these questions, a comprehensive theology of writing did not seem to exist. However, many people who take up writing, whether in a personal, literary, or academic context, attest to the place writing holds in their Christian lives. They understand their writing as part of their vocation and the avenue through which they share the Gospel with others. They have learned that at times working as a writer means accepting the grace of the Spirit and thus being able to produce better work than they thought possible. At other times, the work means accepting their limitations of ability or circumstance, accepting the writing they have been given to do rather than the writing they think they ought to do.

Whether they attest to their experience in ways big or small, their experience is a witness to the love of God in their own lives and contributes to building up the Church, the Body of Christ. Writers who could and often do provide such testimony may find a work that places their testimony within the context of broader theological concepts useful. This seems to be the work that needs to be written, and while a comprehensive answer may be beyond the scope of this thesis, I would like to begin the conversation.

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1 For all Scripture references see The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Catholic ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius 1966).
Two works which consider reading rather than writing are among my models for this work. In *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, the social critic and moralist Alan Jacobs asks questions about reading similar to those I would like to direct toward writing. He explains that his work is done through a Christian understanding of love, and that he sets out a way to read "lovingly because of and in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the author and guarantor of love" (1). In doing so, he draws on the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and a wide range of literary works. He describes the work of a charitable and hopeful reader who welcomes a text she is going to read just as she would a neighbor who comes to her in the flesh.

The second book is a popular secular work entitled *A History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel. He emphasizes that while as readers we may seem isolated, we are in fact members of a community as large and as deep as the history of the written text. Manguel also draws on a variety of historical figures and time periods, yet his organization is not strictly chronological. Rather, he loosely organizes the book by themes such as "The Shape of the Book," "Metaphors for Reading," and "Reading within Walls." For Manguel reading has an all-encompassing quality, the ability to hold an important place in the lives of people in a wide range of times and places. Given that, as Christians, writers are initiated into the Word of God, and given the place that the Bible holds in the life of the Church, a theology of writing may reveal an expansiveness similar to that of Manguel’s book.

At the end of his book, Manguel explains that the book the reader holds in his hand, *A History of Reading*, is not the same as the book that dwells in his imagination, *The History of Reading*. "The History of Reading," Manguel explains, "fortunately has no end... I imagine leaving the book by the side of my bed, I imagine opening it up tonight, or tomorrow night, or the night after that, and saying to myself, ‘It’s not finished’" (4). *The History of Reading* will not be finished until the last reader has ceased to read, and I expect that a theology of writing will be similar. All that writing has to teach us about God, all the ways in which it can strengthen our bond with the Lord, will not be understood until the last writer has finally laid down his pen. For now, between the Incarnation and the second coming of Christ, we work in history, our individual history as well as the history of the Church. It is

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only with the Parousia that the full truth we seek about ourselves, our
world, and our God will be revealed, and only then that we may cease
our thinking, our working, and our reading and writing.

Writers may emerge wherever there are those who are passionate
about words, yet they may not be explicitly aware of how their
practice may draw them further into the Christian tradition. They may
not have yet experienced the Christian tradition in a way that connects
that tradition with the work of writing. Alan Jacobs wrote his book
on reading “with the hope that there are many readers (often, but not
necessarily, Christians) out there who want a richer, more rewarding
... way of reading, but perhaps lack an appropriate vocabulary for
describing the kind of reading they prefer.”4 My hope, too, is that this
work will be useful to many writers who would like to deepen their
understanding of the theological nature of their work. As I was in the
midst of this project, one of my colleagues at our local community
college, a writer and a teacher of writing, asked, “A theology of
writing—does such a thing exist?” While I may have begun this work
to answer these questions for myself, I also continue it for her and for
all of those who may find themselves seeking God through the words
they put on the page.

This work began with a blessing. For the last six years, the
Iconographie Arts Institute has found a home for its summer institute
with my community at Queen of Angels Monastery. The last morning
of the institute, the students and teachers place their completed icons
in front of the altar so that the icons may be blessed and venerated
during the Eucharist. After the icons are blessed by our prioress, the
veneration unfolds in silence. The assembly approaches each icon and
venerates it with a bow, a touch, or a kiss, and for the elders who are
unable to stand, the icons are brought to them.

This moment of blessing and prayer is the culmination of several
intense weeks of work that happens in the room below our chapel, our
community’s reception hall that the iconographers convert into their
studio. They spread blue tarps on the floor, lay out a table of supplies
for each student, hang drawings on the walls, and set out thick books
on the technique, history, and theology of iconography on the tables
under the tall windows. At the entrance of the studio they place an
icon of the face of Christ, the first icon the beginning students learn to
write.

As intriguing as I found the materials for iconography (the thin
drawing paper, the pigments in a china dish, the gold leaf) it was the

process for their use that drew me back to the studio time and again. Sometimes I would ask questions or look through the books, but I mostly sat in a chair against the wall, watching and listening. Their actions were focused, full of intention, and, as the students continued with the institute, they would discern if they were indeed called to the vocation of the iconographer. The hospitality of the iconography teachers opened a space for me in which I could stand beside them and their students and ask, “What are you doing?” or more implicitly “How do you find God here?” One afternoon as I watched three of the advanced students work on a large icon of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, I sensed they were thinking, praying, and working all at the same time, and that at the deepest level, these three actions were one.

In terms of an art or craft, I recognized some of my own experience with needlework in the work of the iconographers, and I developed a series of needlework retreats based on that insight. Women come to our retreat house with their knitting, crocheting, quilting, needlepoint or cross-stitch, and spend the day praying and working together. The Scripture passages, poetry, and elements of the monastic tradition which I offer them seem to lead them to explain to one another and to themselves what they are doing on a spiritual or theological level. We reflect on the internal space that both broadens and deepens when we dedicate solitary time to our needlework. The women share information about their tools, from one who came with her one and only crochet hook because she had only started learning to crochet a few days before the retreat, to another whose grandpa taught her to knit with two nails and a piece of rope. Some discover for the first time that their abilities with their needlework are a gift from God.

The iconographers and the needleworkers led me to reconsider the art, the craft, to which I dedicate the most time and energy, personally and professionally, that of writing. All three can be intensely visual and physical activities, all three can encourage a reverence for the tools of the trade, and all three have a place for the relationship, whether it is formal or informal, between the apprentice and the master. I also saw in the iconographers and experienced with the needleworkers a reverence for process, for mystery, which I experience in my work as a writer yet had not explored on a theological level. Particularly during my time as an undergraduate student, I had to learn to accept writing as a sometimes painful, sometimes perplexing, yet ultimately joyful process. Any attempts I made to circumvent the inevitable

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twists and turns of a writing project would fail. As I heard from the iconographers and the needleworkers in terms of their own projects, many writing projects contain a path and a purpose much deeper than I could imagine at the project's conception or conclusion. Each individual project is a reflection of each person's relationship with God and the mystery of the calling inherent in that relationship.

The understanding of charism and calling is the first of the primary theological concepts contained in this project. It begins with a discussion of the meaning of a charism for writing and how it may be manifested, particularly though not exclusively within a monastic setting. Next, several historical examples will help reveal the sacramental nature of writing. A theology of writing does not differ, in its essence, from that of the prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours or the celebration of the sacraments that I experience with my monastic community each day. Singing the psalms together may have a different intensity, yet in both the singing and the writing, it is God who calls us to begin and who will also be our final end. Each time we engage with the process of either one, we are given another moment in which the Paschal Mystery can deepen within us. Reflection with a variety of theologians will build on this sacramental, incarnational understanding of the work of writing and the moral responsibilities that result from engaging in it. Lastly, a thread winding throughout this work is the reality of the communion of saints. We are not alone. We share in the temporal and spiritual work of all the holy ones who are, who have been, and ever will be pursued by the Lord as they pick up their pens.

PART I: WRITING AS PRACTICE – WRITING AS CHARISM

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
1 Corinthians 12:7

I.

Why write? Why create a new poem or play, a novel, a short story or an essay? Why learn calligraphy and create a new illuminated manuscript? Within a theological context, looking into the initial impulse to write places such an inquiry in the presence of God. In his book Real Presences, the philosopher George Steiner explores this question. He asserts that any understanding of language and its capacity to generate meaning, especially within the arts, is "underwritten by the
assumption of God’s presence.” God is primary. God, who is present before any writer or artist, is the one to whom they respond with their words, images, and music, and is the one to whom they will return when their work and their lives come to an end. Artists create because God surrounds them and is within them.

When an artist is in the midst of her work or when anyone is responding to a poem, painting, or piece of music, they reenact the two defining moments of any life, “that of coming into being where nothing was . . . and the enormity of death” (209). The artist gives birth to a new work that did not exist before she began and that may exist far beyond her death. Experiencing this process may lead the artist to face the reality of the God who created him to experience these moments and who is with him as he journeys from birth to death. The act of writing, therefore, is an act that may be more fully understood through the development of a theology of writing because of the reality of the living God.

Unfortunately this immersion can be pushed away or diminished through writing as well. Toward the beginning of his book, Steiner describes an image that he calls the “secondary city,” a city which has swamped contemporary artistic and intellectual discourse (4). He describes American academic writing as patterned after journalism; therefore, it writes and speaks about all subjects equally, trying to cover everything and to give everything equal importance (33). This creates a situation in which the volume of secondary discourse, writing that is a discussion about a piece of original artwork rather than an original piece of artwork itself, has “the blind weight of a tidal wave,” a fearful and suffocating image (24). Steiner claims people create this tidal wave because they balk at the mystery that is immediately present in the act of artistic creation. They use the secondary literature to guard against “the often harsh, imperious radiance of sheer presence,” the presence of God (48). Without the filter of the secondary discourse, such a presence may be overwhelming. It seems harsh because it pushes a writer or artist to recognize the ultimate meagerness of his efforts, as well as the tenacity required to pursue his work. The secondary discourse may also shield people from perceiving their limited understanding of the work they are considering at the moment; without the noise of that discourse, they cannot escape their smallness. On the other hand, the power of sheer presence may also call out of an artist creative work she would not have thought possible. Therefore,

5 George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: U Chicago 1989) 3.
placing oneself in that presence and responding through one’s own act of creation takes humility and courage.

In contrast to the flood of secondary discourse, Steiner defines the act of responding to a work of art through the creation of another work of art as “the enactment of answerable understanding, of active comprehension” (7). The master interpreters of a work of art are other performers: composers and musicians, poets and novelists, painters and sculptors. According to Steiner, the interpretations and judgments of a work of art that result in another piece of artwork have an authority that is almost never equaled by secondary discourse. A secondary work, a piece of criticism, may have the potential to be considered as an artistic work in and of itself, and critics can and should certainly strive for such thoughtfulness and quality. Steiner grants that even though it may be rare, it is possible that a secondary work could “claim the dignity of creation,” in part because good criticism and reviewing can help undiscovered artists find an appropriate audience or encourage hesitant readers and patrons (5). This kind of criticism could assist the act of creation rather than detract from it. However, the primary purpose of Steiner’s parable of the secondary city remains to “urge a fundamental question: that of the presence or absence in our individual lives and in the politics of our social being of . . . the act and experienced act of creation in the full sense” (23). Talking or writing about art, which Steiner concedes can have a limited place within his allegorical secondary city, is not a replacement for the act of creation itself. The act of creation is primary just as the presence of God is primary.

The interpretations from within a work of art are the most evident in drama. An actor becomes the words, embodies the words in the script, and through different materials, the artists who develop the technical aspects of the production (the costumes, lighting, and the set) construct their part of the interpretation of the play developed by the director. However, the process of acting out a work of art is just as key for non-dramatic art even if most adults today are not in the habit of engaging with a creative work in this more intense way. Enacted interpretation does not necessarily have to be public either. For instance, people can learn a piece of music or a poem by heart, thus taking it into their very being. “To learn by heart,” Steiner explains, “is to afford the text or music an indwelling clarity and life-force” (9). Memorizing a poem or passage of prose can be intense and immensely satisfying. The work at hand is no longer held at a mental or spiritual
distance; rather, the presence within the work of art is taken into the center of a person, and she in turn offers a response from within her own sacred center. Once an artist has entered deeply in this process of incarnating a work of art in her own body, her own breath, the work cannot be taken away, and it cannot be undone.

Steiner claims that every serious artist understands that his work may outlast him, may persist in the world after his death, and that those who experience great literature, art, and music have an experience with a work that has survived its creator. According to Steiner, these experiences give the metaphor of the resurrection “the edge of felt conjecture” (145). He points toward an understanding essential for a theology of writing—the possibility that people can make a connection between the experience they have with artistic works that developed long ago yet are still influential today—and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the resurrection, because Jesus Christ lives beyond the time of his physical body, people may have a relationship with him today. A fainter version of this occurs when, through an artist’s work, a person encounters an artist who has died. Depending on a person’s particular background or experience with religion, he may not be able to articulate this connection between an artistic work and the resurrection, at least when he initially encounters it. However, when he does more consciously experience an encounter with Christ, he may have the sense that he has experienced something like this before because of his encounter with a poem, a painting, or a sonata.

Explaining to another person the experience of what happens in an encounter with a work of art is difficult at best and perhaps embarrassing at worst. Additionally, speaking of an encounter with art as a religious experience may not always be acceptable to others. A person may also fear that her own work is terribly inadequate compared to the work to which she is responding (178). The experience of many of the beginning iconography students working with the Iconographic Arts Institute echoes Steiner’s statement; their work seems poor compared to the models of master iconographers from which they work. Still, the beginning iconography student, like the novice writer, painter, or musician, still bears witness to his or her encounter with God.

II.

If works are to truly live beyond the artist, they must be received by others, and the manner in which those works are received is important.
because of the presence of God that is mediated by them. Steiner explains that as a person focuses on a work of art, his focus must be a “courtesy of the most robust and refined sort” (149). The work of Alan Jacobs on the hospitality a reader provides a piece of literature echoes this point. Art is due this courtesy in part because of the priority of time; it has precedence over any commentaries or interpretations that are dependent on it. This does not mean that people do not need to be historically informed; their welcome certainly takes place in the here and now, but it is enriched by learning about the context of the piece for which they are creating a space in their minds and hearts. Even this kind of commentary, though, must be pursued with the utmost respect. By no means should anyone take a painting, a poem, or a musical composition and “strip it bare [or] dissect it in some brutal rhetoric of total penetration and subjection” (176). True courtesy and civility between the reader or listener and a work of art requires a vital distance, a protection of its core worth, even as comprehension and intimacy deepen.

Within the monastic tradition, a person can find an encounter such as the one Steiner describes in the practice of lectio divina. In his beautiful little book entitled simply Monastic Practices, the Cistercian monk Charles Cummings describes lectio divina, Latin for “sacred reading,” as one of the three pillars of monastic life.6 Along with liturgical prayer and work, lectio divina provides the foundation for any other practices monks and nuns take up throughout the day. In his sixth-century Rule for monasteries, Benedict originally dedicated several hours of the day to a slow and prayerful reading of the Scriptures (8). In this way, reading became a primary way in which the monks sought God. The amount of time set aside for lectio divina may have changed, yet its purpose remains the same. Lectio divina, then as now, is not necessarily a dramatic process full of twists and turns but a gentle encounter with and immersion in God’s presence.

The four steps of lectio divina are simple and need not be followed in a rigid manner. Generally speaking, though, a time for lectio divina follows a basic pattern. The first step, lectio, is a slow reading of a given Scripture passage. At this point a person is focused on the literal meaning of the passage, concentrating on the story being told or the truth being explained. She may find her focus is drawn to one particular word or passage which she repeats silently or aloud (16). The second step, meditation or meditatio, considers how this passage

6 Charles Cummings, Monastic Practices (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian 1986) 7.
is related to the larger chapter or book in which it is placed or to other places in the Bible where similar words or images are found (16). At this point the secondary historical or textual criticism with which the monk is familiar may be helpful. She may also find herself free associating with the passage, remembering that at this moment the Holy Spirit is addressing these words directly to her. Such an address is not unusual because this direct encounter with God lies at the heart of lectio divina. The person may recall a memory, a friend who is in need, or a difficulty she is facing at the time, and that thought will be deepened by the Holy Spirit’s movement between her thoughts and the words of Scripture.

Prayer, oratio, is the third movement in lectio divina. At this point, the person’s focus is less on the text than on God, the source of the words before him (16). He is in dialogue with God, sharing his thoughts and longings, fears and joys, knowing that everything is heard by God. Depending on the text and the moment in which he is reading it, he may feel gratitude, repentance, or adoration. With the grace of God, his prayer may move to the fourth step, contemplatio or contemplation (17). Now he rests in God’s silent and loving presence, no longer needing any particular words. When the moment ends, he may end the time for lectio divina or return to one of the earlier steps, depending on the rhythms of the moment or the day.

The effects of days and months and years of the daily practice of lectio divina may accumulate slowly, yet the effects should be evident as the Scriptures sink ever more deeply into a person’s heart. Both her repentance for her wrongful actions and her gratitude for the grace through which she makes life-giving decisions increases. A person who prays the Scriptures comes to embody the Scriptures, to incarnate the Word in her own body and words. Steiner echoes this understanding in his discussion of enacted interpretations, yet the process of lectio divina moves a step further. The person praying with the Scriptures not only takes the words into herself but is also transformed by them. She becomes less self-centered and irritable and more kind and patient with others and with herself. The time a person spends in quiet with God’s Word may easily become the most fruitful activity she pursues since in the end it touches every place she goes and every person she meets. The hospitality she tried to offer to the words of Scripture in turn enables her to offer better hospitality to others.

The act of writing can be a part of lectio divina when it is held gently, just as a person would hold gently the time set aside for lectio
divina. By doing so, it is again emphasized that a theology of writing begins in a relationship with God. Writing may be incorporated into the initial reading of a Scripture passage by writing the passage by hand. This may be particularly fruitful if a person is praying a familiar passage which she could read too quickly due to the assumption that she already knows what it has to say to her. Watching the words form on the page through her own hand may help her see them anew. During the time of meditation, jotting down the questions that come to mind may help the person see where the questions may be leading her. A long-forgotten scene may emerge, and she may desire to remember it so as to return to it as a further focus for her prayer or to reflect on it at a later time. Even in prayer or oratio, a person may wish to write her words to God rather than speak them aloud or hold them silently.

Charles Cummings also suggests that so long as lectio divina with the Scriptures retains a firm place within a person’s daily life, the practice can broaden to include other areas, including a lectio of one’s experience, past and present (20). This, too, may come through reading the writing that was part of a person’s lectio divina with the Scriptures or may take place as he composes a new work, a new consideration of how God is working through him and in him. In this way the act of writing may take him on a journey, at the end of which he may be closer to God than when he began.

III.

In addition to the place writing may have within the monastic tradition of lectio divina, it also has a place as an act of service. Whether a writer lives in a monastery or beyond its walls, this is an important point if a theology of writing is to be as meaningful as possible. Her communion with God in prayer, mediated in part through her writing, must extend to her communion with those with whom she lives and works. Eventually her prayer urges her to service, and this service can take place within and to a particular community, as well as extend to the larger Church and outside community.

Saint Benedict does not specifically mention writing or writers in his Rule. However, writing is an appropriate activity to keep in mind when reading chapter 57: The Artisans of the Monastery. Benedict opens the short chapter with this command: “If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility, but
only with the abbot’s permission.” The artisan’s work always remains under the guidance of the abbot, and should he become conceited, the abbot will order him to cease. Additionally, the actions of those who sell the goods made by the artisans should not have a trace of fraud or greed. Benedict’s greatest concern is for the spiritual welfare of anyone involved in the arts and crafts of the monastery, whether they are producing them or selling them. Arrogance and scandal must be avoided even if it means losing the income from an artisan’s work until “after manifesting his humility” (RB 57.3) the abbot allows him to take up his work again.

Claude Peifer, an American Benedictine monk, offers a contemporary context in which to consider chapter 57 of the Rule and the work of writing. Peifer helps to describe the concrete context in which a monk may live out a theology of writing within the life of a monastic community. In an article entitled “New Monastic Industries,” he discusses the economic challenges facing contemporary monastic communities. Given that the traditional sources of income for monasteries, particularly schools and agricultural work, have dwindled, he discusses what work may be appropriate and available to contemporary monks. What work can be done that is “productive of income to maintain our communities, and at the same time be in accord with our legitimate traditions and of value to the Church and the world, especially in our locality?” (297). A look at Peifer’s guiding principles for answering this question also opens the way for considering how writing may be part of the answer.

Peifer offers five principles for selecting new monastic industries. First, communities should strive for the ideal of living by their own work and be honest about the need to make money and earn a living (299). Just like their secular counterparts, monks need to keep the lights on and put food on the table. As with each of his principles, Peifer acknowledges this is an ideal, and that endowments and unexpected gifts still have a legitimate place. Second, the work must be compatible with the monastic life; monks should do everything they can to find work that allows them to maintain a monastic horarium, the daily schedule of the liturgy of the hours, lectio divina, work, and recreation. To give up on the horarium “is to threaten the very existence of the thing we are trying to preserve” (302). Third, remaining free of commitments to major institutions is also important;

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8 The American Benedictine Review 42.3 (September, 1991) 297.
this prevents the community from taking on responsibilities it may not be able to maintain in the future due to changes in the numbers or interests of its membership (303). The fourth principle is compatibility with monastic life; this implies that, as much as possible, work within the monastery is necessary because “it is not really possible to work full time at a secular job and still follow the monastic horarium” (308). Last is diversification, which is not only a sound business practice but also leads to happier monks. Why not let each monk do the work, Peifer asks, which is the most suitable to him “provided that it contributes to the overall welfare of the community and remains under the control of the abbot?” (305). Whether the monk prefers manual or intellectual work makes no difference. Anyone who lives in community will find plenty of opportunities for manual chores. So long as the monks maintain “a general willingness to do whatever one is asked,” finding the work for which each monk is suitable should be the goal (310).

Peifer makes several suggestions for current monastic work, including the established tradition of literary activity, the writing and production of books. This tradition “continues to the present day,” and as with any other art or craft that can fit into the monastic horarium, “should be encouraged for those who have a talent for it” (312). A monk’s writing could be put in the service of educational or artistic endeavors and would not necessarily require expensive equipment. For those who have had positive experiences with writing, whether they occurred before or after entering the monastery, pursuing the practice of writing as a service to his community and the Church should be considered, and Peifer’s analysis of new monastic industries encourages this reflection. Thus writing is not only a spiritual practice that supports lectio divina, but may also be a part of a monk’s and a community’s apostolate, always keeping in mind, though, that the fruitfulness of the apostolate of writing could be endangered if those considering it are tempted to view it in purely economic terms. Peifer’s consideration for the happiness of the monks can help guard against this temptation.

The comments of the philosopher Jacques Maritain can also help clarify this important point in several respects. The purpose of any Christian apostolate is “to convey to men the good tidings of the Gospels and to lead souls to faith in revealed truth.” However, if a person takes up his writing as his apostolate, he may approach spreading the Gospel indirectly in the sense that the Paschal Mystery

may not be the explicit subject of his work. Any writing is also subject to the standards of a writer’s particular discipline. He must first be “an artist fully dedicated to the requirements of his art and the beauty of his work, or a thinker fully dedicated to the requirements of knowledge and the progress of intellect in truth” (228). The spiritual aspect of the writer’s work is best served by him doing the highest quality of work of which he is capable. Of course any writer who is a dedicated Christian will want to spread the Gospel, but holding this as his most explicit goal to the detriment of the quality of the work is harmful. Lastly, Maritain explains that “we would risk spoiling many precious things if we let any kind of utilitarianism, even for the noblest purposes, enter the sphere of art or speculative knowledge” (228). Writing or producing books for solely economic reasons, even the noble cause of supporting the monastery, could lead the writer into producing work of little artistic or intellectual value.

It is best for all involved (the monk, the abbot, the community, and those that the community serves) if the monk-writer understands and accepts his work as a charism of the Holy Spirit. What is true for the monk certainly applies to other Christian writers in their own particular situations. If writing is his charism, he should engage in it with all humility, and if it is not, the discernment for more suitable work should continue.

IV.

Discernment and charism are inseparable, and in her work through the Catherine of Siena Institute, Sherry Weddell is helping Catholics address both. She has published *The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory*, a tool that includes a discussion of charisms, a questionnaire, and descriptions of the twenty-four most common charisms.¹⁰ The word *charism* comes from the Greek and means a gratuitous gift; charisms or spiritual gifts are abilities that all baptized Christians receive from the Holy Spirit “to enable them to be powerful channels of God’s love and redeeming presence in the world” (6). In this sense, a charism is part of what enables a Christian to pursue his or her apostolate. The Holy Spirit gives a charism to a particular person, and she is to use it in the service of a particular community at a particular time and place.

A charism may differ from a person’s natural talents. In most cases they are probably one and the same, but to always equate one with the other could lead people to limit the actions of the Holy Spirit to those traits for which a person has usually been recognized or that she normally expects from herself. God does work through a person’s particular circumstances and abilities, yet the person in question may not see the full picture of her talents and abilities as God does. “All charisms are supernaturally powered,” Weddell explains, and while some may seem more extraordinary or draw more attention than others, God intends all of them to be given away (7). Overall, Weddell’s inventory helps Catholics discern their charism through a series of questions that helps them see how a particular charism may be active in their lives, whether it is in ways that are obvious or more subtle.

After taking the questionnaire, Weddell encourages participants to experiment with the charisms they have identified in themselves and explains the signs that should be present over a longer period of time if a person has truly received a particular charism. First, if a charism is effective, it “will do what it’s supposed to do” (21). If a person is a teacher, people will learn; if a person is a musician, people will appreciate and grow through her music. Second, a person’s experience of the charism is crucial because “God does not give us charisms as a form of penance!” (21). While a person may not feel happy each and every time she uses her charism, a sense of energy and joy should be her overall experience. Lastly, the responses of others confirm the presence of a particular charism. People may say they learned from the class a person taught or were able to pray through the music he played. The confirmation may come in what other people ask a person to do. For instance, she may be receiving many requests for others to stay with her as houseguests because others recognize her charism for hospitality. Others may consciously or unconsciously see this charism active in her and be inviting her to explore it more thoroughly. Eventually, if all three of these signs are consistently present, the person may assume that a particular charism is present and active in her life.

How would the charism of writing be manifested? Weddell points out that because many societies today have almost universal literacy, the charism of writing can be more difficult to discern. Being well-schooled and receiving a charism are not necessarily parallel experiences. Weddell also explains that because charisms are given so
as to serve the Church and the world, they cannot be used in ways that oppose God’s purposes (54). For instance, the charism of writing could not be used to write a vindictive email or a nasty letter to the editor. If a person uses her talent to create a piece of writing that is intended to wound and humiliate, that is the work of her own sinfulness, not of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, while the writing would not have to contain a directly religious purpose, there would be “a lingering spiritual quality about the prose or poetry produced” (54). Writing resulting from a charism would, explicitly or implicitly, fit within a Christian worldview.

In a theology of writing, the concept of charism brings together the larger tradition of the Church represented by Weddell and her work and the individual experience of a writer. The questions concerning writing that Weddell includes in her inventory indicate how writing as a charism would be manifested, thus becoming recognizable to the writer and others. Does a person use writing in her prayer, perhaps through a journal or part of lectio divina (14)? Is writing the means she turns to when she is called upon for an expression of her faith (16)? Do people enjoy his writing and have they told him “that their lives have been touched or enriched by reading things [he] has written?” (19). When these events happen over time, then a person has likely been given a charism of writing by the Holy Spirit and will find ways to serve her community—whether it be in her home, in her parish, in a religious community, or in a more wide-ranging setting—with her words.

End of Part I