

## The Monastic Life as Exegesis: The Hermeneutics of John Cassian in *Conference 14*

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Today, faith in the revelation of scripture is not a prerequisite for becoming a successful scripture scholar. Although many contemporary scholars consider unbelief a prerequisite for analyzing and interpreting scriptures unbiasedly,<sup>1</sup> the monk John Cassian (d. circa 435 C.E.) would see such lack of faith as *detrimental* to the entire process of understanding the scriptures. This divergence of opinion results in part because these contemporary scholars and Cassian view the end of scriptural interpretation differently. While a contemporary agnostic scholar strives in his or her exegetical work primarily for erudition, originality, and positive peer reception, Cassian wants to unlock the meaning of scriptures for the sake of living a life of unceasing prayer and encounter with God.

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<sup>1</sup> D.Z. Phillips describes the hermeneutical situation today in terms of a false dichotomy between a hermeneutics of recollection, which presupposes belief on the part of the interpreter in the religious texts being analyzed, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, which sees the unbelief of the interpreter as his or her greatest tool for accessing the meaning of the religious text, since the religious worldview of the text hides or warps the truth of the text. As a middle position between these two extremes, Phillips offers the hermeneutic of contemplation, which allows the interpreter to accept the religious worldview of sacred texts for the purpose of interpretation without actually believing in the worldview presupposed by the text. D.Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). As this paper hopes to show, Cassian's hermeneutic denies the possibility of both the hermeneutics of suspicion and contemplation.

To even begin such an endeavor requires faith and virtuous living. In his *Conferences*, especially *Conference 14*, Cassian instructs monks on how to acquire the virtuous life, a life which both allows for and is strengthened by faithful interpretation of scripture. Instead of juxtaposing orthodoxy and orthopraxy, he sees both as necessary stages in the process of interpretation, informed and supported by the monastic community, which lead the monk to encounter the ineffability of God and become a person in whom others can share the experience of this encounter.

In *Conference 14*, Cassian describes the division of spiritual knowledge he learned from Abba Nesteros, one of the experienced spiritual masters he met during his time in the Egyptian desert. This knowledge includes both practical and theoretical elements: according to Nesteros, the practical side of spiritual knowledge helps a monk to recognize his sin and live virtuously, while the theoretical aspect of spiritual knowledge deals with “the contemplation of things divine and the awareness of very sacred meanings.”<sup>2</sup> The monk can achieve theoretical knowledge without practical knowledge only to a limited extent, requiring the practical side of spiritual know-

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<sup>2</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 155. Future references will include the conference number and chapter followed by its page number in the Luibheid translation. When cited in that way, the former citation would be *Conf.* 14, 1; 155. For a critical edition of the Latin original of the *Conferences* along with a French introduction, translation, and notes, see Jean Cassien, *Conférences*, vol. 1 (I–VII) and 2 (VIII–XVII), trans. Eugène Pichery, Sources Chrétiennes 42 and 54 (Paris: Cerf, 2008 and 2009).

Though Cassian attributes this distinction between the practical and theoretical elements of spiritual knowledge to Nesteros, the division reveals the influence of Evagrius of Pontus. Due to Origen’s influence on Evagrius, Cassian, who left Egypt because of the Origenist controversy, never references either theologian by name. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 218–219. For a detailed analysis of Evagrius’ influence on Cassian, see McGinn *The Presence of God*, 218–223, 225. For a summary of Evagrius’ thought, see *ibid.*, 144–157, and Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97–110.

ledge before he can possess authentic *theoria*.<sup>3</sup> According to Nesteros, “[a]nyone wishing to master contemplation must, with all zeal and energy, acquire first the practical side” because “[t]here are two arranged and separate stages by which human lowliness can reach up to the sublime;” he who spurns the first stage of practical knowledge “does not avoid the stains of sin” and “strives vainly for a sight of God.”<sup>4</sup> For Cassian, following Nesteros, intellectual pride defeats the purpose of scripture reading because the monk aspires to truly know the meaning of the sacred texts in order to be united with Christ as his disciple, a goal that requires both humility and help from the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

In gaining practical knowledge before developing in virtue, the monk first recognizes his sins and learns how to overcome them. He must deal with what is “lower” and interior as the first step on the road to virtue; only then does the contemplation of that which is “higher” and exterior become possible.<sup>6</sup> Yet, recognizing and rooting out sin presents the monk with more difficulty than acquiring virtue.<sup>7</sup> In order to

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<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of *Conference 9*, Cassian distinguishes virtue and prayer in a way analogous to this distinction between practical and theoretical spiritual knowledge. While “virtues are the prerequisite foundation of prayer,” they “cannot be effected without it.” *Conf. 9, 2*; 101. Similarly, without *theoria*, practical spiritual knowledge lacks its ultimate purpose.

<sup>4</sup> *Conf. 14, 2*; 156.

<sup>5</sup> “For it is one thing to be a skilled talker and a shining speaker. It is something else to enter into the very heart and core of heavenly utterances, to contemplate with the heart’s purest gaze the deep and hidden mysteries. This is not something to be possessed by humanistic lore and worldly erudition. It will be gained only by purity of heart and through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.” *Conf. 14, 9*; 163.

<sup>6</sup> *Conf. 14, 3*; 156.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Cassian gives an allegorical reading of Jeremiah 1: 10 (“Look, today I am setting you over nations and over kingdoms to tear up and destroy, to scatter and overthrow, to build and to plant”) to support this claim: God gives Israel four negative tasks, which represent the destruction of sin, before performing the two positive tasks of building and planting, which represent the attainment of virtue. Rebecca Harden Weaver explains what Cassian is attempting here and in his *Institutes* as astutely psychological: “the origin of sin and virtue lay in the thoughts. It was thus necessary to learn to recognize in oneself the kinds of thinking that distorted one’s perceptions. These *logismoi* twisted the heart so that it could not receive the truth about itself, its

accomplish this task, the monk needs help from others in the community, primarily his abba;<sup>8</sup> if he desires to know God, then he must enter the monastic community in order to “live with others who have the same intention and the same aspiration. Over the years in that community [he] must learn to practice prayer, and the moral life that is necessary to prayer,” and, only after that might the monk retire to his hermitage where “the silence and the remoteness allow [him] to listen more continuously to the Word of God and to come into His presence.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, in *Conference 14*, Nesteros warns Cassian not to disregard his teachers and to allow his intellectual pride to stand in the way of his development:

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neighbor, or its God.” Rebecca Harden Weaver, “Access to Scripture: Experiencing the Text,” *Interpretation* 52 (1998): 369.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Kelly argues that within scripture the monk finds models on which he can base his life and thus grow in virtue. But the monk comes to scripture through his abba. Kelly writes, “The monk first encounters the sacred text in the person of the *abba*. With guidance from such men, he withdraws into the chrysalis stage of monastic discipline, during which time his self-centered orientation is supplanted by the immanent sense of scripture.” Christopher J. Kelly, *Cassian’s Conferences: Scriptural interpretation and the Monastic Ideal* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 97.

Catherine M. Chin, by using the inherently social aspects of distributive cognition to explain Cassian’s depiction of the relationship between individual monks to their larger communities, builds on the point that Cassian, instead of juxtaposing the individual and the community, sees them as integral to one another. Catherine M. Chin, “Cassian, Cognition, and the Common Life,” in *Ascetic Culture : Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, ed. Blake Leyerle and Robin Darling Young (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 147–166. In this sense, without his abba, the monk cannot truly come to know his sin and what he lacks.

<sup>9</sup> Owen Chadwick, introduction to the *Conferences*, by John Cassian, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 5. In a similar vein, Weaver notes that Cassian understands contemplation in the communal context of the abba as the monk’s teacher even though at the beginning of the *Conferences* Cassian focuses on the solitude of the monk in the act of contemplation: “The role of the contemplative had become one of service to the community as a teacher of the Bible. For that role disciplined experience was essential. Unprepared teachers, who were inexperienced in the truths of scripture, were a menace to their pupils and, in effect, to the church (*Conf.* 14.17–19).” Weaver, “Access to Scripture,” 375–376.

So be careful – you especially, John, whose youthfulness must especially heed what I say – be careful to completely hold your tongue unless you want your zeal for reading and your eager effort to be raised up uselessly. For this is the first step in practical knowledge, namely, to receive the instructions and the opinions of all the older men with an attentive heart and a silent mouth, to place them carefully in your heart, and to hasten to put them in practice rather than to lecture about them.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Cassian is acutely aware that the Christian community consists of not only earthly aides through spiritual teachers and communal support, but also heavenly ones to help the monk root out sin, and especially pride, as his account of the monk Paphnutius shows. Paphnutius, confident in his virtue after having withstood several demonic attacks, becomes distressed over his negative reaction to burns received while preparing a meal, and sees this disquietude as calling into question his ascetical gains. Later, in a dream, an angel of God appears to Paphnutius and provides a test to prove that carnal urges no longer threaten him: in order to prove his virtue, he must find an attractive, naked young woman, take her in his arms, and not be sexually aroused. Upon waking, instead of looking for such a woman, he examines his conscience and discovers a lack of the chastity required to pass the test. He concludes that “[i]t is higher virtue and more sublime grace to extinguish the cupidity within one’s own flesh than, with the sign of the Cross and by the power of the Most High, to subjugate evil spirits whose attack comes from outside.”<sup>11</sup> Even though Paphnutius successfully fights exterior battles against demonic powers, he needs angelic help to recognize he must continue to wage the war interiorly.

Not surprisingly, therefore, of the virtues the monk should strive to develop, Cassian gives pride of place to humility. Nesteros advises, “If you wish to achieve true knowledge of Scripture you must hurry to achieve unshakeable humility of

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<sup>10</sup> *Conf.* 14, 9; 162.

<sup>11</sup> *Conf.* 15, 10; 181–182.

heart. This is what will lead you not to the knowledge which puffs a man up but to the lore which illuminates through the achievement of love.”<sup>12</sup> While Cassian only specifically mentions humility in this passage, he indirectly refers to it numerous other times by warning that pride, or vainglory, stands in the way of spiritual knowledge.<sup>13</sup> For the learned who seek to teach others, such a temptation always exists; Cassian compares such a teacher, however, to the image in Proverbs 11:22 of an evil woman likened to a pig with a gold ring in its snout.<sup>14</sup> He further adds that God grants even illiterate people, like the apostles, true knowledge to show that they did not stand proudly like trees adorned with useless leaves of erudition but were bent down with the heavy fruit of spiritual knowledge, so those on the ground whom they taught could access it.<sup>15</sup>

Cassian divides the theoretical side of spiritual knowledge (the contemplation of divine things) into two parts: historical interpretation and spiritual insight or lore; the divisions of the latter category are tropology, allegory, and anagogy, ultimately making for four separate categories.<sup>16</sup> Although inspired by previous exegetes, most notably Origen,<sup>17</sup> Cassian is the first to lay out the four senses of scripture in this way.<sup>18</sup> The historical sense deals with the literal meaning of the text, while the three spiritual meanings behind the literal point to Christ in various ways. In proposing these senses, Cassian does not intend to lay out a formal system with which to dissect every

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<sup>12</sup> *Conf.* 14, 10; 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Conf.* 14, 9; 162–163; *Conf.* 14, 13; 168; *Conf.* 14, 17; 172–173.

<sup>14</sup> *Conf.* 14, 16; 170.

<sup>15</sup> *Conf.* 14, 16; 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Conf.* 14, 8; 160.

<sup>17</sup> Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93.

<sup>18</sup> Pauline A. Viviano, “The Senses of Scripture,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/national-bible-week/upload/viviano-senses-scripture>, 3. de Lubac attributes the origin of the classification to both Augustine and Cassian: Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 56.

biblical passage,<sup>19</sup> and, in any case, the multiple meanings found within the text serve no purpose if they do not help the reader grow in virtue.

As the monk grows in his theoretical knowledge, his practical knowledge continues to grow as well; the monk aspires to become a better Christian, not a biblical scholar. On Cassian's understanding of biblical study, Owen Chadwick notes, "This was not precisely *study* of the Bible, if by that word is meant a critical or historical analysis.... The study was rather devotional than critical. It was intended more to touch the heart than to inform the head."<sup>20</sup> Thus, Cassian advocates the memorization of biblical texts so that at any time the monk may reflect on them in order to hear God's Word and live according to it.<sup>21</sup> In *Conference 10*, he describes the fruit of the interplay between the theoretical and practical knowledge found in the virtuous monk; meditation on his theoretical knowledge, his spiritual food, allows him to become a living text whose virtuous actions speak of this truth.

Nourished by this food, which [the monk] continually eats, he penetrates so deeply into the thinking of the psalms that he sings them not as though they had been composed by the prophet but as if he himself had written them, as if this were his own private prayer uttered amid the deepest compunction of heart. Certainly he thinks of them as having been specially made for him and he recognizes that what they express was made real not simply once upon a time in the person of the prophet but that now, every day, they are being fulfilled in himself.<sup>22</sup>

In order to understand the biblical text, a monk must possess virtue, and in order to perfect that virtue, the monk must be shaped by the biblical text at every moment of his life. As he

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<sup>19</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 93. Stewart notes that Cassian never claims each passage has every sense.

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick, introduction to the *Conferences*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> *Conf.* 10, 11; 137.

progresses in the spiritual maturity that arises from this constant interplay between virtue and contemplation, the horizon of the text expands to include the monk's perspective in addition to the original author's, because the monk lives the psalms as if he wrote them. They now speak of his experience. This expansion of the textual horizon allows for the realization of the monk's union with God, as he grows in spiritual maturity through his own efforts, the good influence of his community, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, and eventually becomes an abba, one through whom others encounter God.<sup>23</sup>

Although Cassian disagrees with Augustine on the exact relationship between grace and free will, his division of spiritual knowledge into the practical and theoretical and his belief that this practical knowledge can be taught to advance the prayer life of the monk do not fit the claim that Cassian holds a semi-pelagian view of grace and salvation.<sup>24</sup> Although a monk may strive to learn and live the virtuous life, his attainment of it does not ultimately belong to him, because only God's grace renders its achievement possible. Columba Stewart thus argues

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<sup>23</sup> "Ultimately, the monk achieves his *scopos* when he withdraws sufficiently from the world and his own identity that he manifests the scriptures in his person. The monk's life is supposed to be an extended exercise in *mimēsis*. In this process the scriptures and the *abbas* (who successfully embody the text) provide an initial entryway, but the further along the *via regia* the monk proceeds the more the scriptures reveal their deeper meaning. The more the monk understands and manifests the text the holier he becomes. The dual benefit of this transformative knowledge is that the monk enjoys a small measure of the beatific vision and the community gains another *abba*." Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 101–102. Sofia Millican concurs with Kelly and suggests that the abbats' "simple kindness" reveal their holiness and its source. She writes that the young monks "not only hear from an abba's personal experience about advanced states of holiness but actually see in the abba himself what a transformed person is like and hence find reason to hope that this might be possible for them too." Sofia Millican, "Spiritual Encouragement in the *Conferences* of John Cassian (Part II)," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49 (2014): 292.

<sup>24</sup> For treatments of Cassian's relationship to Augustine and Augustinians, see Alexander Y. Hwang, "Manifold Grace in John Cassian and Prosper of Aquitaine," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010): 93–108; and Augustine Casiday, "Rehabilitating John Cassian: An Evaluation of Prosper of Aquitaine's Polemic Against the 'Semipelagians'," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005): 270–284.

that *Conference 14* “with its teaching on ‘spiritual knowledge,’ must be understood in context. It follows *Conferences 12–13*, with their basic theme that divine grace, rather than human effort, brings a monk to perfect chastity.”<sup>25</sup> Chadwick states Cassian’s position even more emphatically:

The soul is always at the mercy of God. It is helpless without His help. Man is free to choose. You must exercise your moral judgment. You must try. You must discipline yourself. But still the soul is helpless without God. The grace of God must help you to begin, continue and end. Purity of heart is a gift, not an achievement. Still, you must try.<sup>26</sup>

Cassian’s inclusion of the incident involving Sarapion in *Conference 10* supports this claim because, although he lived virtuously, doing so did not insure either the acquisition of theoretical spiritual knowledge or the encounter with God that follows.

Sarapion’s story begins with a letter sent to the churches and monasteries in Egypt by Theophilus, the patriarch of Alexandria, condemning the heresy of the Anthropomorphites, who interpret Genesis 1:26 (“Let us make man in our image and likeness”) as a warrant for depicting God in human form during worship. Sarapion, an older monk who “lived a life of

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<sup>25</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 90. After giving a detailed exposition of Cassian’s treatment of grace and free will in *Conference 13*, Boniface Ramsey concludes that Cassian retains a balance between the two and avoids semi-pelagianism. Boniface Ramsey, “John Cassian and Augustine,” in *Grace for Grace: the Debates After Augustine and Pelagius*, ed. Alexander Y. Hwang, Brian J. Matz, and Augustine Casiday (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 120–128. Yet some argue that, although Cassian gives credit to an initial grace, his stress on the merits of free will ultimately undercuts it. See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: Commentary on the Summa theologiae of St. Thomas, Ia IIae, q. 109–114*, trans. Dominican Nuns of Corpus Christi Monastery (South Bend, IN: Ex Fontibus, 2015), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, introduction to the *Conferences*, 26. For a detailed exposition on Cassian’s relationship to Augustine and a defense of Cassian against accusations of pelagianism and semi-pelagianism, see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 110–136.

austerity” and “had experience of every aspect of monastic discipline,” finds this announcement troubling because, although virtuous, he lacks the contemplative knowledge to avoid this error.<sup>27</sup> Cassian does not specify whether Sarapion portrays God the Father or God the Son in human form; Stewart thinks it is the latter for several reasons, including the fact that Cassian criticizes Nestorius’ Christology for placing too much stress on Jesus’ humanity.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately for Sarapion, a deacon from Cappadocia named Photinus visits his monastery and explains the orthodox position, to which Sarapion immediately assents. Yet, afterwards when he begins to pray, Sarapion falls back into his old habit and cries out that his God has been taken away from him.

According to Cassian, Abba Isaac explains that Sarapion’s error results from an inability to progress past the pagan practice of worshipping demons, who were thought to be gods. According to Isaac,

Paganism gave human shape to the demons which it adored. And nowadays it is thought that the incomprehensible and unspeakable majesty of the true God can be adored amid the limitations of some image or other.... This is the error against which are directed the words: “They have exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for a likeness of corruptible man.” And Jeremiah says this: “My people have exchanged their glory for an idol.”<sup>29</sup>

Although Sarapion stands as an exemplar of adherence to monastic discipline, his incorrect interpretation of Genesis 1:26 has grave implications. For Cassian, Sarapion’s inability to move beyond the overtly physical reading of the text affects his salvation. Stewart writes,

If Christ is contemplated only in his earthly, pre-Resurrection humanity, he is not encountered in his

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<sup>27</sup> *Conf.* 10, 3; 126.

<sup>28</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 88.

<sup>29</sup> *Conf.* 10, 5; 128.

glorified, heavenly state. If prayer never passes beyond words directed to a mental image of God, the one who prays does not experience the pure or true prayer that transcends language and self-awareness.<sup>30</sup>

For Cassian, this transcendent encounter with the risen Christ in pure prayer is the goal of prayer and reading the scriptures. In *Conference 9*, Cassian describes the Lord's Prayer as

lift[ing] [Christians] up ... to that ineffable prayer, which rises above all human consciousness, with no voice sounding, no tongue moving, no words uttered. The soul lights up with heavenly illumination and no longer employs constricted, human speech.<sup>31</sup>

Sarapion cannot rise to this level because, while he has developed the practical knowledge of virtue, he does not fully develop the theoretical knowledge of historical interpretation and spiritual insight which would allow him to correctly interpret scripture and, thus, open him to the possibility of such a transcendent encounter. For Sarapion, the horizon of Genesis 1:26 remains static, and he does not allow for the expansion required for encountering the ineffability of God.

In contrast to Sarapion's mistaken literalism is Cassian's interpretation in *Conference 14* of the ark of the covenant and its contents as representing the soul of the person who reaches the goal of monastic life, since within the ark one finds God's presence, not an idol. Cassian instructs his reader who has achieved purity of heart and forgone

all worldly concerns and thoughts to strive in every way to devote [him or herself] constantly to the sacred reading so that continuous meditation will seep into [his or her] soul and, as it were, will shape it to its

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<sup>30</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Conf.* 9, 25; 116.

image. Somehow it will form that “ark” of the Scriptures.<sup>32</sup>

Read allegorically, the stone tablets contained in the ark represent the “strength” of the Old and New Testaments, while the urn that contains the manna of the Exodus represents one’s memory, which “preserve[s] firmly ... the eternal, heavenly sweetness of the spiritual meanings and that bread which belongs to the angels.”<sup>33</sup> The staff of Aaron is the cross of Christ, which Cassian describes as the tree of life. These things make up the contents of the ark of the soul alongside the divine presence, traditionally understood as the Holy Spirit. The cherubim who sit on the ark’s lid represent the vast knowledge of “historical and spiritual lore” (the four senses of scripture) which protect the tranquility of the heart, achieved by virtuous living and meditation on the scriptures. Just as the high priest remains with the ark in the sanctuary, the Christian stays with his or her pure heart occupied by the Lord in a life of unceasing prayer.<sup>34</sup>

This interpretation reinforces scripture’s central role in helping the Christian to contemplatively live a life of prayer, open and disposed to the encounter with God, and allows the fruit of that encounter to remain in his or her soul. Note that even though meditation on scripture helps to bring this encounter about and to protect the memory of scripture’s meaning, it does not make up the content of the soul but is a means to that end. The cherubim atop the ark signify the four senses of scripture, which the ark does not contain; rather, its content is beyond words. Also, while meditation is necessary, the spiritual knowledge inside the ark of the soul, the “contemplat[ion] with heart’s purest gaze [of] the deep and hidden mysteries,” is “gained only by purity of heart and through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>35</sup> Stewart notes that,

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<sup>32</sup> *Conf.* 14, 10; 164.

<sup>33</sup> *Conf.* 14, 10; 164.

<sup>34</sup> For Cassian, the Christian perfects prayer when it has grown so habitual that he or she no longer is aware of praying. McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 224.

<sup>35</sup> *Conf.* 14, 9; 163.

The biblical text dissolves into direct apprehension of its spiritual meaning, and finally even that meaning yields to the realities it signifies. This pinnacle of the spiritual life is an extraordinary gift, but the gift is not capricious. It is the fruit of the well-tilled earth of the monk's heart, worked by the daily labor of *meditatio* and prayer sustained by grace.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Sarapion, although he lived virtuously, lacks theoretical knowledge; and even if he had both types of spiritual knowledge (practical and theoretical), but lacked the Holy Spirit's illumination, he still would have been without the greatest spiritual knowledge – the vision of the ineffable divine mysteries.

Living a life of prayer and contemplation of the scriptures in order to encounter God as fully as one can on this side of the grave was Cassian's primary interest; he was not concerned with hermeneutics *per se*. Yet, two aspects of his writing help modern students of hermeneutics. First, he insists that interpretation of scripture requires a conversion to a life of virtue. Belonging to a Christian community, whether the Church in general or a monastic community in particular, and meditating on scripture help to bring about this conversion and promote virtue. The hermeneutical implication of conversion's necessary role in the process is that the act of scriptural interpretation requires the appropriation of the holy life proposed by scripture: a vicious, evil person will never truly understand scripture. Second, unlike Sarapion, the monk who moves from the limited, concrete images and words of scripture to the ineffable glory of God realizes the goal of his life of prayer. Is the goal of hermeneutics that of prayer? If it is, then the true end of hermeneutics is not the words which most adequately explain a passage of scripture but silent adoration, or, in other words, the full appropriation of the Christian life which scripture proposes. In this sense, the monk becomes a living scripture through whom others can meet God.

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<sup>36</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 113.