

The Restoration of a Masterpiece

Leonardo da Vinci loved faces. If he saw a face in the streets of Milan, Italy that fascinated him, he would take the day off from painting his famous masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, so that he could follow that person and study the face. At the end of the day, Leonardo would return to his house and stay up deep into the night, sketching from memory. Details from those sketches would find their way to his painting.¹ Leonardo wanted his masterpiece to reveal to the viewer real people in every detail.

No one has ever been better than Leonardo at capturing in paint a human soul. Just two years before he began *The Last Supper*, he completed *The Lady with an Ermine*. In this piece, a beautiful young woman holds a small animal and looks to her left; she appears to be caught in mid-conversation. This painting from about 1490 is considered by many art historians the first European painting to capture the motions of a person's mind, the moment of transition from thought to expression.

Only a few years after completing *The Last Supper*, Leonardo finished his most well-known painting, the *Mona Lisa*. From the beginning, people were stunned by the verisimilitude of the painting, claiming one could almost see the veins pulsing under the skin of her neck. Her watchful eyes and enigmatic smile evoke complex, unresolved emotions—similar to our experiences with real people in our lives today and perhaps even from the deepest reflections on our selves.

Most of us don't look at human faces with quite the same intensity as Leonardo. That would be rude. I was once made to stare deeply into another's face, and the moment has haunted me ever since. The instructor paired us off in a college class and asked us to sit cross-legged on the floor about two feet away from our partner. We were directed to look into each other's eyes and ask, over and over, "who are you, really?" As the exercise progressed, I became increasingly anxious. I could find no word or picture to answer the question. I knew, of course, that I was male, a college student, and the son of Vicki and Peter, but the repetition of the question begged for an even deeper response. Who am I, really?

I have come to believe the answers to all the hardest questions are found in the scriptures. The Bible has the capacity to address the unanswerable questions. The answers may be mysterious and paradoxical, they may appear as a question or as a truth we would prefer not to believe, but the answers are there, and we can rely on them.

Scripture presents a variety of ways to understand who we really are, but one of the most powerful is found early in the Bible. The first chapter of Genesis gives us the deep truth of the origins of all things. Faithful reflection on that first chapter teaches us that God created everything out of

nothing—and out of love (Genesis 1:1). It teaches us that, in God’s original intention, everything was created “very good” (Genesis 1:31). And, mysteriously, scripture teaches us that human beings, male and female, were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

Our souls, created in the image and likeness of God, are like the faces in *The Last Supper*. When the painting was completed in 1498, the thirteen figures were every bit as lively and compelling as the *Mona Lisa*. But soon after, the painting began to deteriorate because of an innovative but unstable material used for the base. Within fifty years, the masterpiece was described as “miraculous” but “half-ruined.”² The ensuing centuries were not kind to the painting. It underwent seven restoration attempts, each of which only served to cover and distort the original. Further, the French leader Napoleon Bonaparte turned the room that housed the painting into a horse stable, and the Allies accidentally bombed the building in World War II. Pollution and grime of the air in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries accumulated on the surface. By the late 1950s, the painting was a disappointing, dark blur.

The turning point for the painting came in 1978, when science, the technology of art restoration, and the state of Leonardo studies had all progressed far enough that people were confident they could, as far as possible, restore *The Last Supper*. A master restorer, Pinin Brambilla Barcilon, was given the authority, the time, and the resources she needed to do the best work possible.

I invite you to imagine that your soul is like one of the faces of *The Last Supper*. Because you are God’s beloved child, you were fashioned with at least the same amount of care Leonardo gave to his great portraits. Because God made you

in God's own image, you have within you the capacity to be good, beautiful, and true. You are invited to show the world the divine image in you.

This comparison of the restoration of *The Last Supper* and our souls has good news and bad news for us. The good news is that we were created lively and beautiful by the hand of the master. God created us in God's own beautiful image. We don't need to become something or someone else. From the Christian point of view, there is no such thing as the proverbial "self-made man." God made us, and our only work is, paradoxically, to become what we already are.

There is more good news. We know what it looks like when a human being perfectly shows forth the image and likeness of God. The climax of our scriptural story is that, in the fullness of time, God sent God's only son, who "is the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:3). If we look to Jesus, we see what it means to be perfectly good, truthful, and beautiful. We may have only a vague sense of what it means for us to show forth the image in which we were created, but when we look to Jesus, when we remember and reflect on his life, we can be confident that we are gazing on a human life without fault or blemish. It is as though, in a painting otherwise decayed and defaced, one face is miraculously complete.

The bad news is that so much in our lives has obscured our God-given beauty. The integrity of the likeness to God has broken apart; the foundation has not been firm. We have tried to fix things and often made them worse, and the environment in which we live can be toxic, violent, and aggressive. Whether you call it abuse, addiction, mistakes, or sin, all is not well, and all is not as it should be. We present to

the world a likeness that is a corruption of what the Master intended. We need restoration if we are to become what God intended—and what we already are beneath the decay and grime.

The faces in *The Last Supper* were not uniform in their deterioration. Some, like Thomas, retained their expressiveness and, as it turned out, were not that far from Leonardo's original intention. For others, like John, ninety percent of the face had been lost, leaving only a pale shadow of the original. Right now, you and I are somewhere in that continuum, still able to reflect the beautiful hand of the Master yet showing a face far less good, true, or beautiful than God intended.

It took Barcilon and her team twenty-two years of careful, determined work to complete their restoration project. She wrote that “each day proved a new and engrossing experience, but one inevitably grounded in caution and reflection, confirmation, and consultation.”³ It was not always easy. Their process required time, persistence, endurance, teamwork, and some measure of skill. Our process of restoration requires nothing less.

In order to embark on the restoration of our souls, we need help. We need help with our thoughts, and we need help with our behavior. This book gives you an internal spiritual structure to help you orient your thoughts throughout the week and through the course of your long climb. This internal structure comes from prayerful reflection on an ancient and reliable spiritual tradition in western Christianity, the way of Saint Benedict. He was the founder of the western monastic tradition and developed a twelve-step process to spiritual restoration.

Born in the 500s to a noble family outside of Rome, Benedict left his home as a young man and became a hermit. Within some years, stories of his holiness had spread, and people came to him to ask him to become their spiritual master, or abbot. As part of his role as abbot, Benedict devised a short Rule of Life. It seems clear that he used material inherited from previous fathers and mothers of the faith but added his own spirit of balance, moderation, and practical reason.

From the tone of the *Rule*, the man seems sober, practical, and stern, not at all an unearthly mystic, although he is capable of a few moments of compelling beauty. The Twelve Steps of Humility are the heart of his *Rule*. The chapter in which he explains the twelve steps, which I've included in the back of this book, is the longest in the *Rule*.

When he writes about the steps of humility, Saint Benedict describes an image of a ladder with twelve rungs. This is based on Benedict's interpretation of Jacob's dream found in the Book of Genesis. Perhaps you know the story: the patriarch Jacob flees his home after outwitting his older brother Esau. After a time he takes a rest. The story continues that "he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). Along with most of the church through history, Benedict views Jacob's dream as a gift from God that gives us a way to God. Benedict imagines that the ladder Jacob saw has twelve rungs or steps (THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT, 7:6). This book is a user's guide to these twelve steps that can help us as we seek an intimate encounter with God.⁴

The prologue to Saint Benedict's *Rule* concludes with a few sentences that seem to capture much of the man. He writes,

“We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome... The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT, *Prologue*: 46-49).

Over the next thousand years, Saint Benedict’s *Rule* was popular in Western Europe as a way of life for those who wished to make Christian vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Even the lives of those outside the monastery walls were changed for the better by the teachings, the witness, and especially the prayers of those inside. *The Book of Common Prayer*, the core document of my own Christian denomination, The Episcopal Church, relies heavily on the *Rule* of Saint Benedict. The original architect of *The Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer, used the prayers and rhythm of life of the Benedictines to create, in the common language of the people, an essentially Benedictine way of life for an ordinary person. For example, he took the seven daily prayer services of the monks and nuns and condensed them into two—Morning and Evening Prayer.

Although Benedictine sensibility is a part of many Western Christian denominations, there are few guides or commentaries on the twelve steps of humility— especially for people who aren’t monks and nuns. I’m not sure why that is. What I do know is that I was saved by the Twelve Steps of Humility. In the midst of a season of deep disorientation and pain, I found Michael Casey’s *A Guide to Living in the Truth*.

Casey is a monk in the Benedictine tradition with a doctorate in medieval theology. His book is a commentary for today's monks and nuns and is rooted in solid academic research. Some parts are a bit dry, but there are also parts that, for me, leapt off the page and spoke precisely to my spiritual state. In a time of deep disorientation, the twelve steps as unpacked by Casey gave me a reliable map so that I could, if only faintly, discern God's presence in my pain and so stay faithful. It showed me the path of love and hope, even if I did not always follow it.

Because it was so helpful for me, I was eager to share its wisdom with others. But I found that the words and ideas did not easily translate to individuals' lives and ways of understanding things. My background had made Casey's book accessible to me. I had been to seminary and have always had a passion for ancient spiritual wisdom. For years I had close friendships with monks and nuns, and their struggles and ways of being were familiar to me. When I tried to share Casey's book with others, I found it didn't resonate with them; it didn't sing for them the way it sang for me.

In the decade since I first read Casey, I have read and reflected on many of the books on the twelve steps of humility. I have had conversations about the steps and have taught classes on them. Above all, I have tried to live by them as best as I can. This book reflects this journey and offers one way of beginning to walk a life-saving path for yourself.

Saint Benedict suggests that his *Rule* is for beginners, and he begins and ends with the suggestion that some saints have progressed far beyond what he describes. Without the benefit of experience, readers might think that if they followed the instructions in the *Rule* for a year or two, they would soon

be ready for the next great spiritual thing. In practice, people have found that the *Rule*, and in particular the Twelve Steps of Humility, are sufficient for a lifetime. The *Rule* may only encompass Twelve Steps, but it is, for almost all of us, a long climb.

Furthermore, the way of Saint Benedict is not a solo journey; it is always pursued in relationship with others. So while you can use this book just by yourself, I intend it as an invitation to join a national movement with the same name as this book, The Restoration Project. The movement is open to all Christians who hunger for spiritual depth in community. What binds us together is a set of classic practices that have proven to be effective ways to grow wise, spiritually strong, and loving.

The most important structure of The Restoration Project community is Discipleship Groups. These are small groups that meet regularly, often every week or every other week. Each meeting begins with some time of silence, an expression of a common intention to seek God through Christ, and then a recitation of seven vows. An explanation of these seven vows is integrated into the beginning chapters of this book. (The full liturgy for a Discipleship Group can be found at the back of this book).

Just as Saint Benedict's monastery provided the best context for nuns and monks to follow his spiritual wisdom, so Discipleship Groups provide the best context I know for ordinary Christians who desire to be held in love while they die to their old selves and are reborn in Christ. We all need help. Without loving structure, our spiritual growth will stall, and we will never become the person God created us to be. We each have been given unique gifts and were created to

complete a particular piece of God's work. The Restoration Project, like Benedict's Twelve Steps of Humility, is intended as a reliable and tested structure for revealing to the world the beautiful soul God created in each of us.