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READING AT MONASTIC MEALS

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Michael Tunney is a Queenslander.

Prior to becoming a monk of New Norcia (in 2001) he was a clinical psychologist with Department of Health in Western Australia.

He is the single parent of Claire, a gifted cellist living in Germany.

I've been asked to speak briefly about the reading that accompanies the meals in the monastery refectory. I'll comment on three aspects of this:

- a. the organization and content of these readings
- b. some recent and current books, and
- c. the purpose of these readings.

The monks meet for a main meal at lunch and a light supper each day, both of which are taken in silence with readings. Breakfast is eaten alone and in silence.

We will visit the refectory on the tour. It is an attractive room, furnished and arranged in the traditional monastic style that you would see in monasteries of either monks or nuns anywhere in the world.

At each meal Scripture is read during the first course, which is soup and bread. At lunch this Scripture reading is from the Old Testament, and at supper from the New Testament. These are continuous

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readings, each reader taking up from where the reader of the previous day finished.

For the remainder of the meal, which at lunch is a main course and dessert and at supper a main course only, a selected book is read. At lunch this book usually has some religious focus, at supper it is usually secular in content. Currently at lunch we are reading William Dalrymple's *The age of Kali: Indian travels and encounters*, and at supper Alice Thomson's *The singing line: The story of the man who strung the telegraph across Australia, and the woman who gave her name to Alice Springs*. Dalrymple is predictably good.

At the end of lunch we read a section from St Benedict's *Rule for Monasteries* and at the end of supper the necrology for the following day. This is a list of the deceased monks on their anniversary of death from monasteries throughout the world, which belong to the Subiaco Congregation of Benedictines of which this house is part. This list goes back as far as the mid-nineteenth century. It is read daily in all houses of the congregation.

A comment on a book of note: we have recently finished reading James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: a history*. This is an alarming account of Jewish-Christian relations throughout history with particular attention to the Holocaust, its causes and aftermath. Even allowing that this book may not give a perfectly balanced, objective interpretation throughout, it is well worth reading for the historical facts it records and the reconciliation and correction of injustices yet to be achieved. This book was the gift of a local Rabbi

given in one of those contexts that those of us working in "old" libraries sometimes dream of.

A Library Studies student on placement here last year found that we had a rare 17th or 18th century manuscript, a copy of a 1490 Jewish *Kaballah*, later identified as the *Shoshan Sodot*. There is another copy in the Bodleian Library and a few in America. We invited members of the local Jewish community to see it, which they did with great interest. Later, the Council of Orthodox Rabbis requested that we give it to them. We did. It is now stored at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This has been one of the more exciting events of our library year.

Some final comments about how these readings fit into a monk's day. St Benedict, in the *Rule for Monasteries*, which he compiled in the early part of the sixth century, placed great importance on reading and listening to reading. He wanted his monks to spend several hours each day occupied in this. He even devoted a chapter of this Rule to the readings at meals.

He was highly selective about what books were to be read and he wanted the Abbot and knowledgeable others (such as the Rabbi in our case) to choose the books. He wanted the monks to come to this with open minds and hearts. He wanted them to put aside all prejudice, especially that of self-interest, listening to discern the truth. And he wanted the perception of truth to change their minds and hearts because he believed that seeking truth is, ultimately, seeking God.

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FOR NEXT ISSUE
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