

Donald Ottenhoff

on the

Ecclesial Literature Project

By Tracy Schier



Donald Ottenhoff has served as Executive Director of the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University in Minnesota since 2004. As a part of the St. John's community (which includes St. John's Abbey, the university, St. John's Preparatory School, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Liturgical Press, and the closely associated women's community of Saint Benedict's Monastery, and the College of Saint Benedict in nearby St. Joseph, MN), the Institute is a residential center of learning where a diverse mix of people representing equally diverse religious traditions pursue research and writing, educational programs, dialogue, and prayer in a place

shaped by the Benedictine tradition of worship and work. Writers, academy-based scholars, business leaders, artists, pastors, teachers, and other professionals contribute in various ways to the research and educational purposes of the Institute. Its website states that the monks of St. John's, along with such theological luminaries as Jaroslav Pelikan, John Meyendorff, and George Lindbeck, originally established the Institute in 1967 to *“dispel religious ignorance and promote better understanding and harmony”* among faith traditions.

The Institute's founding story takes us back to the 1950s when the Abbey sent a monk, Kilian McDonnell, to study at the theological faculty of Tübingen University in Germany. When he returned to St. John's, he

pressed his confreres at St. John’s to develop a center of scholarly research intended to nurture Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theology, and foster mutual understanding among these traditions. The Institute has been, ever since, a significant contributor to the ecumenical movement through its residential programs, consultations, publications, and rootedness in the Benedictine traditions of community, hospitality, and common prayer.

In 2009, Lilly Endowment funded the Ecclesial Literature Project at the Institute. The project is multifaceted and designed to encourage the writing and disciplined reading of literature that engages matters of the spirit. Specifically, the project intends to help congregations become the kinds of intellectual centers that informed and benefited from writers as varied as Thomas a Kempis, John Milton, John Bunyan, G.K. Chesterton, Georges Bernanos, Flannery O’Connor and many others. By convening summer writing workshops that offer instruction in the skills of writing, instituting a writer-in-residence program and awarding prizes for exemplary works of religious literature, and by bringing noted writers to the Institute and university campus during the academic year, the Institute serves as a place where pastors, academics, and laypersons can take up residence together to write, and read and discuss one another’s work. Institute leaders see it as an incubator for a variety of ecclesial writing—fiction, drama, poetry, theological essays, memoir, children’s books, biography, and history.

Before coming to work at the Collegeville Institute, Ottenhoff served as an editor at *The Christian Century* magazine.

The conversation is edited.

Q. *Let’s talk about pastors first. What are the specific challenges of getting them to write?*

A. The biggest challenge for pastors who want to write is time. Since they have a lot to do, clearing time for writing isn’t easy. Also, congregations typically don’t put “excellent writer” at the top of the job description when they’re looking for a pastor, so it’s not a high priority. Pastors are expected to be good preachers, they are expected to deliver excellent pastoral care, and they’re expected to keep a skilled eye on administrative affairs. That’s a heavy job description in itself. Those who want to write have to clear a space for it. More precisely, they have to learn how to clear a space for it. Eugene Peterson, who has worked with us for the last three years, has offered participants in his workshops his particular take on this

problem. Eugene was a working pastor for a good portion of his career, and managed to write a couple of shelves worth of books at the same time.

Q. If writing isn't part of the current job description for most pastors, why encourage them to write?

A. For a number of reasons. By the nature of what they do, pastors see the world from a unique perspective. Some things only pastors can write about, and we're all richer when they do. You only have wonderful books like Heidi Neumark's *Breathing Space*, or *This Strange and Wondrous Calling* by Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver, or Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets* because the authors are both pastors and accomplished writers. You're able to see what they see because they write about it. Each of these writers, by the way, has some connection with the Collegeville Institute's Ecclesial Literature Project.

I also think it's safe to say that church-goers have a lot of questions on their minds—about the Christian faith, about how to live a faithful life in today's society, about the relationship between the Christian message and a whole range of issues. Who better than pastors understands these questions and the people who ask them? Certainly, pastors address some of these questions in sermons, but I believe that laypersons are looking for the kind of intellectual engagement that happens when you plunge into a book or article, or the carefully crafted blog. There's a reading audience out there that pastors are uniquely positioned to reach.

But, while the kind of writing I'm talking about isn't first among a pastor's duties, in fact pastors write all the time, from sermons to newsletters. In these cases pastors don't need to be encouraged to write, but to take writing seriously, and to write well. Not every pastor is going to be picked up by a religious publishing house, but every pastor can learn to write in a compelling way within his or her particular context.

Q. Reading is the obvious corollary to writing. Do you think that encouraging the reading and deep engagement of significant and serious literature is a pastoral activity?

A. Absolutely. Good preaching should excite a passion for the life of the Christian mind, and the mind of a Christian is nourished through reading. But, finding nourishing material isn't that easy.

A lawyer, for instance, might tell a pastor that she wants to learn more about theology. A pastor should be able to help that person. Yet, there isn't a great deal of solid contemporary writing about theology available for the educated layperson—someone who hasn't spent three to eight years pursuing an advanced degree in a theological discipline. As clear a writer as Calvin is, I don't think a pastor should hand the lawyer the two volumes of the *Institutes* and expect that the problem is solved.

That's why writers such as Kathleen Norris and Eugene Peterson are so important. They're able to write about grace and pride and the presence and absence of God in a substantive way that at the same time invites in a wide audience of contemporary readers. We need more writers like Kathleen and Eugene.

A friend of mine argues that Christians don't need new books; they simply have to learn to read the old ones. I agree that the Christian tradition offers an inexhaustible wealth of wisdom and experience via the printed page, but we can't forget about the small matter of history. Perennial issues are perennial issues precisely because every era has to struggle with them in the language and circumstances peculiar to that time. We have to recognize the need for writers who can address the issues of today—perennial or not—in the language of today. There's a place for books that say something in a language that speaks more or less immediately to the reader.

The most important reasons pastors should promote the reading of serious literature in their congregations, though, is that such writing feeds Christian imagination. This is an enormous issue that I only mention. How you see and respond to the world on a day-to-day basis has as much to do with how your imagination is formed as it does with your ability to reason on a theoretic level. John Lennon was absolutely right to say, “Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.” Good literature, good religious literature, shapes imagination and hence our perception of the world.

Q. When I was in the Baltimore airport recently I noticed many copies of Dan Brown's new novel on people's laps. It seemed to be everywhere! Are there lessons in this for pastors, and for the people who come to the Institute?

A. It would be easy to simply dismiss Brown as the literary equivalent of high fructose corn syrup, but I think it's more useful to ask what we can learn from the Brown phenomenon, both positive and negative. I've only

read *The Da Vinci Code*, so that’s the only book of his that I can comment on.

Why did so many people read *The Da Vinci Code*? For one, Brown is skilled at plotting, which is something that every writer who wants to reach, and hold, a broad audience should keep in mind. One of our writing teachers at the Institute leads a session on how to keep readers turning the page when they’re not reading a book because it’s an assignment on which they’ll be tested. I doubt that she’d want to recommend Brown as a model, but some of the issues she raises overlap with a book like *The Da Vinci Code*. It’s a very fast-paced book. Virtually every 3-page chapter ends with a cliffhanger that—assuming you’re hooked—compels you to keep reading. While I wouldn’t recommend that writers plot with such a heavy hand—it’s the Perils of Pauline school of plot development—I do think it’s true that even a journalistic piece should have a well-designed narrative structure that keeps a reader interested, and compels him or her to follow through to the end of the story.

Whatever you might think of it, Brown also came up with thematic material that captured readers’ interest—secret religious societies, hidden religious truths, codes, and conspiracies. The minimal lesson I would hope apprentice writers would take away from Brown is that it’s worth paying attention to the audience for whom they wish to write. A potential writer may have just come through a traumatic experience in their lives, but they shouldn’t simply assume that large numbers of persons want to read about it.

The negative aspect comes when you ask, what do you take away from *The Da Vinci Code*? And here’s where the high fructose corn syrup analogy comes in. It might taste good, but it’s not all that good for you. I doubt that a book like *The Da Vinci Code* nourishes Christian imagination, and not simply because of what some people would consider the heterodox thematic material. Books like Brown’s are entertainments—diversions. Entertainments aren’t in themselves bad. Graham Greene distinguished his “entertainments” from his more serious works—but his entertainments are still pretty good. Entertainments do become a problem, however, if that’s all a person reads. There isn’t a substitute for truly living into a book with profound ideas—for entering into a book and engaging it in a serious way because the author is addressing serious material.

Now, I don’t want to be seen as trashing popularity and popular culture. There are plenty of page-turners out there that rise above the category of diversion. Think of Chandler and Hammett and Ross McDonald. They were good writers, and, Chandler, in particular, presented moral visions of the world. The books of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain were the pop

literature of their day. We should never lose sight of the importance of a good story, and both words are key, *good* and *story*. People orient their lives through stories. The question is, what stories will readers keep company with? Through the Ecclesial Literature Project we hope to encourage writing that’s at the same time appealing to a broad audience and consequential to the life of faith.

Q. Do you think people today (with the exception of theology and literature majors!) actually read writers from the near and distant past, like Julian of Norwich, Thomas a Kempis, Graham Greene, Bernanos, Flannery O’Connor, and so on?

A. I think a select group of people read at that level. The issue your question brings up is the complex category of *difficulty*. Relative to Dan Brown, Flannery O’Conner might be perceived as difficult. *Paradise Lost*—as theologically rich as any systematic theology—is conceptually difficult even for an expert like Stanley Fish. And certainly distance in time alone introduces an element of difficulty in the attempt to read any text from the past. What’s a sackbut anyway? The question then becomes how to educate people to develop a taste and a habit for writing that is more difficult to read and understand than contemporary pop literature, but is also, I venture to say, more sustaining. It is a learning process. If you develop a taste for Marilynne Robinson, Mary Gordon, or Walker Percy, it’s not a huge step to Flannery O’Connor. If you learn to recognize the brilliance and insight in Czeslaw Milosz and Denise Levertov, you’ll take steps that eventually bring you to Milton.

Through the Ecclesial Literature Project we’re developing an approach to reading that tries to move readers, who aren’t students in the formal sense, from more immediately accessible writing, to work that many might find, at least initially, “difficult.” Churches that are taking themselves seriously as learning centers are also working to open readers to a range of literature. Not everyone has to like Flannery O’Conner and Georges Bernanos, as great as I think they are, but learning entails growth, so I would hope that readers aren’t simply looking for another book that reminds them of the last one they read.

People read for a lot of different reasons—to get to sleep at night, to be comforted, to have their views confirmed. Lord Peter Whimsy read mysteries to get over a relationship gone bad, when he wasn’t reading his incunabula, that is. But I also know that people read to learn about, to reflect upon, things that matter to them deeply. They pick up a book

because they assume, sometimes vaguely so, that it will take them deeper into an understanding of God and the world, of guilt and forgiveness, of the traumas and joys of living in history. Serious literature addresses questions that people have on their minds but sometimes do not know how to ask, or don't have opportunities to ask. We see it as a major challenge of our project to help people appropriate writers of the present and past who are the great examiners of the spiritual life.

Congregations are ideal places to move people along the learning curve I'm talking about. The congregation that reads together not only stays together, they encourage one another in learning, feed one another intellectually, and grow together toward maturity in the faith. For that reason pastors should incite congregants to read together in an intentional way. I know that it's as difficult for laypeople to find time for such reading as it is for pastors to find time to write. There are so many conflicting demands for everyone's time. But, in my view, reading together should be a high priority. Find the time.

Q. Do you think that many seminaries imbue students with sufficient (any?) background in literature so that they can bring these riches to their congregations?

A. I think that seminaries increasingly are trying to do this. But so much has to happen during a typical three-year seminary education. Seminaries can't be faulted for not incorporating courses on Christian literature in their core curricula. I do know, though, that many seminary faculty members incorporate literature into courses they teach, and have done so for a long time. I don't think it's unusual for books like Johnny Ray Youngblood's *Upon This Rock*, and Heidi Neumark's *Breathing Space* to be assigned in ministry courses.

Q. What lessons are to be learned from the seeming popularity of the “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harrison?

A. One thing the phenomenon tells us is that people want answers to significant questions—the relation between faith and science and the question of God are certainly among the most obvious. Whatever else you may want to say about the trinity you mention, they are writing books for a broad audience that deal with substantive issues. And people are reading

them. Anyone who doesn't think there's a market for books about religion has their head in the sand.

I also think we have to ask ourselves, why are these writers so ignorant of any form of faith other than that presented by fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals? The new atheists seem unaware that there are different ways of understanding God, and quarrel almost exclusively with people on the right, and the most extreme elements at that. Hitchens, at least, does this deliberately because he knows it's easier to make his argument against a fundamentalist. But, mainline views that have been tempered by an honest encounter with modernity by and large are not being heard, and part of the reason for this is the paucity of accessible writing that reflects mainline perspectives. So in some ways it's a communication issue, and an important one at that. By the way, John Haught's *God and the New Atheism*, and Terry Eagleton's quirky *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* are good and accessible counters to Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harrison.

Q. Tell us more about the Ecclesial Literature project.

A. Well, maybe I should first define “ecclesial literature.” By ecclesial literature we mean to designate a broad and varied body of writing—from confessions of faith to poetry to books of spiritual guidance to mystery plays to fictions of all sorts—that in effect has over time partnered with the church in educating, encouraging, and even entertaining its members. Ecclesial literature is less technical than present-day academic theology, but more theologically substantive than the volumes of devotional and new age literature that line the book shelves of both Christian and secular bookstores. It's also more closely akin to the tradition of *belles-lettres* than to the technical writing associated with the professional spheres of the humanities, including theology. Something is going on in an essay by John Updike or Thomas Lynch that isn't characteristic of the typical essay published in a journal of theology.

Through the project we provide a place where writers of all sorts, essayists, poets, novelists, memoirists, who are pursuing religious or theological themes in their work can come to write, learn, and hang out with other writers. We'd like to become a magnet for authors who want to see religious writing, or writing that features religious themes, done well. The Institute is a place where writers can hone their craft, we hope, in service to the church. You might think of us along the lines of other writers' communities, but with a religious and ecumenical mission. As I've

mentioned, we also look for ways to foster reading of literature that deals with issues of the Christian life.

Q. Since the Ecclesial Literature project began, what surprises might you have had?

A. I’m surprised that we got the fairly ambitious project off the ground. But, beyond that, obviously we had a hunch that this was a project whose time had come, but I’m continually surprised at the degree and quality of the response to our programs. Participants experience a kind of shock of affirmation that someone has identified writing as important in their lives and in the church’s life. I think we’ve tapped into what economists call pent up demand. One participant’s response I thought was particularly telling. Toward the end of one of the workshops a group of us were chatting and a man who has served the church for many years said with noticeable anger in his voice, “Why wasn’t a program like this around when I was a young pastor.”

I’ve also been surprised, and gratified, that pastors and others rediscover a love of language when they spend a week here. Participants are excited to be in the presence of others who value well-wrought language. I’m one of those who gets a little queasy when the word “creative” is tossed around too much, but in reality, the life of faith is a creative life. Biblical literature is creative literature. It’s exhilarating to watch pastors, in particular, come to the recognition that language and writing aren’t limited to the conventions of the term paper—that they can themselves participate in the creative project of Christian literature.

Q. When a person participates in one of the project’s groups, what does a typical day look like?

A. Of course, this will differ from group to group. People are typically here at St. John’s for 5 or 6 days. We try to give them time to write and also to provide them with tutoring in writing. And for pastor participants we offer sessions that provide some mentorship on negotiating writing and the pastoral life.

Each day usually includes a traditional workshop session when participants critique one another’s work in, we hope, helpful and supportive ways. Participants can choose to take breakfast and lunch alone, or join others. We share a common evening meal, which is often

followed by an informal session about getting published, or finding your voice, writing in a digital age, and other subjects.

As you might have noticed, St. John’s is a beautiful and lively place. Among other things you can swim in Lake Sagatagan, hike around the thousands of acres of arboretum, browse the libraries, check out the St. John’s Bible—the first illuminated Bible commissioned in 500 years—or the pottery studio. There’s a lot to do in the limited free time in between program sessions. And, of course, we encourage participants to join the monks of St. John’s for prayer as often as they can. While the workshops are not to be mistaken for retreats—participants work hard while they’re here—we do try to strike a healthy balance between work and conviviality.

Q. The question of publishing seems to loom large in every writer’s mind. Do you find that the availability of publishing on the Web is an advantage for some of your participants? What do you think about Web publishing?

A. Getting published is a major issue, which is made all the more problematic given the fluid nature of publishing, and the Web has certainly had something to do with that. Magazines have had a rough go of it for some time—before the advent of the Web. Publishing houses exist on a pretty thin margin, so they have to be extremely selective about the titles they publish. Overall, outlets for print publication are becoming more limited. Having said that, no publication or publisher will pass up the opportunity to publish a text that they think will have broad market appeal. Every religious publisher is looking for excellent writers whose work will appeal to a wide range of readers. Straitened circumstances for publishers mean a premium on good writers who write for a general audience. The larger the potential audience, the happier the publisher.

I hesitate to talk about “Web publishing.” At least I want to maintain a distinction between the words “publishing” and “posting.” Anyone can post anything on the Web. In my view, publishing involves at least some of the procedures traditionally connected with the publishing trade, in particular, editorial review and acceptance. So, while anyone can post anything they want on a home page, it’s a different matter getting published on Slate or Beliefnet, or Web editions of print publications. Publishing involves matters of accountability, trust, authority, perspective, and professionalism. While I think that it’s inevitable that print publication will gradually yield to digital publication, the review and access procedures developed within the publishing world will remain in effect. Digital

publication, as I'm defining it, will live in a wider universe of postings, blogs, and open-access social and intellectual networks, and probably won't maintain the same kind of power held by print publications—although that's arguable. But, Web sites that maintain standards of accuracy, intellectual merit, literary quality, and so forth, will still find readers, and probably subscribers. What all this means for the kind of writers we're working with in the Ecclesial Literature Project is this: don't think that excellent writing doesn't matter anymore just because you can post random notes about last night's dream on your homepage.

It's a fluid time for publishing, but one relationship developing now between print publication and blogging is interesting to note. Print publishers pay attention to writers who develop a voice, an identity, and an audience on the Web through a blog. Publishers will look at many factors, including what you're writing about and the likely identity of your audience, but gaining a foothold on the Web can be a foot in the door at a publishing house. Participants in Institute workshops and others should take advantage of this opportunity. In my view, however, a writer must be very disciplined about what he or she posts on the Web.

In all the uncertainty created by this time in between Gutenberg and the new age of digital communication, I don't think we should lose sight of what will be the persistent need for what is crassly called content. Even the once-new visual media of film and television didn't banish writing to the dustbin of history. They have depended on the skill of writers such as Dalton Trumbo, Paul Schrader, and David Simon. Ecclesial literature will endure in the digital age, as will the need for talented writers who are able to write about the life of faith with insight and eloquence.