

Fr. John Hardon, S.J.
WRITING AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
Address to Thomas Aquinas College
March 28, 1998

I'd like to start with a prayer. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Hail Mary. . . . Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us. In the Name of the Father

I brought three manuscripts with me on which I could speak. "How to be an Authentic Catholic"; "The Holy Eucharist, the Center of the Pro-life Movement"; and "Writing and the Spiritual Life." I decided to speak on the last topic, "Writing and the Spiritual Life."

I'm afraid very few people understand the value of writing. It was St. Augustine who confessed that, and I am quoting, "it was one of those who write because they have made some progress, and by means of writing, make further progress; make further progress in the spiritual life" (St. Augustine, letter 143).

We are addressing ourselves to a strange subject: "Writing and the Spiritual Life". The proverbs of all nations raise the value of writing. One proverb: "Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well"; again, "Look into your heart and write." To insure that the revealed word of God would be written, God invented the alphabet. Except for the inspiration to write, we would not have the Sacred Scriptures. What is the Bible except the inspired word of God but in written form? In our first week in the Jesuit novitiate, we are told, "part of your spirituality is to write." St. Ignatius carried with him in his travels only his Divine Office, Imitation of Christ, and his log book, (his diary). My purpose here is to look annually briefly; I asked how long to speak, I suggested 45 minutes. And then, if you wouldn't mind, writing out your questions, the way we taught Jesuits for 25 years, [and] your objections. I would be happy to cope with whatever you write. My purpose is basically to help you see why writing is such a blessed asset of the spiritual life. To be convinced of the value of writing, if only a few words every day, is to have made a giant stride on the road to sanctity.

My talk here this afternoon can be summarized in one word. Imperative mood: WRITE! In teaching my young Jesuits in their first year of theology, one of the scholastics, as we would call them, [who was] very bright and could write well, I told him, "John, you should write, here's the facts." I kept after him all year long. He would not write for publication. I kept after him for four years. Recently a priest visited me in my office in Detroit and after, in my office for maybe an half an hour, he left three paperbacks on my desk by mistake. They're all by my former Jesuit student. Turned over one of the books. It said there now are over nine million books, copies of writings by Fr. John Powell in print. I want to begin each section [of my talk] with a title. And the answer will be, the observation I wish to share with you. The question is: "Why write?"

we have in life is to master our minds, to control our thoughts. Writing disciplines the mind. Left to themselves our thoughts--what a saver!--tend to roam about. Our minds are not naturally under control. All this needs to be said. We all have a fallen human nature, thanks. What does that mean? We have a fallen human mind. Our minds tends to run in all directions at once. And what a safe statement "Our minds are not spontaneously under our command." I don't see that there's [any] sanctity, there's not even salvation, unless we have learned to control our minds. That is why writing is so important. It provides a pathway for the mind. Writing gives direction to our thinking. [It] enables us to master the most difficult part of our nature to control our faculty of thoughts.

Writing controls and enables us to master our thinking. With our thoughts in control, as we know, every thought leads to a desire. Every desire leads to an action. Every action leads to a habit. Every habit shapes our character. And our character determines our destiny. It all begins in the mind. We're asking the question "Why write?". Writing is a most wonderful way of growing in intellectual humility. Cardinal Newman explains why more people do not write. The reason, he explains, is that "I have to read what I have written. I must look at myself as I really am." Writing is a mirror of our minds. And what we see, we blink [at]. What fool wrote this? I must see the vagueness of my thinking, the inconsistencies of my logic, the triviality my life; and the experience is humiliating. [This is] my regular habit in writing for publication: the average is, from when I have finished a manuscript the first time, I reread, change, improve, rewrite, seven times on average before it goes to print. There's only one way of becoming humble. Only one. That is the road of humiliation.

The deepest humiliation is being humiliated in our own eyes. I've encouraged too many people to write. By now they've given me a hundred excuses. The single main reason why more people don't write is pride. Let me repeat. The single main reason why more people don't write, especially for publication, is pride. Writing is a proved way of lowering myself in my own estimation my looking in my real self. It has now [been] 25 years [since] I've been teaching Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. In none of their 500 homes throughout the world do they have a single mirror. How many times I've told the Sisters, "You don't need a mirror, you must grow in humility by writing." I'm so happy to report after 25 years the Missionaries of Charity write! I'm giving a lecture around. Somebody's not writing; a long pause. "Sister, find a pen and paper and start writing". Writing is a mirror of our minds. There is no way known to man for more surely and effectively growing in humility, than by writing, and of course, then by reading what you write; rereading and changing.

In God's mercy, I have published many books. I don't know a single book that I have ever published in there was not at least one, sometimes several, stupid mistakes. We are addressing ourselves to writing and the spiritual life. I'm explaining why writing is such a precious asset of the spiritual life. Writing provides us with a record of the graces we have received. How grateful we can be to the people who have done favors to us. But, by writing we keep a record of the inspirations and illuminations that God gives us. One reason why some of the great saints of history have written so much is [that] they wished to keep a record of the graces [they had] received from God in their meditation and mental prayer. Hear it: "We shall love God only as deeply as we realize how good God has been to us." Gratitude is a bedrock of love. The deepest gifts that God gives us are the graces with which He illuminates and inspires us. On the one hand, writing helps to keep us humble by giving us visible proof of our own weakness and folly.

I can't believe it. I entered the Society of Jesus Sept 1, 1936. How many here have been born before Sept 1, 1936? In my desire to obey my father in God, St. Ignatius, I have kept a written record every single day of my Jesuit life. Needless to say, a record of my failings, of course, I have my own special shorthand. They can read it, but they won't know what's there. [I have] also [kept] a daily record of the graces God has given me. We shall love God only in the measure that we are grateful to Him for the blessings He has given us. How many saints would never have been canonized unless, either under the direction of their own superiors, or the orders of their spiritual directors they had put the graces God had given them into writing like the latest doctor of the universal Church, [St. Thérèse of Lisieux]. Never went to high school. Never went to college. My friends, you don't have to go to college to receive extraordinary graces from God. Keep a record of both your failings and the graces God gives you. I can say from personal experience, it's a wonderful way of growing both in humility and in the love of God.

We are answering basically one question, "Why, why, why is writing so precious?". Writing cultivates the memory. There are two statements that I'm going to ask you to remember. "The capacity of the human mind to forget is infinite." Repeat after me: "The capacity of the human mind to forget is infinite." Whatever you forget, don't forget that. Second thing to remember: "We remember what we want to remember." A good memory is one that remembers what should be remembered--and hear it--and forgets what should be forgotten. How does writing cultivate our memory? By writing down our thoughts, and especially our spiritual experiences, we make a strong act of the will to remember what we have written. I've watched too many people in conversation; the thoughts, if you call them such, ooze out of their mouths. [We must write] in order to have in our memories what God wants us to remember. In teaching priests, my own Jesuits--over 600 of them in theology for 25 years--I told them. Fathers or priests-to-be, write so that you will remember what you should remember. I'll never forget, years ago, one of my spiritual fathers told me to keep a record of the interesting experiences I had: episodes, anecdotes, stories. In six weeks I had over 200. By now, I have several thousand. What a difference. What a difference between having a cultivated memory through writing and then engaging in conversation! Of course, you don't put on a set of notes and engage in conversation. You [use those things that you] have written and remembered and then you choose what you say, say what you should say, and make your conversation interesting.

One reason in making even a brief notation, say, a quotation of one of the saints, helps to fix in our minds what he wrote down. After, (I'm not exaggerating), assembling over 5,000 quotations from the saints, I thought I had enough. At least for a while. That's why the Church canonizes saints. To assure us that they are really in heaven. Infallibly in Heaven. But secondly, to leave us a record of their lives, especially a record of their words. So that by remembering what the saints wrote, we, too, might join their heavenly company.

It is a good idea to begin collecting a choice of these sayings of the masters of the spiritual life as a powerful aid for deepening our own spiritual resources. The next two sentences are crucial. Whatever is memorized becomes part of the treasury of our mind. Hear it: We have nothing [he blows to simulate wind], nothing on our minds except what we

have memorized.” Over the years of study in the Society of Jesus, I finished my doctoral studies in biochemistry, finished my graduate studies in psychology, and then I got a doctorate in theology. I cannot tell you how many educated, empty minds are walking the streets of our country. Our memorized thoughts become part of the treasure of our mind. Our memorized thoughts contribute to everything we think, say, or do for the rest of our lives. We can think only with what’s in the mind. And what’s in the mind is in the memory. Not just words; not just letters; but thoughts. And the surest way of remembering ideas is to write them out.

We’re still on the question of “why.” Why writing is so important for the spiritual life. Writing provides us with a moral inventory. St. Ignatius Loyola stressed the importance of a daily review of our conduct and it put into written form. This serves many purposes; especially for it shows how serious we are about overcoming our failures. The last thing we want to admit, we proud mortals, the last thing we want to admit are our failures, our mistakes. I make sure that the doors are closed more than once [before] aloud I said “Hardon, you idiot!”. What fools we mortals can be. Keep a record of your folly! It is good for your humility. Writing as a moral inventory shows how honest we are about growing in the virtues we need. May I ask, how many of you have ever read the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin? I recommend it to all of you. He was our first ambassador to France. He came to know some Jesuits in France. They taught him how to keep a daily inventory of his moral behavior. He decided that he had twelve principle moral failings. It is all in print. So he divided them into twelve months. One month for each failing. Everyday of each month for thirty days, he kept a written record of his failings. He wrote, “I owe most of my success, such as I’ve had, to keeping a daily record (inventory) of my moral behavior.”

Why is writing to keep a moral inventory so important? It gives us the opportunity of looking back over the progress, if any, that we have made in our imitation of Christ. Oh, how forgetful we can be of our failings. Keep a record! Finally, keeping this moral inventory in writing makes us conscious during the day what we plan to put down in some written form at the end of the day. You hear something. You read something. I’d better put that down in writing! If I have not done that I would have never, I don’t say, published several million words; I would not have published 100 words in my life.

We go on, on why writing in the spiritual life is so important to cultivate the art of speaking. We are told by St. Ignatius according to St. James the Apostle, St. James in the third chapter of his letter--read it. Here’s what he says: “Every kind of beast and bird, serpents, and the rest is tamed by mankind. But the tongue no man can tame--a restless evil, and full of deadly poison” (James 3:7-8). The Apostle does not mean that we cannot tame the tongue; what he means is that we cannot tame it alone. We need the constant help of God and God will give us the grace to tame these wild beasts if we do our part. A most valuable way of taming our tongue is to write down our thoughts while saying a prayer before we start writing, as we write, and after we have written, to obtain the divine light to see what God wants to say and the divine help to say it. I know the Sisters who care for the Holy Father’s private household; his domestic needs; take care of his personal, private correspondence. He’ll go at night, after midnight. Strange sounds. Holy Father’s private chapel. They get out of bed and see what’s going on. Holy Father was in the sanctuary writing before the Blessed Sacrament. People who do this, (we are speaking about, remember, taming the tongue), go a long way in taming their tongues as God wants them to.

We have the grace required to write down our thoughts, are a major contribution to mastering speech. Too often we speak without first thinking. But we cannot write without thinking. We can babble all kinds of nonsense in speech. We cannot write without thinking. The most important faculty to master in our lives here on earth is the faculty of speaking.

Again, quoting the Apostle James, “If anyone who does not offend in word, he is a perfect man” (James 3:2). I’m almost finished. In our last part, “why write?”. For the practice of charity in sharing our souls. Writing, we’ve said, is a proved trainer of the tongue to prevent us from failing in charity through speech. But there’s more to the practice of charity than merely avoiding failures against this virtue. Charity is above all sharing with another person what I have in order to enrich that person whom I love. What is our dearest possession? Our dearest possession is the gifts of the spirit that the Holy Spirit has so generously given to us. If I’m to share these gifts of my soul--let’s be honest--are not my lips making strange sounds? Speaking to your ears? No! It is my soul speaking to your souls! If I’m to share these gifts of my soul with others, I must do several things. I must acquire as much grace, as much of God’s wisdom as I can by reading, by prayer, and by self denial. For my record, I share, as occasion arises with others, of the goodness of the Lord has given to me. It would be a good idea if we started keeping a written record of past experiences, interesting episodes, uplifting sentiments, whether our own or those we receive from others. Remember when Our Lord foretold about the last day? We shall finally be judged on the practice of the virtue of charity,.....

“I was hungry, you gave me to eat! I was thirsty and you gave me to drink” What is the deepest hunger of the human heart? It is for the truth. What is the deepest thirst of the human soul? It is for God’s love. What God in His wisdom and love has shared with us, keep a record of that. Share that wisdom and love with others and make sure you share what Our Lord has given you by writing it down and thus you’ll be practicing that one virtue on which your and my salvation depends. I thank you for the privilege of speaking to you. Thank you.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Father, is there a particular question you ask yourself before performing your examination of conscience before you write in your journal to determine what to write down?

A: Yes. There are three questions that are basic to Christian spirituality.

The first question is, what, during the past day, should I thank God for to inspire my gratitude. You know that there are two kinds of blessings. There are pleasant blessings and there are painful blessings. So first, what during the day should I thank God for? Then express your gratitude and keep a record.

The second question. What have I done that I shouldn’t have done or not done what I should have. Where have I failed? Don’t go to sleep until you come up with at least one thing you’ve done wrong during the day. So second, what have I done wrong?

Thirdly, plan the next day. An unplanned life is a disordered life. Plan the next day. What am I to do? How much time do I wish to spend? How will I do what I believe God wants me to do in the next 24 hours? By the way, as I’m sure you all know by studying Latin, the Latin verb for “to do” is *agere*. The gerundive for that verb to do is *agenda*, things that should be done! That’s part three of every good examination of conscience. Does that help?

Q: You said to write down your daily faults and graces and you also suggested that we write down particular experiences that have happened to us? A: That’s different. Q: Do you keep them in a different spot or do you write them with your three questions you just answered?

A: You see, I have various places in which I write things. Now, whenever I travel I always take with me what I call my examen book. In which I keep a record of my daily conduct. That is one thing. Over the years I have kept notebooks in which I would write. For years I kept a daily diary or log. Moreover, for years I have kept a record of episodes, events, that I wanted to use in conversation or communication with people. So there are different places of writing which I have kept over the years, among which, specifically, is the examen book. Now I use my own shorthand, and I’ve been using for years what we call the *Ordo*, that is, the list of every day of the Ecclesiastical year. [It contains] what Mass to be said, saint to be commemorated, what reading needs to be done. But there’s always plenty of space around each day which I fill with my shorthand. I carry this *Ordo* with me wherever I go. Last night before I retired, I wrote out my record for yesterday, and before I’ll retire tonight, I’ll fill that out for my record today. So, [you need] different books, different notebooks, booklets that you keep a record in. All I can tell you is, it will change your lives, if with God’s grace you decide to write.

Q: What, if any, are the dangers in writing?

A: I suppose one danger would be that I’d agree that people might want to read what you write. Then you have to work out your own hieroglyphs, your own ways of expressing things. You say certain things that nobody except the Lord knows what it means. So of course you don’t pass this around, you don’t show people these things. There are certain things that you just never write down. As a priest, one of the great gifts of the priesthood is the capacity to forget! Am I clear? And one sure way to forget is not to write. But if something should be remembered and is worth remembering, but what should not be read by others, (unless until later on some occasion we will want to use it), then it should be kept somewhere, privately, even under lock and key. So I’ve never really worried about what I had written being dangerous because this is why you have to pray, “Lord, what should I write?”. But, the treasure, the precious gift of writing, is beyond anything that these sinful lips of mine can tell you. Writing is a great grace from God.

Q: There are many illiterate people in the world. What would you advise them?

A: All illiterate people should be trained to write! That is a precious gift from God and before the Bible was written, even Genesis for centuries for having God's revelation. However He chose Chaldaea and Asia Minor to enlighten human beings in Asia Minor how to write alphabetically. Most of the people in China to this day do not write alphabetically. As only in the alphabetical language in which, the divine inspiration could have been written down. So teach them to write! Great charity.

Q: Since we do not know what God is planning for us for tomorrow, what do you mean by "we should plan for the following day" since we don't know what God is planning for us?

A: Thanks for the question. That's one of the main reasons for praying. "Lord, what do you want me to do?". He, needless to say, knows the future. He knows what He wants us to do. Give a problem--my, there are no problems in life. No problems in life! Zero! What we call problems are all acts of Divine Providence.

God wants you to do something. You have a problem. Pray. Ask for light. Then, you find out what God wants. We still have a problem: we don't want to do it! So we pray again, "Lord, now that I know what You want me to do, I'm scared, give me the grace to do it." I would never have left my widowed mother alone, in very bad health, and entered the Society of Jesus, unless I had prayed that You help me to. What does God want me to do? I was accepted for medical school. So pray, and pardon me, since we don't know what God is planning for us, mamma mia!, pray! Ask for light!

How do you know when you have got the light from God? How do you know? The first condition is you must be totally, completely open to God's will. Ready. Write: "Lord, I don't know what You want, but I mean it, I want to do Your will." That's the precondition. Then ask for light. The thoughts you get about what you think now is God's light telling you what to do. If that brings you peace of mind, that is God speaking to you. We are never, never, never thinking alone. Never, never. God is always thinking with us, for us, and enlightening us what He wants us to do. Being open to His will brings us peace--that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. Maybe we'll be scared. So what? If I'm at peace, I'd do it. Now the beauty is, after a while you become so used to getting instructions from the Lord, you just assume. You are ready and willing, holding nothing back, "Whatever you will, Lord." Then pray, and if the thoughts should come to your mind giving you peace, they are from God. If they disturb you, forget it.

Q: How can you be at peace if you are afraid?

A: Well, there are two kinds of peace. First of all, there is peace of mind, and there is peace of heart. Peace of mind is knowing the truth. Peace of heart is doing God's will. Now, what we must do is constantly distinguish between our feelings and our mind and our will. Can we be afraid once we know what God wants? Can we be afraid? But, if my mind tells me something is God's will and I'm afraid, do I not do it because I'm afraid? In other words, to not allow our fears to guide our minds, we must ask ourselves, why, why am I afraid? Am I afraid because I will fail? Am I afraid because I will make a fool of myself? I repeat, once my mind enlightened by faith, I must be open, really open, to doing God's will. My mind tells me: "This is God's will." You can pray and ask God to give you strength to overcome your fear. But don't you dare avoid doing it just because you are afraid! And as we say in Rome, oh, mamma mia! No. We have to have courage. And courage comes from conviction. My mind is sure that something is God's will and I do it! I wouldn't be standing here. I wouldn't have done so many things I thought God wanted me to do if I were afraid. I could talk for hours! Thanks for the question!

Q: How do you use what you have written to help other people? How exactly do you share the gifts of God with others?

A: Obviously, the one principal way that I share is by writing. Could I mention a strong recommendation, (unless you already have one here at Thomas Aquinas College)? Do you have a Catholic writers' institute? That is one way. This will make my trip to California worthwhile! Form a writers' guild. I formed one in New York City, we have an office there. I formed one for my own Jesuits, the Jesuits Writers Guild. In other words, put your thoughts on paper for publication. The market is vast. What I have done over the years in organizing writers' guilds is to first find those who are more able and willing to write. they should agree that they're going to write. Then, I would write to publishers, editors of magazines, that I'm organizing a writers' guild. I assure a magazine that [the writers' guild] would be consistent with editorial policy, the length of words, vocabulary on their level, and I ask "Are you interested?". I got

more affirmative replies from editors than I could cope with. In one year, my own Jesuits, all still in studies, published 85 articles in national magazines. Organize a writer's guild. I've organized a publishing house where I live in Detroit. I live in a Jesuit rectory and my office is at what's called "Grotto Assumption Parish." So we've organized "Grotto Press," a publishing house. After the second Vatican Council, 12 major, good publishing houses closed shop. We need Catholic publishers. I would be happy to help Thomas Aquinas College to start a Catholic press. That is very simple. You don't do the printing. Somebody else does the printing. All you need is a market. First law of publishing is market. Second law of publishing is market. Third law of publishing is market. Somebody tells me, "Father, as long you make money for us we'll publish anything you like." The market is vast. Good Catholic books are desperately needed. So, I hope I've answered the question. Publish. I will help you people if you wish, on both levels. A writers' guild and Thomas Aquinas Publishing House!

Q: This is inspiring. In say, three weeks from now, when our memory and enthusiasm are flagging a bit, what do you suggest we do to keep this thought that you've presented alive?

A: First of all, I think it should be part of a policy of this wonderful college to train Catholic writers for the twenty first century. It means of course, not so much training in the art of writing as training in the art of clear thinking.

I would then suggest: 1. Within a month or so that you form a writers guild. I would be very happy to assist you. 2. I would suggest that the Board of Directors give serious thought by the fall of 1998 to plan on having Thomas Aquinas College become a Catholic publisher. 3. I think if you want to, you can develop, with the faith you've got here, one of the most influential publishing, and I mean my words, publishing houses in the United States. I am very happy to help you in any way that I can.

Mr. Blewett: Mr. DeLuca, are you checking the budget to see if we have the budget for a publishing house here?

Fr. Hardon: You don't need a budget! My first book was published in Virginia, about the churches of America. The owner of the publishing house was not even a Catholic, had never married. He told me, "Father, I started publishing with \$20 and a broken typewriter. In ten years, I was millionaire." That's one way to start. A publisher publishes. What he did, he told me, was to contact writers of good Catholic books and he offered these publishing companies his services as an agent. The average earnings on a book by a publisher is 40 to 50 percent of the retail price. If you've got good Catholic books that you want to promote, you publicize and then arrange with the publisher in such a way that you don't start up with unsold books. They could be on consignment. If you sell, for example, a 1000 books with 50 percent royalty and the books sell for say \$15, that's \$7.50 profit per book. you sell those 1000 books and you make \$7500. You don't need money to start a publishing house. You just have to know how to do it. Thanks for the question.

I never like to close without a prayer. In the name of the Father...Hail Mary...Oh, Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. O, my heart! Thank you for the privilege!