

Overheard in the Academy: Pope Francis, the Role of Literature, and a Defense of Reading

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Zeam's "Overheard in the Academy" forum, of which this is the inaugural offering, promises to display the "real world" of the Ivory Tower by providing multiple perspectives on an issue central to higher education. For the six English faculty featured here, there can be few professional issues more significant than the nationwide decline in students who want to study English in college. While a few departments have managed to hold steady or forestall the downwardly trending numbers, it is hard to escape the many think pieces, in trade publications as well as the popular press, on the so-called "Death of the English Major." While the trending away from all the humanities majors is foreboding, perhaps even more frightening is the idea that reading literature might no longer be seen as a vital, edifying, and skill-building activity. The country, if not the world, seems to be asking why the study of literature matters to those who are headed toward nursing or engineering for their careers. From what some might see as an unexpected source, the late Pope Francis, comes a robust and welcome answer. In his "Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation," written in 2024, Francis argues for the value of reading literature as a component of formation, not just for those engaged in priestly formation, but ultimately for all Christians as a source for understanding ourselves, other human beings, and God.

Francis notes the often toxic, disconnected reality of modern life and posits that a "good book" can enrich the soul and help readers connect with others. Specifically, the Pope describes literature's facility to open readers up to different cultures, helping us to understand and connect with those who are different from us. He also says it offers practical improvements, such as a wider vocabulary and a wider exposure to life's situations and variations. Literature, claims Francis, allows us to hear other people's voices and to see through the eyes of others, which enables us not only to understand others' perspectives and experiences, but also to reflect differently on our own.

Perhaps most provocatively, Francis describes reading as an "active pursuit" and says that readers do not merely passively receive the message

of novels and poems, but are themselves “being read” by the texts with which they engage. He compares literature to a telescope that helps us see in ways we have not seen before. He also says that it is a kind of “digestion,” in that we take it in and it becomes part of us. This is music to the ears of any student of literature, as it seems to speak to the contemporary study of literature, evoking such ideas as reader-response theory and postmodern thought.

The six scholars presented in this forum, many of them faculty at Catholic institutions, engage with Francis’s ideas, applying them to different periods and practices, praising the Pope’s understanding and appreciation for the power of literature, and filling in some noteworthy gaps in his argument.

Cynthia A. Leenerts, in “Pope Francis as Literary Theorist: Reader Response, Poststructuralism, and Postcoloniality in *Letter on Formation*,” notices that in his argument about what literature does for the reader, Pope Francis acts as a literary theorist. Leenerts shows how his various claims echo the theories of reader-response, wherein the meaning readers bring to and take away from a text is an important component of interpretation; of the questioning and destabilizing approach of poststructuralism, specifically when Francis claims the reader is “being read” by the text; and of postcoloniality, which has expanded the canon beyond traditional Western texts and asked us to consider the suffering of those oppressed by colonialism.

In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” John C. Hawley helps the reader understand how Pope Francis positions literature as a way to more deeply engage with the world around us. As Hawley argues, cultural forces are trending away from empathy, with prominent voices urging followers to prioritize themselves over others and to see selfishness as a virtue and a sign of strength. Francis, in stark contrast, recommends the power of literature as a way to see the world through the eyes of others or to imagine oneself in unfamiliar situations. Hawley notes that this concept aligns with the Ignatian concept of finding God in all things. Additionally, he points to research from the field of psychology that echoes Francis’s claim that reading literature can build empathy.

In “Teaching Postcolonial Literature at a Jesuit Institution,” Nalini Iyer demonstrates how her institution, Seattle University, promotes its mission to educate the whole person and to produce graduates who can provide just and humane leadership to the world. Iyer highlights Pope Francis’s claim that readers engage in a form of rewriting when they engage with literary texts, bringing all the power of their own imaginations, memories, and experiences to the interpretive act of reading. While Iyer agrees with the Pope’s claim, she seeks to add an element of the argument that, for her, is

missing. Noting that literary texts can be alienating to many readers, she argues that the “politics of knowledge formation” should be woven into his larger claim. Citing postcolonial authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Iyer encourages a decentering of the European canon and using intentional curricular design and pedagogical techniques to foreground inclusion and acknowledge trauma. Iyer argues that without these approaches, critical reading remains an incomplete exercise.

Like Iyer, Brian Yothers highlights Pope Francis’s claim that reading is a sort of rewriting and connects the Pope’s claim to the American Transcendentalist writers of the nineteenth century. In Yothers’s essay, “‘New Interior Spaces’: Empathy, Discernment, and Echoes of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature in Pope Francis’s ‘Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation,’” he begins with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “The American Scholar,” where Emerson compares a careful reader to an inventor. Yothers notes that these two very different thinkers—Francis and Emerson—both saw reading as a creative act. Yothers then moves to the subject of cross-cultural connections, noting that one of Herman Melville’s most recurrent themes was religious difference and that his works of fiction consistently invite readers to see and hear unfamiliar perspectives. Finally, Yothers links the ecological concerns of the Transcendentalists to Francis’s letter, noting how literature engages the reader in ways that are deep and powerful enough to encourage resistance to dominant narratives, such as the idea that human beings stand in dominance over the natural world.

Nidhi Shrivastava, in “Exploring Social Justice, Identity Politics, and Memoir-Writing at a Catholic University through Robin Ha’s *All-American Girl*,” agrees with Pope Francis’s claim that literary texts allow us to “see through the eyes of others” and uses her experience teaching Robin Ha’s graphic memoir *All-American Girl* to students from diverse backgrounds. This experience, as the students engage deeply with Ha’s journey as a young South Korean immigrant unexpectedly forced to assimilate into American culture, confirms Francis’s beliefs about the importance of seeing diverse, unfamiliar perspectives. Shrivastava, however, takes the claim in a new direction, by assigning to the students a task of writing a memoir of their own. When some students took to the task excitedly, this helped to confirm how important it is for us to tell our own stories, and not simply have stories told about us. Unexpectedly, though, some of Shrivastava’s students were reluctant to complete their own memoirs, believing that their stories were not important enough to warrant a memoir. Ultimately, this takes Shrivastava back to Francis’s claims about the importance of literary texts. Reading diverse texts from people of all backgrounds has the potential to help more

readers see not only the perspectives of others, but also to see themselves in the stories they read.

Finally, in “Welcoming the Word: The Challenge of Other Voices in Public Reading Groups,” Maryse Jayasuriya illuminates Francis’s point that reading literature can make us better listeners. Jayasuriya’s essay, like Shrivastava’s, revolves around how Pope Francis’s letter connects to a particular project at her previous university. Jayasuriya formerly taught at the University of Texas at El Paso, which is near the U.S.-Mexico border. There, she led a very successful community reading group, where texts from a variety of disciplines were read and discussed by the participants, which included students and faculty from UTEP, but also retirees, members of the military and their families, and Border Control personnel. These meetings, according to Jayasuriya, offered participants the opportunity to “listen to others” and feel empathy for those who have felt trauma and have been in difficult circumstances, even when the setting and circumstance was far from the readers’ own experiences. For the diverse reading groups, their shared conversations encouraged participants to listen with intention and to resist the self-isolation Francis warns against in his letter.

From these scholars, we can see how Pope Francis’s claims about literature bear out in the real-world experiences of classroom teachers and readers of all types. In 2025, many feel bombarded with bad news and toxic behavior. As Pope Francis notes, our “obsession” with screens will not help us to transcend the superficiality and confusion this toxicity engenders. Reading literature, which is slow, immersive, and even spiritual, does the opposite of distracting us from real life (as those screens do). It lets us feel more deeply, see with newly opened eyes, and believe in a hopeful future.