



# Renovaré BOOK CLUB

## **Living Incarnationally in All Four Spaces**

By James Catford

Have you met the characters in *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*? I feel sure that you have. Leo and Eusebius in chapter one, Lepidus and Penitens in chapter three, Calidus in chapter four, and Serena in chapter five are all based on people we might know. Such pen portraits reflect the literary device of 'spiritual autobiography' popular in their day. Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe are examples of the period and the genre was substantially developed a generation later by Jane Austen and then Emily Brontë.

If not in literature, perhaps you have met them on screen. Ned Flanders, the cheery Evangelical who lives next door to Homer in the Simpsons, reminds us of the hapless bunch we find in the first eight chapters of *A Serious Call*. Many of the boxed set series on Netflix, AppleTV, and Amazon Prime include a hypocrite pretending to be virtuous (and who usually meets his or her demise before the end of the series). Shallow people run through *A Serious Call*, as they do in life.

Perhaps the most developed character for William Law is Flavia in chapter seven. Like all of us, Flavia lives in four worlds all at the same time.

There is Flavia in 'public space' where she manages with great care her estimated fifteen hundred and sixty public appearances on Sundays. Two hundred different outfits boost her public image at all the plays, operas, assemblies, balls, and other diversions she attends. And tossing the odd crown or half-crown to someone she likes is done with precision timing for maximum effect. Do you recognise her?

Or how about Flavia in 'social space' where she is "the wonder of all her friends" and "always so genteel and so constant in all places of pleasure and expense?" She says all the right things and, to those who think they know her, "she talks warmly against heretics and schismatics," and "thinks they are atheists who play cards on a Sunday".

Of course, it is unlikely that we will meet Flavia in the 'intimate space' of her marriage to Lucius, but she can be spotted in much contemporary fiction and many classic movies. "If you would know how cross Lucius is to his wife, what ill-natured things he says to her when nobody hears him; if you would know how they hate each other in their hearts though they appear so kind in public—you must visit Flavia on a Sunday" at home. Sound familiar?

Finally, there is 'private space,' the place where we would like to ask Flavia 'who are you when no one is watching?' What governs your heart? When, in a lecture, Dallas Willard quoted a quaint old Puritan saying that "eventually your petticoat with show," was he



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thinking of Flavia in her private space? Eventually who we really are underneath will come out. It almost always does.

These four spaces of who we are in public, social, intimate and private settings have been the stuff of storytelling for centuries. From the spiritual biographies of the eighteenth century to the hit dramas of the twenty-first century, it's as if they come directly from the William Law playbook. Nobody likes a hypocrite.

It would be unfair to dismiss *A Serious Call* as merely a superficial and prudish Victorian polemic. Had Law wanted to champion strict asceticism he would have gone about it in a different way. He doesn't call on his characters to leave the world and join the church. That's his point. Taking holy orders is no more an indicator of a devout and holy life than giving a little to charity or putting on a smiley face. In the case of Leo and Eusebius in chapter one, "If you look into their everyday life you will not find the least difference."

Dallas Willard was keen on the motif of Vision, Intention and Means, which he sometimes abbreviated to VIM. He used it often and it is hard to believe that he didn't lift the idea straight from the pages of *A Serious Call*. Here's how it goes.

To live a deep and meaningful life with God requires a Vision of what our life could be in Christ. It depends on an Intention to actually do something about it. And it needs the Means to become the kind of people who could achieve real progress in a devout and holy life.

Vision: A flaming life with God that William Law called "the best and happiest thing in the world".

Intention: To "dedicate every condition of life to God's service" rather than the comfortable practice of "a formal compliance with those modes of worship that are in fashion where I live."

Means: The "ordinary means of grace" that we find in books like *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, or *The Good and Beautiful* series of books by James Bryan Smith. There is no one definitive list of spiritual disciplines, and some have stood the test of time better than others. But for Dallas, in *The Divine Conspiracy*, he selects four of the most important of these practices: silence and solitude, worship and study. Can anyone grow in grace without them?

Taken together, a captivating vision of life in God's kingdom, the right orientation of our heart (intention), and the use of the "ordinary means of grace" that are available to us will usually pull us straight in this life. Sure, there are times when a business or leadership coach can help us, or wise counselling will lead to a breakthrough in our life with God.



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These are to be welcomed when they are available, but the basic game plan for a devout and holy life is VIM. Vision, Intention, Means.

With this essential structure to life, the priest will be fully alive and "will converse as if he had been brought up by an apostle," while for the tradesperson it "will make him a saint in his shop." This is the vision that William Law offers us, a life that refuses to separate who we are on Sunday from what we do on Monday. A life that is completely integrated and truly incarnational.