

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

The
INSTITUTES
of the Coenobia

John Cassian

Resurrection Publishing



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THE INSTITUTES OF THE COENOBIA

JOHN CASSIAN

One Patristic (West) voice on putting sin to death

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The Institutes of the Coenobia — Discussion Guide
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This voice among four

How does the believer put sin to death? Christians have answered that hard question with shared seriousness and with real differences in emphasis. This guide begins with John Cassian because it is made to help a group read *The Institutes of the Coenobia* carefully, together, and all the way through.

John Cassian · one Patristic (West) voice on that question.

Cassian brings the discipline of the Egyptian desert into a Gallic monastery he is founding, and he shapes his answer as a rule for common life. The first four books order the outer man: the habit a monk wears, the hours of prayer he keeps, and the training in obedience that unmakes his own will before he is set against the passions. The remaining eight books name the passions themselves — gluttony, fornication, covetousness, anger, dejection, listlessness, vainglory, and pride — as one connected ladder, each fault feeding the one above it, until pride, the last and worst, is reached.

Cassian is one of four voices gathered around this question. Owen's treatise, Isaac's *Mystic Treatises*, Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat*, and Cassian's *Institutes* belong in conversation: they share a concern for repentance, watchfulness, and life in Christ, yet they do not flatten their traditions into one answer. Let their kinship be a help, and their honest difference an occasion for patient attention.

This guide is for Cassian's *Institutes*. For a reading group, the Cassian hardcover is available in a facilitator pack of 8, so each reader may have the work in hand.

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Facilitator norms

This is a conversation that may touch sensitive ground, but it need not become a place where anyone is pressed to disclose what they have not chosen to share. Invite candor; do not require it. A participant may speak from the text, from prayer, or from a question still taking shape. Silence is not failure, and no one is asked to prove seriousness by telling more than is wise.

Read the author with care before judging him quickly. Let people finish a thought. Ask what a passage says before asking how it applies. Where the group disagrees, name the disagreement plainly and return to the words on the page. The aim is neither to win an argument nor to make a display of self-knowledge, but to hear a Christian teacher faithfully and to seek the Lord together.

Keep Christ at the center. The counsel in these pages is not a set of religious techniques by which we repair ourselves. Faith looks to Christ, depends upon his Spirit, and receives the ordinary means of grace with humility. Pray at the beginning and end; make room for repentance and hope; leave one another with encouragement that is truthful, particular, and free of pressure.

Cassian — argument map

Cassian builds a monastery in words before he sends a monk into battle. Read the movements in that order.

1. The habit and the outer man (Book I). Before any teaching on the passions, Cassian describes the clothes a monk wears — cincture, cowl, tunic, staff — and reads each as a chosen sign of the inward renunciation it is meant to serve. The outer man is ordered first, not because it changes the heart by itself, but because it holds the heart to what it has professed.

2. The offices of prayer (Books II–III). Cassian sets out Egypt’s fixed round of psalmody, day and night, and insists on the same measure for every monk regardless of private zeal. Moderation, not intensity, is the mark of a healthy rule: excess is as much a danger as neglect.

3. The rule of renunciation (Book IV). Long probation, plain obedience, and the deliberate cutting off of self-will prepare a monk for what follows. Cassian’s stories of testing — an elder’s strange commands obeyed without question — are not cruelty; they aim at a will no longer defended against correction.

4. The eight faults named (Books V–XII). Gluttony, fornication, covetousness, anger, dejection, listlessness, vainglory, and pride are treated as a connected sequence. Victory over one clears ground for the next; defeat by an early fault leaves a monk exposed to all that follow.

5. The climax in pride (Book XII). The last fault is the most dangerous because it can rise from the very defeat of the other seven — pride at one’s own progress, crediting the will rather than grace. Cassian treats this as the fall of the adversary himself, and as the point where humility alone, not further effort, must hold.

6. A different shape of repentance. Where Owen concentrates his whole argument on one continuous act — believers mortifying indwelling sin by the Spirit’s power, fixed on Christ crucified — Cassian forms repentance through the slower architecture of common life: a rule

kept in company, a will unmade by obedience, and a graduated struggle against named passions in their proper order. Both look to grace; they build toward it by different roads.

Session 1

Reading: Preface and Book I

Where we are: Cassian tells Bishop Castor he will hand on Egypt's practice plainly, then describes the monk's habit garment by garment as a set of chosen signs.

Understand: Why does Cassian read the cincture, the cowl, and the small sleeves as more than clothing? What is each item meant to hold the wearer to?

Discern: Cassian promises plain fact over marvels, and correction of Gaul's practice by Egypt's standard rather than flattery of what already exists. What does that promise ask of a reader who wants a shortcut instead of a discipline?

Trust: If an outward form does not by itself change a heart, why does Cassian still think it is worth choosing and keeping?

Tip: Bring an object or habit from your own life that functions the way Cassian describes the cowl — not magic, but a daily reminder of what has been professed.

Session 2

Reading: Books II–III

Where we are: Cassian sets out the fixed number of psalms for night and day prayer, defending measure against both laxity and unrestrained zeal.

Understand: Why does Cassian insist on the same number of psalms for every monk, rather than letting each set his own measure according to his devotion?

Discern: What is the difference between a monk who prays less because he is careless and one who wants to pray more because he feels particularly earnest? Why does Cassian treat both as departures from the rule?

Trust: How does a fixed round of prayer serve someone on a day when he does not feel like praying at all?

Tip: Ask the group to name a “rule” of prayer or worship they already keep by habit rather than feeling, and what it protects them from on hard days.

Session 3

Reading: Book IV

Where we are: Cassian describes the long probation, plain obedience, and marks of humility that train a renunciant before he is set against the passions.

Understand: What does Cassian mean by “cutting off the will”? Why does he treat this as the necessary foundation for everything that follows in the *Institutes*?

Discern: Cassian tells stories of elders who command strange or seemingly pointless tasks and monks who obey without protest. What is being tested in these stories, and what would make the same kind of command merely cruel rather than formative?

Trust: Where is a person’s own will most likely to resist correction disguised as reasonable objection? How does honest obedience differ from mere compliance?

Tip: Distinguish Cassian’s monastic obedience to a superior from a general principle for every relationship; let the group name what does and does not transfer to ordinary life.

Session 4

Reading: Book V

Where we are: Cassian opens the eight faults with gluttony, the first and most basic battle, because the belly's discipline clears ground for every struggle that follows.

Understand: Why does Cassian place gluttony first among the eight faults rather than treating it as a minor bodily matter? What does he mean by tracing the fall itself to food?

Discern: Cassian refuses one fasting rule for every monk, insisting instead on discretion suited to each person's strength and circumstance. How does he distinguish that discretion from indulgence on one side and from vainglorious extremity on the other?

Trust: If gluttony is mastered but the deeper passions are not yet touched, what has actually been gained? Why does Cassian still call this a necessary first victory rather than the whole of the fight?

Tip: Give this session real time. Cassian's logic for the whole ladder depends on the group grasping why the fight begins here and not with a more dramatic sin.

Session 5

Reading: Books VI–VII

Where we are: Cassian turns from the body's hunger to fornication, and then to covetousness, a fault he calls unnatural because it belongs to the will rather than the flesh.

Understand: Why does Cassian say the struggle against fornication requires more than bodily restraint — that it reaches the mind's continence and cannot be won by fasting alone?

Discern: Covetousness, Cassian argues, is chosen rather than inherited from nature, which makes it in one sense easier to renounce and in another more culpable. What does his story of the monk who secretly kept money reveal about a vow that is kept outwardly but not inwardly?

Trust: Where does disclosure to another believer — bringing a hidden thought or a hidden possession into the light — change the shape of a temptation that had been faced alone?

Tip: Handle Book VI's subject plainly and without embarrassment; Cassian himself writes with directness rather than delicacy, and the group's honesty should match his.

Session 6

Reading: Books VIII–IX

Where we are: Cassian allows no anger at all, even anger that feels righteous, and then names dejection as the fault that follows when the heart is denied its wants or its outlet.

Understand: Why does Cassian refuse to permit anger even against manifest wrongdoing? What does he think anger does to prayer that no justification for it can undo?

Discern: Cassian distinguishes a godly sorrow that leads to repentance from a useless dejection that darkens the soul and closes it to Scripture and prayer alike. How would a group tell the difference in itself rather than only in theory?

Trust: What does it cost to lay down anger that feels justified, and what is gained in its place?

Tip: Watch for the connection Cassian draws between these two chapters: suppressed or unresolved anger is one common root of the dejection he describes next.

Session 7

Reading: Books X–XI

Where we are: Cassian names the listlessness that attacks at midday and empties the cell of meaning, then vainglory, the fault that turns virtue itself into a stage.

Understand: What does Cassian mean by the demon that strikes about noon, and why does he prescribe steady work and staying put rather than escape or distraction as the remedy?

Discern: Vainglory, Cassian says, can attach itself to clothing, speech, labor, fasting, even to hiding one's own vainglory. Why does he call this fault the hardest to guard against, and what makes it different from the more obvious faults already named?

Trust: How does a person continue in a good work once he notices he has begun doing it partly to be seen?

Tip: Let the group sit with how ordinary “noonday” listlessness feels before moving to solutions; naming it accurately matters more than resolving it quickly.

Session 8

Reading: Book XII

Where we are: Cassian reaches pride, the last and worst fault, capable of rising from the very defeat of the other seven and of ruining a monk who has come this far.

Understand: Why does Cassian treat spiritual pride — crediting one's own will for progress rather than grace — as more dangerous than pride before other people? What does he see this fault doing to everything achieved in Books V–XI?

Discern: If the ladder of the eight faults can itself become an occasion for pride at having climbed it, what keeps the group's own progress through this guide from becoming exactly that occasion?

Trust: Cassian names humility, not further victory, as the only sufficient guard against this last fault. What does it mean to trust grace at the very point where effort has finally begun to show results?

Tip: Give this session the most time. Return to the shape of the whole ladder: each fault cleared the ground for the next, and pride is the point where the climb itself must be surrendered rather than completed.

Also on this question

If another voice would serve the group's next conversation, these editions take up the same question from different places in the tradition.

Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers — John Owen

Protestant

Owen concentrates the whole question into one continuous argument: believers put sin to death by the Spirit's power, faith fixed on Christ crucified, rather than by Cassian's slower architecture of common rule and graduated struggle. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

Mystic Treatises — Isaac of Nineveh

Orthodox

Isaac approaches the struggle through ascetical counsel shaped by mercy, prayer, and the healing of the heart, closer to Cassian's desert roots but weighted toward compunction and tenderness rather than a rule for common life. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

The Spiritual Combat — Lorenzo Scupoli

Catholic

Scupoli offers a practical manual of watchfulness and spiritual warfare, with daily counsels for resisting self-reliance, closer in temper to Cassian's own combat but addressed to a solitary reader rather than a community under a rule. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

Letters from Resurrection Publishing

If this question is yours, Resurrection Publishing sends personal notes from Harvey, our founder — on reading these voices for real groups.

Sign up for the letters: <https://resurrectionpublishing.com/l/g>

Close

Thank you for giving this demanding book the time it asks of you. Keep Cassian near enough to return to: not as a substitute for Scripture, prayer, or the Church's ordinary life, but as a serious companion in the work of learning to hate sin and hope in Christ.

If this question remains with your group, the other voices on it are in the Resurrection Publishing catalog as hardcovers and ebooks, each with its own free discussion guide. They are invitations for another season of reading, not requirements for completing this one.

This edition is for readers who want the work itself, not a summary.