The perennial problem for commentators on—and practitioners of—the interior life of prayer is that it is essentially impossible to test and establish the efficacy and veracity of an individual’s experience of God beyond doubt. How, then, can an institution condone meditative practices that rely on unobservable events, and who can claim with certainty that a religious experience is free from evil and the influence of the devil? These difficulties plagued Anthony in the desert and flared up time and again through the centuries. Advancing new or unusual methods of prayer was especially fraught in the aftermath of the Reformation when competing forms of Christian practice were being formalised into separate and violently opposed groups.

The treatises of the Benedictine priest Augustine Baker (1575–1641) manifest precisely these tensions. Between 1624 and 1641 Baker wrote over a million words about prayer methodologies for English nuns at a newly founded Benedictine abbey called Our Lady of Consolation, at Cambrai, in the Spanish Netherlands. Despite

1 Most of Baker’s surviving works have been edited by Justin McCann, John Clark, and Ben Wekking and are printed or reproduced in the *Analecta Cartusiana* series, general editor James Hogg (Salzburg: University of Salzburg). The following treatises are concerned with what Baker termed “discernment” and finding one’s “call” to a particular form of prayer, which he believed was different for everyone: *Doubts and Calls*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1999); *A Secure Stay in All Temptations*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1998); *Directions for Contemplation A.B.C.*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2001); *Book D*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2000); *Book E*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2002); *Book F*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1999); *Book G*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2000). All quotations reproduce the editorial practices of the editions from which they are taken.
formal investigations into the orthodoxy of his writings during and after his lifetime, these works were read extensively at Cambrai and were later copied for the library of Cambrai’s daughter house, Our Lady of Good Hope in Paris, founded in 1652.² Baker urged a specific form of prayer which he called “internal affective prayer” and claimed it was “the end of all our spiritual and religious exercises [...] which will bring a soul to the state of perfection.”³ He did not hold the formal act of confession in great esteem, preferring the nuns in his charge to practise the prayer methods he propounded and to refrain from confessing any more than they had to. In minimizing the importance of confession—one of the few forums in which nuns could be monitored and guided by male clerics—Baker generated scrutiny and eventually anger from the official Cambrai confessors alongside whom he worked to serve the spiritual needs of the convent’s nuns.

Baker’s writings aimed to guide the Cambrai women to find their “call,” metaphorically and literally the way in which God was calling them to himself. He writes: “Observe your own way, Spirit & Call, & of books take & practise according as you shall find to be proper & answerable to such way, Spirit & Call of yours, & no more nor fur-
ther.”⁴ It is clear from this statement and others in Baker’s writings that reading performed a key role in the nuns’ discovery and practice of meditation. Baker closely monitored what they read and made reading lists stipulating whether they should read part or all of a work, depending on their progress in his prayer regime.⁵

Baker understood these texts and his own works as stepping stones towards spiritual self-sufficiency and an inwardness which

² Founded in 1623 and 1652 respectively. Paris was founded by Cambrai nuns to house the overflow of applicants to Cambrai.


⁴ Augustine Baker, Secretum, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1997), 5.