Jerome's twenty-second Letter is the famous Libellus de virginitate servanda which he addressed to Eustochium in 384 during his sojourn in Rome. The second half of this treatise opens with the affirmation that Jerome's purpose is not praise of virginity but its preservation. Eustochium should accordingly avoid all contact with worldly cares and stay inside her chamber, where Christ alone will occupy her thoughts. It is in this context that Jerome then makes the following statement: oras: loqueris ad sponsum; legis: ille tibi loquitur (25,1).

These words are quoted by Nautin in his recent article on Jerome in Theologische Realenzyklopädie: for him they embody the quintessence of Jerome's spirituality, in which prayer and the study of scripture are pre-eminent. Similarly Antin has adduced this passage of the Libellus de virginitate as encapsulating Jerome's attitude to "écriture sainte et vie spirituelle" in the long article on the subject in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité. Neither Nautin nor Antin appears to be aware that Jerome has borrowed the idea from elsewhere. Almost seventy years ago Gorce discussed the words which Jerome has used here and noted that they are inspired by a striking passage from Cyprian's Ad Donatum: sit tibi vel oratio adsidua vel lectio. nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum (15). Accordingly when Jerome employs the idea in his Letter to Eustochium he is simply following his standard practice of taking over arresting material from other people.

Cyprian's very impressive formulation naturally had an irresistible appeal for Jerome. It is therefore no surprise to find that he reproduces it on several occasions elsewhere. The idea had already occurred in one of Jerome's earliest works. The letter he wrote to Rufinus from Antioch in 374 contains the following portrait of their mutual friend Bonosus, who had withdrawn to an island in order to lead the ascetic life: ille
securus, intrepidus et totus de apostolo armatus nunc deum audit, cum
divina relegit, nunc cum deo loquitur, cum dominum rogat (epist.
3,4,4). The one half of the conceit is also found in a description of the
virgin Asella which belongs to the same year as the Libellus de
virginitate: sponso aut orans loquebatur aut psallens (epist. 24,4,2). The
other half is used in the Letter to Praesidius: leges evangelium, con-
fabulabitur tecum Iesus. This last occurrence of the idea in Jerome has
so far escaped the notice of commentators.

The striking aphorism which Cyprian had created was to enjoy a cer-
tain popularity. It stands conspicuously at the end of the Ad Donatum:
this was perhaps the most highly esteemed of all Cyprian’s works.10
However the treatment which commentaries on the Ad Donatum give
to Cyprian’s influential formulation is wholly inadequate. Failla merely
refers to Jerome’s Letter to Eustochium.11 More recently Molager
ignores Cyprian’s arresting phrase altogether and simply adduces a
handful of texts which state the importance of reading and prayer.12
Neither notes that in formulating this maxim Cyprian would seem to
have followed a cue from his “mentor” Tertullian.13 In Ad uxorem Ter-
tullian speaks of Christian virgins in the following terms: malunt enim
deo nubere. deo speciosae, deo sunt puellae. cum illo vivunt, cum illo
sermocinantur, illum diebus et noctibus tractant, orationes suas velut
dotes domino assignant, ab eodem dignationem velut munera maritalia,
quotingescumque desiderant, consequuntur (1,4 11. 20-24). The words
cum illo sermocinantur14 in conjunction with orationes and reciprocal
intercourse with God would appear to be the source of Cyprian’s
brilliant formulation.

After Jerome it would seem that Ambrose is the next western Father
to have taken over this dictum. Ambrose never mentions Cyprian by
name.15 Koch accordingly devoted an appendix to the question “Kennt
Ambrosius den Cyprian?”16 His answer was in the affirmative. Recently
Molager has claimed to have shown that Ambrose was familiar with the
Ad Donatum itself.17 However the sermon which he adduces to support
his case is in fact by Maximus of Turin.18 Earlier Duval had demon-
strated in two important articles that Ambrose does exploit Cyprian’s
De habitu virginum.19 Duval concludes the first of these articles as
follows: “D’autres pages montrent que ce commerce s’est poursuivi”.
He then corroborates the statement by reference to Cyprian’s
memorable formulation from the Ad Donatum on divine colloquy and
to the following passage of Ambrose’s De officiis: illum (sc. Christum)