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LECTIO DIVINA

Praying with Scripture

Kenneth Gaffa

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RATIONALE:

This module is an overview of the ancient method of prayer referred to as **“*Lectio Divina*”**.

Lectio divina dates back to the early Church Fathers around 300 AD. The four steps were first recorded by a monk, Guigo Cartujo, in 1173. These steps *Lectio* (Reading), *Meditatio* (Meditation), *Oratio* (Prayer) and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation) remain central today although methods differ.

MOTHER CHURCH EXHORTS US AND WARMLY INVITES US TO USE *LECTIO DIVINA*

The sacred Synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life, to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’ ... Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man. For ‘we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.’ (DV 25)

The same DV 25 begins by saying: Therefore, all clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who, as deacons or catechists, are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word, should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study.

Over forty years have passed since Vatican II sounded this invitation and since then many baptized have discovered with joy that they all have been invited to taste the marvels of the Lord, by making the word of God their daily food. The exile of the word of God, distant from the people of God, really seems to have ended. Even within religious life, the Bible has often

become again the foundation, not only of the Community liturgies, but also of personal prayer.

All Christians are invited to listen to, receive, sing, taste, and pray the Word in the daily concrete situations of human history. At the beginning of any form of religious life, any reform or updating, there has always been a return to the sources, to the only Source: the word of God. It is, in fact, the Word that always governs the gushing of holiness in history; it is only the Word that can transform men and women into witnesses of the radical demands of the Gospel. (Enzo Bianchi)

The message of the Rt. Rev. Matthias Ssekamanya, Bishop of Lugazi Catholic Diocese, Chairman of Uganda Episcopal Conference and President of the Bible Society of Uganda, on the occasion of the publication of Sunday Gospel Readings with *Lectio Divina* (Bible Society, 2008):

As we use *lectio divina*, I have the feeling that the words Pope Benedict XVI spoke while opening the International Congress [on] Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church, which took place at the Aurelia Convention Center of Rome, are truly applicable to all of us. *“I would like especially to recall and to recommend the ancient tradition of lectio divina: the assiduous reading of Holy Scripture accompanied by prayer realizes that intimate colloquy where, by reading, we listen to God who speaks and, in prayer, we respond to Him with confident openness of heart (cf. DV 25). This practice, if effectively promoted, will bring to the Church – of this I am convinced – a new spiritual spring. As a firm point of biblical pastoral ministry, Lectio divina should for this reason be further encouraged, through the use, too, of new methods, carefully considered, that are fully up-to-date.”*

DEFINING LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina literally means “Divine reading”. This term of the ancient method of praying with Scripture is commonly translated or referred to as “Sacred reading” (LG 25), “Spiritual reading”, “Devout reading”, “Prayerful reading of Scripture”,

“Praying Scripture”, “Praying with Scripture”, or “A Praying encounter with the Word of God”. The monastic tradition has often referred to *Lectio Divina* as the ‘ladder of prayer,’ the ‘ladder of Paradise.’ The title of this module, ‘Praying with Scripture,’ actually refers to *Lectio Divina*.

Lectio Divina is:

- A wise and prayerful reading of Scripture.
- Praying the Word; a prayerful reading of the Word of God; listening to the Word in prayer (Enzo Bianchi).
- The assiduous reading of Holy Scripture accompanied by prayer (Pope Benedict XVI).
- Letting myself be worked upon by the Word, assiduously ruminating it, at fixed times and in determined ways, memorizing it, getting soaked in it.
- A way of coming into the presence of God through His Word, and letting myself be transformed, moulded, pruned, cleansed, healed, corrected, and liberated by it.

Lectio Divina is exercised only on Scripture; not on any other text:

“Word of silence,

Word of words,

Word made flesh,

You alone are the Word!” (Enzo Bianchi)

Lectio divina is based on the Word of God, loved and sought after as the greatest treasure; source of life and protection, root of copious fruits of sanctification. It is continuity of life between Christ Jesus and the believer.

“When I read certain treatises where many obstacles to perfection are shown, my poor mind grows tired very quickly. I close the learned book that wearies my head and dries up my

heart and I take instead the Holy Scripture. Then everything appears to me in a clear light. A single word opens out infinite horizons to my soul. Perfection seems easy to reach!” (St. Therese: The ‘Little way.’)

“Gather on the mountains of holy Scripture. There are your heart’s delights; there is nothing poisonous there, nothing you should not eat; its pastures are of the richest quality.” (St. Augustine: Scripture)

“Give me time to meditate on the secrets of your Law; do not close the door for one who knocks. O Lord complete your work in me and unveil those pages. Behold: your voice is my joy; your voice is for me far above every sweetness. Do not abandon your gifts; do not neglect this blade of thirsty grass. That I may find grace before you, and that the intimate secrets of your Word may open themselves up when I knock.” (St. Augustine: *Confessions* 11, 2, 3-4)

Lectio divina is a dynamic, life-oriented approach to reading Holy Scriptures, encouraged by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. It provides a framework for a faithful and respectful reading of the Bible that is sincere and authentic.

Lectio divina is a blessing for the entire Church as it opens up the rich truths of Scripture for every Christian. Through it believers are invited to read, understand and deepen their appreciation of the Scriptures and to seek guidance for their lives in the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Our real goal is to meet our Lord as we read his Word and allow him to transform our lives to be more like him through the work of the Holy Spirit.”

The Scriptures are a great path to God.

In essence *lectio divina* is a simple way to meet with the Lord through reflection and prayer based on Holy Scripture. It is not a study method. Background knowledge can be helpful but is not essential.

The conditions for understanding scripture are not so much the acquisition and possession of human biblical sciences, though these are frankly necessary; but are prevalently virtuous habits of faith, prayer, humility, purity and conversion (Enzo Bianchi).

The Scriptures reveal their sense only in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. They remain sealed until he himself opens the seals (Rev. 5:2-5); until the Spirit opens the eyes of the disciples so that they can understand the Scriptures (Luke 24: 25-27, 32; John 16:13).

Lectio divina is guided by the great desire to encounter, to know, to experience and be transformed, transfigured, by the blessedness of ‘staying with Jesus.’

“Used in groups a structure is necessary but for individuals the steps need not be followed rigidly. Our aim is meeting God, not just completing the steps themselves. So when the Lord impresses something on us we need to stop and wait. We can always come back to the steps another time. We don’t want to lose what God is saying to us.” (Bible Society of Uganda, *Sunday Gospel Readings with Lectio Divina*, Kampala: The Bible Society 2008, 9 – 10.)

CHALLENGES OF PRAYING THE WORD OF GOD TODAY

Among the many innovations of Vatican II, the most transforming was giving back the Word to the people of God. The Word was put back at the centre of the life of the Church. The Word now continues to reactivate the process of God’s judgment on history, on life and on the Church herself in her quality of pilgrim, of Communion of Saints and sinners in their journey towards the Kingdom (Matt. 5: 17-18).

The Word has been re-discovered as a living reality; dynamic, efficacious, capable of nourishing faith, inspiring life, and judging the way of life of Christians in history and in their companionship with humanity. Besides, it is assiduously

preached in Christian gatherings and read, meditated, prayed by individual believers and in many Christian Communities.

However, there are a number of challenges of praying the Word today:

I – Immoderate use of Commentaries and other Scriptural tools:

Today, there is a copious production of books, commentaries on lectionaries, and ICT material (computer software, internet sites, blogs), meant to help preachers and the faithful comprehend the Word. Unfortunately, there is an exaggerated and immoderate use of these tools, leading many away from a direct and personal contact with the Word.

These scriptural tools tend to promote a passive relationship with the Scriptures. The preacher (listener) is denied the fruitful effort of a personal encounter with the Word. Materials like ready-made homilies or *lectiones divinae* obtain a paradoxical outcome: That of eliminating a direct contact with the Bible, thus dispensing the individual from a personal preparation; from the certainly tedious but necessary penetration of the Word, and especially from praying the text.

How can material hurriedly gathered from a scholarly exegete or theologian, become a life-giving word and nourishment for diverse Christians and for diverse situations of local Churches, on lips of a preacher who has hardly digested what he is announcing?

Some preachers collect homilies from commentaries on the lectionary, or from internet sites, without even reading the Word of God on which the homilies are based! In the homily they will be talking of texts they have not meditated, not penetrated, not prayed. It is not surprising that many people lament today that the Word of God shared in homilies no longer touches them.

The preacher ought to remember that he is: ‘Minister of the Word’ (Luke 1:2); ‘Servant and Witness of the vision’ (Acts 26:16); ‘Servant and Steward entrusted with the mysteries of God’ (1 Cor. 4:1); and especially ‘Servant of the Word’ (Acts 6:1-4). This implies that the preacher should never read the Word hurriedly; or, even worse, merely hear it through the preaching found in a book of homilies or on an internet site; and then impart it to others.

“For it must not happen that anyone becomes ‘an empty preacher’ of the Word of God to others, not being a hearer of the Word in his own heart” (DV 25).

The preacher ought to first read the Word, meditate it at length, and pray it so that it dominates him, turning him into a slave of the Word. He should be a servant of the Word: It is only then that he can become its pure echo, free to proclaim it frankly and without fear. He will then be able to share the Word, trying not to deform it and trying to mediate between the text and the listeners; relating it to the global biblical context and thus commenting Scripture with Scripture.

He will share his faith experience, asking his listeners to desist from a passive attitude towards the text; and inviting them to decipher from it the Word, actualize and incarnate it in their daily lives.

“Why don’t you dedicate free time to the reading of Scripture? Will you not spend time with Christ? Will you not visit him, not listen to him? ... We listen to Christ by reading Scripture!” (Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* I, 20, 88 [PL 16, 50A])

II – Selective and Narrow use of Scripture:

Sometimes Scripture is read in group study or sharing in search of solutions to social problems, using discriminatory and biased criteria. The common questions or problems for which Scripture is selectively applied are Peace, Social justice, Violence

or Non-violence, Marriage, Freedom, Human rights, Rights of Women.

Often Scripture is used as a mere research / search tool; the choice of texts is biased by topical issues at hand and the type of answer desired. The dimensions of listening to the Word in its totality and the effort of personal penetration are lacking.

‘You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.’ (John 5:39-40)

John Chrysostom:

“The Luke warmth in which we have fallen depends on not reading Scripture in its wholeness; choosing instead what seems to be clearer and more useful without taking into consideration the rest.” (Sermon I in illud: “*Salutate Priscillam et Aquilam*” [Rom. 16:3] [PG 51, 187])

The ‘nibbling’ (selective and discriminating) style of reading leads to a biased listening to the Word and an erroneous interpretation of Scripture in the ‘light’ of ideologies and world problems. It is no longer the Word of God that is throwing light on the signs of the times clearly immersed in the conscience of the believers, but it is the ideology orienting in certain directions the Gospel and calling ‘signs of the times’ every historical event that pretends to give topicality and content to the Word.

In this case, prayer is absent. Often prayer disappears and is replaced by the ‘analysis of the situation.’ The Word of God ceases to be ‘a lamp for my feet, a light on my path’ (Psalms 119: 105); instead we become blind disciples of modern sociological and psychological ideologies.

Our reading, then, tends to remain intellectual and sociological, incapable of having that efficacy that produces the conversion and growth of the spiritual stature in Christ.

III – Anthropological and Egocentric Methods of Meditation:

There is a type of reading the Word that is founded on what is termed as ‘meditation.’ This type of reading is a kind of deformation of the Ignatian (Loyolian) intuition; it is characterized by an excessive intellectualism, and especially psychologism. Its main objective is making one who practices it ‘feel good’, have the ‘hygiene of the deeper self’, experience ‘primitive stability.’

As a method it is rigorous, complex, systematic, associated with a strong voluntaristic effort . It turns the believer, not into a contemplative, but into one who ‘exercises’ (note Ignatian spiritual exercises). It becomes a mental exercise, aiming at thoughts capable of rousing sensory reflections and effects: the ‘outflow of sentiments’, the ‘devotions’, measured on the intensity of their warmth (in the heart).

This is referred to as ‘*devotio moderna*’ and is common in religious houses. Its grave defect is being anthropocentric and egocentric. Egocentric spirituality is on the increase today. It is a search for mere interiority and the dominion of the movement of the heart; a kind of tool for the so-called ‘interior hygiene’ or the ‘emptying of self’, with sensory techniques.

The above methods / techniques of ‘modern’ meditation have nothing to do with authentic meditation. Truly fruitful meditation is always Theocentric or Christocentric and never centres on the self.

Authentic Christian meditation solely aims at communion with God. This communion is achieved by liberating the senses; descending in the depth of one’s heart searching for unity; the fountain of being and acting in relation to the other who gives us light. A Christian cannot bend on himself, forgetting to fix his eyes on God!

The Rule of St. Benedict, in line with the great monastic tradition of *lectio divina*, reminds us that to meditate is to read and re-read, to masticate and murmur, to ruminare and recite, to fix in the mind and conserve in the heart the Word; in order to arrive, not at disputation (scholasticism) nor at sensations (*devotio moderna*), but at prayer (*oratio*), at contemplation and hence action (*opus Dei*). (RB 4.55-56; 48; 49.4)

IV – Approaching the Scriptures routinely:

The last challenge we shall look at is the inattention to the Word; the routine and superficial approach to the Scriptures.

We let the words flow over us, like water off a duck's back. We hear the Scriptures again and again but they make little impression on us. For example, we are familiar with Jesus' words about forgiveness, yet we never allow them to address particular conflicts. This attitude of resistance to any message that might convey a grace of conversion leads us to rationalize our unchristian behaviour and render God's Word impotent. (Heb. 4: 12-13; John 15: 2-3)

The Word will never be active in our memory if it is ignored through inattention. The same outcome follows when we manifest such a defensive attitude that nothing can penetrate the hardened husk of a heart unwilling to be corrected. What does not enter will never be retained; what is not retained can never be recalled.

Not remembering is often a means of protecting ourselves from the call to return to God. Prayer builds upon some antecedent willingness to reform our lives. To remain receptive to an invitation to unite ourselves with God in a moment of prayer is practically inseparable from allowing our daily conduct to be judged by God's Word. Refusal to be touched results in a certain hardness of heart that is the opposite of compunction. Just as compunction helps us to be mindful of all that God has said and leads to prayer, so hardheartedness issues in

forgetfulness and progressively isolates us from God, from amendment of life, and ultimately from the truth about ourselves.

Memory is the bridge between hearing the Word and putting it into practice. Israel is constantly exhorted to ‘remember and not to forget’; the *shema* – Deut. 6: 6-9; 4: 9-10; 9: 7; 30: 11-14. Memory is more than the ability to recall. It means living in the presence of what is ‘remembered’; abiding / remaining in the Word (John 8: 31; 15: 7). It means living in the presence of God: This alters my behaviour and also effects a qualitative change in my experience. It is a dynamic element in on-going conversion.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

It is important to note that where there is no constant reference to the Bible, where there is no serious and constant *lectio divina*, various ills sprout: sentimental piety; the dryness of theological thought reduced to intellectual speculation; the shifting of interest and attention to derivatives and secondary aspects of the Christian message; the entrenchment of individualism and the loss of the sense of community; the craving for innovation at all costs; the loss of the vital sap of Tradition and the idolatry of the supposed to be ‘signs of the times’.

Lectio divina helps us to return to the Source, the Word. It is the Word listened to, received, conserved and meditated that can create prophets capable of choices that liberate; that can create men and women who, faithful to the earth and to humanity, can tell us about God.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

THE BASIC APPROACH:

Scripture is God's message to humanity, to every individual. It is an appeal to the person so that he may know God personally, meet Christ and live no longer for himself but for the Lord. Since Scripture offers us the Word of God, it can only be penetrated and understood through the intervention of the Holy Spirit; and has to be read and approached with faith as Word that comes from God and leads to God.

Despite the progress in biblical scholarship and the spread of its findings in Christian Communities, we still have an amazing 'sterility' of the Word in our lives. This is because we approach the Word in a way that is more intellectual than heart-based, more speculative than cognitive, more meditative than prayerful.

When we come before the Scriptures we should not look for the manifestation of an idea, not a growth in knowledge, but rather a commitment between us and God who speaks to us as we listen; we ought to come before the Scriptures with the intention of making a covenant with God.

The Word of God is not a book, not a collection of writings but a seed (Matt. 13:19), something that carries life in itself (Deut. 32:47) and develops this life until it forms a huge tree of the Kingdom. It germinates in history as well as in the personal life of every person; it grows filling reality with a new presence; it sanctifies because it nourishes and gives food to those who receive it; and it gives light (Psalm 119:105) because it unveils the secret of realities, conferring wisdom even to the simple (Psalm 119:130) and leading all things to their final fulfillment

(cf. John 17:17; Acts 19:20; Hebr. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23; Luke 8:11; Mark 4:13-20,26-32).

The Word was universal, but it concentrated itself in the revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; in the Jewish revelation. It was celestial, but it settled in a city, Jerusalem, finding a home among humans (cf. Sir. 24:1-12). It came near us, on our lips and in our heart, so that we may put it in practice (Deut. 30:14). It was eternal, but it became temporal in Jesus, a man like us: ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14). ‘The Word broke its silence, came out of hiding, and came unto us’ (Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Magnesios* VIII, 2 [PG 5, 669]). Thus the Word has a name, it became a person, the mirror of God, the image of the invisible God (Wis. 7:26; Col. 1:15).

‘There is nothing in the Scriptures that does not echo Christ’ (Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. CXXXIX*, 3 [PL 37, 1804]).

St. Jerome comments: ‘We eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ in the Eucharist, but also in the Scriptures;’ and adds, ‘I maintain that the Gospel is body of Christ’ (Jerome, *Breviarium in Ps. CXLVII* [PL 26, 133-4B]). ‘And that is why we must approach the Scriptures the way we approach the body of Christ!’ (Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Philadelphenses* V, I [PG 5, 700C]).

Lectio divina consists in seeking Christ. St. Augustine writes, ‘it is Him that I look for in the books’ (Augustine, *Confessiones* XI, 2, 3-4 [PL 32, 810-811]). Origen affirms that *Lectio divina* is mysteriously consuming the Word broken (Origen, *Commentariorum in Matthaeum* XIV, 6 [PG 13, 1198]); Gregory of Nazianz points out that *Lectio divina* is consuming the Paschal Lamb (Gregory of Nazianz, *Oratio XLV*, 16 [PG 36, 644ff]).

Lectio divina is welcoming the fulfillment of the Word in Christ; the ‘today’ of the Word (Luke 4:21). When we listen to

the Word, we listen to God; when we pray (the Word), we talk to Him.

In outlining the steps of *Lectio divina* in the next section, we shall apply the invitation of Guigo II. He applied the words of Jesus on prayer to the method of *Lectio divina* that he schematized in the form of a ladder (the ladder of monks).

In Matt. 7:7 Jesus gave this invitation: ‘Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.’ Guigo paraphrased this verse as follows: ‘Search by reading, you will find by meditating; knock in prayer, and you will enter in contemplation.’

It is opportune to add and paraphrase even the first invitation of Jesus: ‘Ask and it will be given to you.’ In this case paraphrased as ‘ask the Spirit, and you will receive the capacity to read; ask the Spirit and you will receive light.’

THE STEPS OF LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio divina has been handed down to us by the monastic tradition as a four-step ladder to the blessedness of coming into God’s presence (Guigo). It is a reading (*lectio*) that seeks the ineffable sweetness of a blessed life; a meditation / reflecting (*meditatio*) that perceives it; a prayer / responding (*oratio*) that asks for it; and a contemplation / resting (*contemplatio*) that enjoys it.

It is necessary to outline a ‘method’ of *lectio divina* that allows us to have a fruitful approach to Scripture. When we refer to ‘method of prayer’ we are not talking of something rigidly fixed and non ductile. A rigid approach would mortify the spirit and would not leave room for the efficacious action of grace. Grace operates in different ways in different persons. It is important to remember that the Master of *lectio divina* is the Holy Spirit.

We therefore cannot have an obligatory itinerary to be followed just as it is described.

I – Fix Time:

The first thing necessary for the practice of *lectio divina* is allotment of time. Just like for other types of prayer, *lectio divina* cannot be left to some scraps of free time left-over from other activities. Prayer should be the framework of the day of a Christian.

Being faithful to a fixed time of prayer is not only a question of ascetics (a very necessary element in our times); but it is especially a question of the seriousness and authenticity with which we put ourselves before God, we prepare to meet him, to celebrate an alliance with the Lord of our lives, to nourish our lives with the Word of God. ‘Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

A human being by nature cannot do many things at the same time but is obliged to choose. Priorities reveal what is precious to each one of us.

Spiritual fathers and masters have always insisted on the necessity of fixing a precise time of the day for *lectio divina*, choosing the most favourable time and seriously adhering to it.

It is by giving primacy to prayer, even in terms of time, that Christ’s lordship over our lives is actualized. A Christian who claims to have no time for God is confessing that time has become his idol. Our time is the most precious thing that we have because it is our very life: therefore accepting to offer it to God is a fundamental gesture of our struggle against idolatry. It is a daily witness that we want to serve the Lord only, that we recognize him as the one who has given us life, and we punctually and faithfully give it back to him.

Finding and faithfully keeping a set time for *lectio divina* is, therefore, an insuppressible point of departure for an authentic practice of praying with Scripture.

II – Choose a Place:

Find a place of solitude and silence, where you can pray the Father in secret until you contemplate Him. Remember that your room is an ideal place for savouring the presence of God. ‘But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you’ (Matt. 6:6).

This is the place of the struggle of the heart, the desert where Jesus prayed and was tested (cf. Mark 1:12, 35; Matt. 4:1-11); the place where God draws you to himself so that he may talk to your heart and offer you abundant gifts, transforming the agonizing abyss of your heart into valleys and doors of hope (cf. Hos. 2:16-17).

Therefore, let your room be your ‘desert’, a sanctuary where God humiliates you with his Word – thus educating, consoling and nourishing you.

You will certainly experience the presence of the adversary who will tempt you to run away from the seemingly heavy solitude; he will distract you with your usual practices and preoccupations; and try to seduce you with a myriad of worldly thoughts. Do not give in to the evil one; the Lord is not far from you, actually he is with you in your struggle. You can be helped by an icon, a lit candle, a cross, a kneeler. These instruments will remind you that you are not studying the Bible or just reading words, but you are before God, ready to listen, in conversation with Him.

Resist the temptation to abandon the appointment of *lectio divina*. You have to get used to moments of solitude, of silence,

of detachment from things and from your brothers and sisters, if you are to encounter God in personal prayer.

III – Wrap yourself in Silence:

Ensure that the place and time of *lectio divina* allow you to have exterior silence, a prerequisite for interior silence.

There is an invitation in a low voice, ‘The master is here and he wants to see you’ (John 11:28). You have to silence other voices in order to hear his Voice; you have to lower the tone of words in order to listen to the Word.

There are times of the day more favourable for silence, depending on your activities and work: In the heart of the night, early in the morning, in the evening, after lunch (siesta time)... Determine the time convenient to you once and for all, and remain faithful to it.

It is not serious to decide to go to meet the Lord only when you have some empty space on your timetable, as if the Lord were a stopgap. Never say ‘I have no time’, because thus you would be practicing idolatry: The time of the day is at your service, you are not a slave of time!

Let the time of *lectio divina* give a pattern to your life. You know that it is necessary to pray always without getting tired (cf. Luke 18:1-8; 1 Thess. 5:17), but you also know that you need special time and space of silence to do this. Then, the *memoria Dei* will be sustained in the whole of your day.

Do you love the Lord? Or do you desire to love him? Then consecrate to him prime time, just as you would do to persons you love deeply. Time for *lectio divina* has to be sufficiently long, not some scraps of time. It should be for at least one hour.

In the course of the day we listen to many words, we read many words! I have to ensure that words do not suffocate the Word in the course of my day. This calls for a lot of vigilance: What is dominant in me, what is my food, the Word or words?

Constant, regular and punctual *lectio divina* fills my heart, my life with the nourishment of the Word; the Word takes flesh in me!

I have to verify the relationship between Word and words in my life. The quantity and quality of words can suffocate the voice of God, hampering its growth to fruition (cf. Mark 4:13-20).

What sense does it make reading everything indiscriminately, nourishing our lives with worldly arguments, reading material that leaves our hearts with profound trails of impurity; and then pretend to live the Word that comes from the mouth of God? If you do not watch the relationship between Word and words in your life, you are condemned to remain an amateur; a paralyzed listener as far as a true journey of initiation is concerned.

IV – Ask for the Gift of an Honest and Good Heart:

Remember that God has called you into silent solitude, a time of dialogue, so that he may speak to your heart.

In the biblical understanding, the heart is the centre, the seat of the human intellectual faculties; it is the deepest intimacy of your person. Therefore the heart is the principal organ of *lectio divina*, because it is that central nucleus in which each human being lives and expresses his personal irrepeatability.

But you also know that this heart could be uncircumcised (Deut. 30:6; Rom. 2:29), of stone (Ezek. 11:19), divided (Psalm 119:113; Jer. 32:29), blind (Lam. 3:65); expressions that indicate a human heart that is distant from God, untouched by faith.

The heart of a believer can be coarsened by debauchery, drunkenness and the cares of life (Luke 21:34); can be hardened, suffering from *sclerocardia* to the point of not recognizing and not understanding the words and action of the Lord (Mark 6:52; 8:17); can become unstable, inconstant, thus led to forget and corrupt the Word (2 Pet. 3:16; Luke 8:13). The heart can become this if it sucks its lymph from the flesh, from the dominant ideologies, from the great sin of pride.

You who lends a listening ear to God, take your heart in your hands, lift it up to God, that He may make it a heart of flesh, unify it, make it firm, may purify it. Remember that it is only the heart of a child that receives the gifts of God (Mark 10:15).

The heart has to be re-made by the Lord, open and eager to listen! The Lord promised to give a new heart to one who invokes him (Ezek. 18:31), to bend it to his Word if it presents itself convinced of its *sclerocardia* (Psalm 119:36). The Lord shouts everyday: ‘If only you would hear his voice today! Do not harden your hearts!’ (Psalm 95:8; Hebr. 3:7). A hardened heart finds God’s Word hard, and this can happen even to believers. ‘After hearing it, many of his disciples said, This Word is hard, how can anyone accept it?’ (John 6:60). Therefore, ask the Lord for a spacious heart; a heart that listens (*leb shomea*), just as the wise Solomon did with the Lord (1 King 3:5-12).

When doing *lectio divina*, remember the parable of the sower that shows us the Lord in the act of sowing the Word. In fact, you are one of the terrains: or rocky or open path to everything that passes or full of thorns or good soil. The Word should fall into you like in good soil; ‘These are the ones who, when they hear the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart (*en kardia kale kai agathe*, ‘a noble [admirable, morally good and generous] and good heart – the Greek ideal), and bear fruit with patient (steadfast) endurance (through their perseverance, JB)’ (Luke 8:15).

It is in a purified heart, a heart made integral (simple) and constant, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit come to dwell in order to share the banquet of the Word and remain in it (John 14:23; 15:4; Rev. 3:20). The heart is made for the Word and the Word for the heart: help realize this wedding song by Psalm 119:111, where his Word becomes yours and your heart sings because it becomes his.

Therefore your heart will be that of a disciple who is docile to the affairs of God, capable of experiencing the Word in its integrity, truly at the feet of Christ and ready to listen to him like Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:39), capable of meditating and conserving the words in the heart like the Mother of the Lord (Luke 2:19 and 51).

Before the Eucharistic celebration, the liturgy sings ‘Lift up your hearts’; ‘Lift up your hearts’ is the cry before *Lectio divina*.

V – Invoke the Holy Spirit:

Invoking the Holy Spirit is an essential element of *lectio divina*. Just as it is the Holy Spirit who transforms bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, it is only the descent of the Holy Spirit that can transform Scripture into word of God. Discerning the Lord who speaks in the Scriptures is a pneumatological action, fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is Sacred, lift it, raise it up with reverence (remember the Eucharistic elevation!) as you invoke the Holy Spirit; it is body of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who presided over the generation of the Word; it is the Holy Spirit who made the Word be pronounced and written through the prophets, the sages, Jesus, the apostles, the evangelists; it is the Holy Spirit who offered the Word to the Church and made it be handed down to you intact.

Since the Word was communicated by the Holy Spirit, it can only be understood through the Holy Spirit (cf. DV 12). Invite the Holy Spirit (*veni, Creator Spiritus!*) to come in you with His power, his *dynamis*, to remove the veil so that you may see the Lord (Psalm 119:18; 2 Cor. 3:12-16).

It is the Spirit that gives life, the letter alone kills. That Spirit that overshadowed the Virgin Mary with his power generating in her the *Logos*, the Word made flesh (Luke 1:34); that Spirit that descended on the apostles and led them to the entire truth (John 16:13), should do the same in you: Generating the Word,

making you participate in the whole truth. Divine reading means reading in the Holy Spirit and with the Holy Spirit the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit generated.

Wait for Him, the heavenly guest, for he will not take too long (Hab. 2:3). Trust the word of Jesus: 'If you then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (Luke 11:13).

You hear his efficacious word within you: '*Ephphatha*, be opened' (Mark 7:34) and you will no longer feel alone but accompanied as you read the biblical text. Like the Ethiopian who was reading the text of Isaiah and could not understand until Philip caught up with him; Philip, full of the Holy Spirit received at Pentecost, opened the text to the Ethiopian and his heart changed (cf. Acts 8:26-38). Like the disciples whose mind the Risen Lord opened to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Without the epiclesis, *lectio divina* remains a mere human enterprise, an intellectual effort instead of a drinking from the fountain of divine wisdom: The failure to recognize the body of Christ means reading your own condemnation (cf. 1 Cor 11:29). Pray as you are able to, as the Lord allows you, or you could pray like this:

Prayer of Invocation before Lectio:

'Our God, Father of Light, you have sent your Word into the world, Wisdom that came forth from your mouth, and held sway over every people and nation (Sir. 24:6-8). You willed that it finds a home in Israel and that, through Moses, the prophets and the psalms (Luke 24:44) reveals your will and speaks to your people of Jesus the Messiah. Finally you willed that your very Son, eternal Word next to you, becomes flesh and places his tent in our midst (John 1:1-14), born of Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35).

Now send the same Holy Spirit upon me that he may give me a listening heart (1 King 3:5), allow me to meet him in these Holy Scriptures and generate the Word in me. May he remove the veil from my eyes (2 Cor. 3:12-16), lead me to the entire truth (John 16:13), give me intelligence and perseverance.

I ask you this through Christ our Lord, who is Blessed forever and ever. Amen!

You could help yourself, in this preliminary prayer, with Psalm 119, the Psalm of listening to the Word. It is the Psalm of *lectio divina*, the conversation of the Beloved and the Lover, the believer and his Lord!

VI – Read!...

Open the Bible and read the text of the day. Do not pick the text randomly, or according to your personal preference, the word of God is not a subjective choice. Accept that text offered to you. This is obedience to the Word. You do not choose the text, you receive it; the text ‘chooses’ you, the Word chooses you. ‘You did not choose me, no, I chose you’ (John 15:16).

The text could be that offered by the Church through the lectionary. Or it could be that subsequent text according to the method of continuous (cursive) *lectio* of a particular book of the Bible. In continuous *lectio* one begins a given book of the Bible from the first chapter, an extract at a time, until the book is completed, and then takes on another. One can also take on the continuous *lectio* of the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Cursive reading would be ideal for a priest. A priest who does *lectio divina* following the lectionary is tempted to think of that homily or short reflection he is to give at Mass! Ministry tempts us to read a text for some ministerial use: A homily, a conference, an article, catechism...

Obedience to the lectionary or to a given book of the Bible is essential for continuity in *lectio divina*; it is a safe guard against subjectivism in choosing texts.

Do not take long sections for *lectio divina*. A passage, a periscope, or just a few verses are more than enough! Read the text several times, even aloud. If you have the means to deepen the meaning by consulting the original texts in Hebrew and Greek, do so. Otherwise, be content with a good translation.

Avoid a rapid and superficial *lectio*. This happens especially when you are familiar with that text (e.g. the parable of the Merciful Father, Luke 15:11-32). If you find it helpful, re-copy the text and try to recite it; try to imprint the text in your heart, moved by the love of the Lord who is speaking to you in that text.

Also read the parallel texts or the cross-references shown in the margin of your Bible. The JB (Jerusalem Bible), the TOB (*Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible*, Ecumenical translation of the Bible), or the AB (African Bible), are very helpful here. These tools help you widen or complete the message: Remember that the Word interprets itself, and that is why the great traditions of the Fathers of the Church remind us that we have to ‘read Scripture with Scripture’.

Gregory the Great rephrased an existing Patristic saying, ‘*Scriptura crescit cum legente*’, as ‘*Divina eloquia cum legente crescunt*’: The Divine words grow with the person reading them. We begin with a small passage and we eventually arrive at reading it with other texts. At the beginning the pasture seems to be small and limited, it eventually grows, enriches us; becomes wider. Attentive reading helps me receive messages that are wider and more global, denser, deeper. My knowledge of the Lord increases, it becomes more penetrating and symphonic. I become a ‘living concordance’; a ‘living exegesis’ of Scripture.

VII – Meditate!...

Meditation is searching, excavating in the text and around the text, so as to enter into a deeper knowledge of the Will of God and the face of Christ.

You can be helped in your meditation by patristic, spiritual or exegetical commentaries. These tools should only be used as a support to our meditation but not as a shortcut, a way of avoiding the healthy toil of research and personal reflection.

Meditatio is not a fixing of the gaze on the self but on Christ. This is the fundamental difference between Patristic *meditatio* and Ignatian meditation. Prayer is not something purely therapeutic, not something that makes us still and calm, nor something that makes us feel good, but something that leads to encounter the Lord.

If we fix the gaze on ourselves during meditation we shall only end up in illusory self-satisfaction (false peace) or profound disappointment. But if we fix our eyes and heart on Christ, we shall receive ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6). ‘And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:18).

For the appearance of the Lord ‘is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; for he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness’ (Mal. 3:2-3).

The refiner and purifier of silver knows that the silver has been purified when, bending and looking into it, he sees his face perfectly reflected (mirrored) in it! This is the purpose of meditating Scripture: So that the image of Christ may be reflected in us like in a mirror.

Meditation should aim at the spiritual apex of the text: not at a phrase that is most striking, but at the central message, one that leads to the event of the death-resurrection of the Lord. Endeavour to excavate for this spiritual sense that gives

continuity and unity between exegesis, patristic reflections and reading Scripture with Scripture, thus searching for what the Lord is telling you.

Lectio divina requires patient endurance. The text is not always completely and immediately comprehensible. At this moment if there is some comprehension, ruminate on the words in your heart (the *ruminatio* of the Fathers) and then apply them to yourself, to your situation without getting lost in psychoanalysis, introspections, and without ending up doing an examination of conscience. It is God who is talking to you: Contemplate him, not yourself. Do not let yourself be paralyzed by a scrupulous analysis of your limits and your deficiencies before the divine exigencies that the Word has shown you.

Of course the Word is also judgment, it discerns your heart, it convinces you of sin, but remember that God is greater than your conscience (cf. 1 John 3:20) and when God stings your heart, he always does it with truth and mercy.

Rather marvel at him who speaks to your heart, at the healthy food that he offers you abundantly. Wonder that the Word is deposited in your heart and that you don't have to go to heaven, or beyond the sea to know it (cf. Deut. 30:11-14). Let yourself be attracted by the Word that transforms you into the image of the Son of God without knowing how. The Word that you have received is life, joy, peace, salvation for you! God is speaking to you, you should listen to him with wonder like the Hebrews of the exodus who saw him accomplish great things; like Mary who sings 'the Almighty has done great things for me' (Luke 1:49).

God reveals himself to you: Receive his ineffable Name, his face of a Lover. God instructs you, he gives himself in his Word: Receive him like a child and enter into Communion with him. God kisses you with a holy kiss: It is a wedding between the Beloved and the Lover, celebrate in your heart his love that is stronger than death, than *sbeol*, than your sins. God generates

you like *logos*, verb-word, like a son: Accept to be born in order to become the very Son of God. *Meditatio*, *ruminatio*, should lead you to this: Becoming the Dwelling of the Father, of the Son, of the Spirit! Your heart is a liturgical space: And the whole of your person is a temple, is a divino-human reality.

VIII – Pray!...

Oratio is not talking of God but talking to God. Now talk to God, respond to him, to his invitations, to his appeals, to the inspirations, to the reminders, to the messages that he has directed to you in the Word, understood through the Holy Spirit. Do not stop at reflecting, but enter into dialogue and converse the way a friend converses with a friend (Deut. 34:10). Do not try to pattern your thoughts to his thoughts at this moment, instead seek him. *Meditatio* had the scope of leading you to *oratio*. Now you have arrived! Do not do spiritual gossip; instead talk to him with trust and without fear. Keep your gaze very far away from yourself, but only enraptured by his face that has emerged from the text in Christ Jesus.

Leave your creative faculties free and put them at the service of the Lord. Not much can be said here, because each person knows his encounter with God and this cannot be imposed by others. What can one say about fire when one is immersed in it? What can one say about Prayer-Contemplation at the end of *lectio divina*, if not that it is a burning bush that does not get consumed and inflames the heart in the chest of the believer making him burn with love for the Lord? ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24: 32)

Lectio divina leads to the experience of the divine presence where you contemplate the Beloved; you re-utter the words of the Beloved in joy, in amazement, forgetting the self. This journey of prayer is not always easy and straight forward. It is full of obstacles. What is important is remaining faithful to this encounter. Soon or later, the Word opens itself in our heart,

overcoming our obstacles; those obstacles that are always present in the journey of faith and the experience of prayer. The person who is assiduous in the Word knows that God is faithful and will reveal himself and talk to the heart.

Thank God for the gift of the Word, for those who announce it and explain it to you; intercede for all the brothers and sisters that the text may have evoked in you – in their virtues and their falls. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 is a wonderful model. Nothing human should appear strange in prayer, because God willed to assume our human condition, except sin (cf. Hebr. 4:15).

Store what you have seen, heard, and tasted in your *lectio divina*; store it in your heart and remember it. Go in the company of men and women; humbly offer them that peace and that blessing that you have received. You will have the strength to take action with them in order to actualize the Word of God in the events of daily life, in your social setting.

God needs you as an instrument for creating new heavens and a new earth. Another day awaits you, a day in which, seeing God face to face in death, you will demonstrate whether you had been a living letter engraved by Christ; *lectio divina* for your brothers and sisters, the same Son of God.

IX – Contemplation?..

Contemplatio is having the ‘look’ of God. It is a very intimate dialogue between God and the believer, a face to face with the Bridegroom. It is worth noting that we are not always given the grace of the prayer that opens up to contemplation. But we have to mention one truth: Contemplation is not an extraordinary experience nor is it exceptionally reserved for a few mystics.

Christian contemplation means having the same mind as Christ Jesus (cf. Phil. 2:5), having the same eyes as God, looking at the same realities around us and the people around us with the look

of God and not with our diseased eye (look). Every Christian is called to this. It is not ecstasy nor is it to do with apparitions. It has to do with 'a simple (clear) eye' (cf. Matt. 6:22) that gives light to the whole body and allows you to see your brother, even the most sinful, as God sees him.

Each person will have personal experiences, according to the grace and the gifts received. This is different from extraordinary sensations. It has to do with intimacy with God, animated by the Spirit in us, leading us to exclaim with Paul: 'It is no longer I but Christ living in me' (Gal. 2:20).

X – Actio?...

We should remember that when the crowds asked Jesus: 'What must we do if we are to carry out God's work?' Jesus answered: 'This is carrying out God's work: you must believe in the one he has sent' (John 6:28-29). This is *Actio per excellence*; it does not mean an evasion of actual tasks in the world, but requires that our relationship with God is not reduced to actions of this world. Of course it would be absurd if our *lectio divina* does not lead us to live fraternal charity and solidarity with humans.

Approaching Scripture with faith leads us to profound listening and deep searching, the capacity to converge all in prayer in order to arrive at looking at the world with the gaze of God. And what is this gaze of God if not perfect charity, *agape* that descends from God and embraces the whole of creation?

Contemplatio, therefore, carries *Actio* in its bosom.

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