

# PRAYING THE WORD

## Introduction to “lectio divina

### ENZO BIANCHI

#### 1. Letter of Bro.Enzo to his brother Giovanni



Dear Giovanni,

At least on Sundays, or even daily, during the liturgy, you celebrate with your brothers and sisters in the local church or in your community: you listen to the reading of the Scriptures and also receive the gift of the homily as explanation and actualisation of the text you are offered. Thus you are placed in front of the living and active Word of God which resounds inside you in the presence of the Lord himself, in front of Christ who, as the sower, sows his

Word in you.

The table is ready: the food of the Word and the Eucharistic food are given to you by him who nourishes, consoles and strengthens you, so that in your journey, in your exodus from this world to the Father, you may be fed and not faint, relishing that viaticum that is offered to you, a sick and tired member of the people of God. You will certainly want to repeat this fundamental christian experience in your every-day life, in the solitude of your room, or in the communitarian interacting with the brothers and sisters given to you as your custodians and companions.

Indeed you will never be able to understand and assimilate the Scriptures counting only on yourself and your poor forces: in order to arrive at a fruitful reading in which the Word of God can operate in you what you alone cannot, certain conditions are needed, preliminaries that will afford you a reading in the faith of Christ, in the reception of the gifts of the Spirit, and a contemplative vision of God the Father.

In short: a reading in the Spirit, a prayer with the Bible, *lectio divina*...

#### 2. La lectio divina an experience of Israel and of the Church



Already in Israel's ancient dispensation, people prayed with the Word and listened to the Word praying. You can find an account of this communitarian praxis in Nehemiah, 6. This method, which calls for reading, explanation and prayer, became the classical Jewish way of praying, a practice taken up also by Christians (cf. 2 Timothy 3,14-16): though never described, it is testified in many passages of the New Testament.

Generations of Christians have kept praying in this way, never submitting to a non-biblical piety that did not recognize the absolute sovereignty of the Word in the prayer of the Church. All the Fathers of both Eastern and Western Churches have practiced this method of *lectio divina*, inviting the faithful to do the same in their homes, and leaving us their splendid comments on the Scriptures, of which they were the natural fruit.

And what shall we say about the monks? These made it the centre of their lives in the desert and monasteries, calling it *the ascesis of the monk*, their daily food, knowing that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (cf. Deut.8.3 and Mt.4.4). At some point the need was felt to put the method in black and white in order to help the neophytes to acquire this knowledge of the Word in the Spirit, which not only sanctifies, but divinizes. Origen, proposing the *theia anâgnosis* to the school of the jewish rabbis; Jerome, chanting the reading with prayers; Cassian, expounding the *meditatio* ; Guigo the Carthusian, showing it as the “Steps to

Paradise” for the monks; Bernard, singing it as honey for the *palatum cordis*; William of Saint-Thierry in the *Golden Letter*, and so many others have fixed the terms of *lectio divina*.

Up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this method fed the faith of entire generations, urging the believers to follow it as the *via aurea* to ineffable conversation with God. Francis of Assisi practiced it constantly. Then in the Lower Middle Ages *lectio divina* underwent a lessening due to the introduction of the *quaestio* and the *disputatio*. This prayer declined in these centuries, giving way to the *devotio moderna* and the *meditatio loyoliana*, a more introspective and psychological prayer. Only in the monasteries and with the Servites was this method kept alive; recently it has been revived by the Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum* 25:

“It is crucial that everyone should keep a constant contact with the Scriptures through the *lectio divina*, by an accurate *meditatio*, remembering to accompany the reading with the *oratio*.”

It was certainly the Spirit that precluded this form of listening and praying the Bible to be lost through the centuries.

### 3. A place for the *lectio divina*



When you wish to immerse into this *prayerful reading*, look first for a *place of solitude and silence*, where you can pray to the Father in secret till you reach contemplation.

The cell, the room is the place where to relish God’s presence, never forget it (cf. Mt.6,5-6). Here lies in fact the place of the fight of your heart, it is the desert where Jesus too prayed and was tempted (cf. Mt. 4,1-11; Mc. 1.12 & 35, etc.), the place where God draws you to himself to speak to your heart and shower his graces upon you, turning the anguished abysses of your heart into a valley and a haven of hope (cf. Osea 2,16-17). Thus, in this solitary place, your spiritual youth will be renewed, you will sing to your Lord, to your spouse, you will feel that you belong only to him and are at peace with all men and all creatures, living or inanimate (cf. Osea 2,18-25).

Let your room, then, the desert place, be for you a shrine where God humiliates you and puts you to the test through his Word; and by doing so he instructs, consoles and nourishes you. You will certainly feel the presence of the Foe who will try to convince you to run away, making the solitude unbearable, bringing out concerns and worries, seducing you with myriads of worldly thoughts. Do not lose heart, do not despair and stand firm in this body and soul fight against the devil, because the Lord is not far away from you, he is in fact not only watching you fight, but he is fighting your battle in you. Find a help, if you wish, in an icon, a lighted candle, a cross, a mat to kneel on and pray. Don’t be reluctant to use these instruments; do not. However, give in to vogues or estheticism: these tools may remind you that you are not studying the Bible or reading words, but that you are in front of God, ready to listen, conversing with him.

If you are tempted to give up, resist, even at the cost of remaining silent. Do resist, you will have to get accustomed to times of solitude, of silence, of detachment from things and people, if you wish to meet God in your personal prayers.

### 4. A time of silence to let God speak



Make sure that the place of the *lectio divina* and the hour of the day give you an opportunity for external silence, a necessary preliminary to internal silence.

The Master is here and calls you (cf. John 11,28), and to hear his voice you must shut out all the other voices; to listen to the Word, you must lower the volume of the other voices. The best times for silence are the night, the early morning, the evening...., see for yourself which suits you best according to your schedule of work, but stick faithfully to the time, and choose it once and for all. It is not serious to go and meet the Lord only at intervals between occupations,

almost as if the Lord were just a stopgap. Never say: “I am busy, I have no time”, because you would declare yourself an idolater: the day’s time must be at your service and not you a slave of time!

Be then enveloped in silence and let the time for *lectio divina* give the rhythm of your life. You know that you must pray always, untiringly (cf. Luke 18,1-8 and Tess. 5,17), but you also know that to do this explicitly and visibly, precise and specific times are needed to sustain the *memoria Dei* throughout the day. Are you in love with the Lord or are you aiming to be? Then do not be reluctant to consecrate to him that time that you normally give daily and joyfully to your wife, to your husband, to your siblings, to your friends. Nor do you forget that this time for *lectio divina* must be sufficiently long, not a hurried odd moment. You must take it with calm, be at peace; just a few minutes are definitely not enough. For the *lectio divina* – the Fathers say – at least an hour is required.

How many words you hear in a day! How much reading you do! That the words may not smother the Word: also in this you must be on the alert. If worldly words are abundant, what concrete primacy may the Word have over them? To do your daily *lectio divina* punctually does not exempt you from *verifying the relationship between the Word and words*. These, by their quantity and quality, may stifle the divine voice and not allow it to grow and yield its fruit (cf. Mc 4,13-20). Does it make any sense to read everything and anything, getting absorbed in a world of mundane information, indulging in readings that carve deep furrows of impurity in your heart, and then expect to live of the Word that comes from the mouth of God? If you don’t keep an open eye on the relationship Word-words in your life, you are condemned to remain an amateur, a shallow person, paralyzed in the face of a true journey of initiation.

## 5. A big and good heart



If God is calling you to a silent solitude, in a time of dialogue, it is *to speak to your heart*. Biblical heart is the centre, the seat of man’s intellectual faculties, the person’s deepest core. The heart is therefore *the principal organ* of the *lectio divina*, for it is the central nucleus in which every man lives and expresses his personal uniqueness. Yet you know that this heart may be uncircumcised (Deut.30.6 & Rom.2.29), as hard as stone (Ezek.11.19), divided (Ps.119.113 & Jer.32.29), blind (Lam.3.65): all these expressions denote a heart of man that is far from God, untouched by faith. The heart of the believer may be weighted down by wantonness, drunkenness, tensions (Luke 21.34), it may turn sour, sick with sluggishness to the point of not recognizing and not understanding the words and the action of the Lord (Mk.6.52 & 8.17), it can be unstable, fickle, tending to forget and mislead the Word (2 Pt. 3.16 & Lk.8.13). The heart can be all this if it sucks its sap from the flesh, from the prevailing ideologies, from pride, which is the greatest sin. Oh you who are preparing to listen to God, take this heart of yours in your hands, lift it to God, that he may make it a heart of flesh strong, firm, purified. Only the heart of a child can receive God’s gifts (Mk.10.15). Only a heart renewed by the Lord is open and available to the listening.

The Lord has promised to give a new heart to those who ask for it (Ezek.18.31), who beg him to subject it to his Word, being aware, as we are, of our heart’s sicknesses (Ps.119,36). Every day he cries out: “Oh, that today you would listen to my voice! Harden not your hearts!” (Ps.95.8 & Heb.3.7). A cold heart finds the Word of God hard, and this is possible also for the believers: “This is a hard word, who can accept it? (John 6.60). Then pray to the Lord for a *big heart, a heart that listens (leb shomea)*, as Solomon, the wise man, did with his Lord.” (1 Kings 3.5).

When you do the *lectio divina* remember the parable of the sower, which shows the Lord sowing his Word. And you are one of the grounds: stony or thorny or a road open to anything coming across, or, hopefully, a good one. The Word must fall into you as on good soil and “*after listening to the Word with a good and simple heart (en kardia kale kai agathê)*, you will guard it attentively producing fruit in your perseverance” (cf. Lk 8.15).

It is in a purified, firm and unified heart that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit come to you making it their home to celebrate the *lectio divina* (John 14.23 & 15.4).



The heart is made for the Word and the Word for the heart: it helps this espousal hailed by Psalm 119,111, where his Word becomes yours, and yours sings because it becomes his.

Your heart will then be the one of a disciple docile to the things of God, able to experiment the Word *sine glossa*, truly lying at the feet of Christ and ready to listen to him as Mary of Bethany (Lk 10.39), capable of meditating and keeping the words in your heart like the mother of the Lord (Lk,19.51).

"*Lift up your hearts!*" sings the liturgy before the Eucharistic celebration, "lift up your hearts!" is the cry before *lectio divina*.

## 6. Invocation of the Holy Spirit



Take up the Bible, carry it in front of you with reverence for it is the body of Christ; then do the epiclesis, the invocation of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who brought the Word, it is he who had it spoken and written by the prophets, by wise men, by Jesus, the apostles, the evangelists, it is he who gave it to the church and made it reach you unscathed.

Being transmitted by the holy Spirit (cf *Dei Verbum* 12)., only the Spirit can make it understandable. Make everything ready so that the Spirit may enter into you (*Veni, Creator Spiritus!*) and with his power, his *dynamis*, may he open your eyes that you may see the Lord (Ps 119,18 & 2 Cor.3,12-16). It is the Spirit who gives life, while words kill! That same Spirit who descended over the Virgin Mary overshadowing her with his power and generating in her the *Logos*, the Word made flesh (Lk.1.34), the same Spirit that descended on the apostles, empowering them to come to the full truth (John 16.13), must likewise operate in you: *generate in you the Word, make you partaker of the whole truth. Spiritual reading means a reading in the Spirit and with the Spirit of the things put forward by the Spirit.* Wait for him, for even if he delays he will not be late (Ababacuc 2.3). Believe the word of Jesus: "If you, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk.11.13).

You will hear inside you the commanding word: "*Effata!* Be opened!" (Mk.7.34) and you will no longer feel alone but accompanied in front of the biblical text: as the Ethiopian who was reading Isaiah but did not understand until Philip appeared, who, with the Spirit that he had received at Pentecost, explained the text to him and changed his heart (Acts 8.26-38); as the disciples whose minds were unlocked to understand the Scriptures by the risen Lord (Lk.24,45). *Without epiclesis lectio divina remains a human exercise, an intellectual effort*, at the most an attainment of erudition but not divine wisdom: but, not to perceive the body of Christ is to read to oneself one's own condemnation (1 Cor,11,29).

Pray as you can, as the Lord grants you to, or you may pray like this: "Oh God, Father of light, you sent your Word into the world to assert your dominion over all the peoples of the earth (Wis. 24,6-8). You wanted it to take up its abode with Israel and through Moses, the prophets and the Psalms (Lk.24.44) it made known your will and talked to your people about Jesus, the Messiah. Finally you wanted your Son, eternal Word with you, to become human flesh and stay among us (John 1,1-14), born of the Virgin Mary and conceived by the holy Spirit (Lk.1.35). Send down your Spirit upon me that it may give me a docile heart (1 Kings 3.5), allow me to meet him in these holy Scriptures and realize the Word in me. May this holy Spirit remove the veil from my eyes (2 Cor.3,12-16), lead me to all truth (John 16.13), give me understanding and perseverance. I ask you this through Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever and ever. Amen"

Above all, help yourself in this preliminary prayer with Psalm 119, the psalm of the listener to the Word. It is the psalm of the *lectio divina*, the colloquy of the Loved One with his Lover, of the believer with his Lord!

## 7. Read!....



Open the Bible and read the text, not choosing at random, for the Word of God is not a heap of scraps. Obey the liturgical lectionary and accept the passages the church offers you, or read a book of the Bible from one end to the other through *lectio cursiva*. Obedience to the lectionary or to the book are essential for a daily obedience, for continuity in the lectio divina, so as not to fall into the trap of subjectivism in the choice of the piece that you like or you think you may need. It is imperative that you adhere strictly to this principle.

You may choose a book offered by the tradition of the church for the different liturgical seasons or one of the daily readings. Do not multiply the texts: *a passage, a sentence, few verses are more than enough!*. And if you do your *lectio divina* on the Sunday readings, remember that the first (Old Testament) and the third readings (Gospel) are parallel and you are invited to pray over both of them. The Sunday lectionary is a great gift, laid down with a great spiritual wisdom; the daily readings are more discontinued: if you find it difficult, it is better for you to choose a book and do a *lectio continua*.

Read the text not only once, but several times, even reading aloud. If you are able, read the original texts in Hebrew or Greek, otherwise a translation will do. Always make use, proportionally to your intellectual preparation, of the versions of the LXX and the Vulgate, which are holy translations, venerated by the church throughout the centuries.

If the text is well known to you, or you even know it by heart, and feel tempted to make a hasty reading, do not be afraid to use means that can prevent you from giving in to this quick and superficial reading: write down and re-write the text! A monk friend of mine, an exegete of international repute, confided to me that with the *lectio divina* he copies the text and repeats it several times to find out the difference between what he has *memorized* and what is *written*.

Do not read only with your eyes, be deeply attentive and try to impress the text in your heart. Read also parallel texts or those suggested by the marginal notes, especially if you are using the Jerusalem Bible or the TOB, which are of great help. Expand the text, complete it, add other passages inherent to that of the day, for the Word interprets itself. “*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*” is the *lectio*’s great rabbinic-patristic criterion.

May the reading become listening (*audire*) and the listening become obedience (*oboedire*). Do not hurry: you must *lectioni vacare*, because the reading is done for you to listen. *The word must be listened to!* In the beginning there was the Word, not the Book as in Islam! It is God who speaks and the *lectio* is but a means to arrive at the listening. “Listen, Israel!” is God’s unending call from the text to you.

## 8. Meditate!...



What does it mean to meditate? It’s not easy to describe it. Certainly it means first of all *to deepen the message that God wants to convey through the reading*. A great effort is therefore required if the reading is to become an attentive and deep reflexion. In the old days, Christians, having to learn the Scriptures by heart, found reflexion easier, repeating with great easiness in their hearts the Word heard or read. On the other hand, even today, you have to dedicate yourself to reflexion, as far as your culture and intellectual means allow you.

We know of course the principle: “*Not erudition but unction, not science but conscience, not charters but charity*”, but the *lectio* is not an undisciplined and occasional hearing, done without the rigour required by every serious research and without the use of the tools needed for comprehension. If you have the opportunity, take up the comments of the Fathers of the Church on the different books of Scripture, or the concurrences that make the Bible comment the Bible, or perhaps exegetical studies or spiritual commentaries. But always do evaluate the quality of certain works that claim to be serious or spiritual, but which in reality contain only personal views or delirious ecstasies that are far from the divine text and tradition. Above all shun those comments called “re-appropriation of

the Word”, where the Word is used only to one’s own convenience. Be choosy also with spiritual commentaries on the Sunday and daily readings: many of them report off-hand issues, artificially drafted in scanty connection with the texts and related more to the words of the writer than to the Word of God. “Hearing is not a passive reception of a given text, but it is also the effort on the part of the believer to penetrate ever more deeply the inexhaustible sense of the divine Word according to one’s degree of maturity and to the steadfastness in its application”, says Origen.

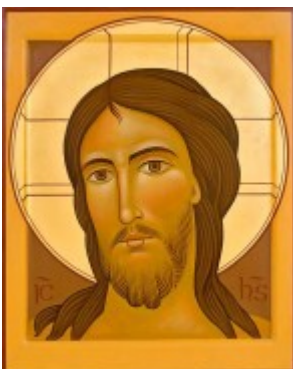
All these exegetical, patristic, spiritual means are undoubtedly useful for the *meditatio* and to the growth of the hearer’s understanding; however what is very important for the *lectio divina* is *the personal effort, not the private one*, certainly made more fruitful when done as an experience of community and fraternity, or of group, an experience of discipleship of the Word, in which *not only we read together, but we experience and live the Word together*. This personal effort must be directed to search for the spiritual central point of the text: not the phrase that strikes you most, but the central message that leads you to the great event of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Try then to grasp the spiritual meaning, give continuity and unity to the exegesis, to patristic contributions and Bible reading with the Bible, and try to discern what the Lord tells you. Do not think of finding what you already know: that is presumption! Nor what you would like to find according to your situation: this is the predominance of subjectivism! The text *is not always totally and immediately comprehensible!* Be humble enough to admit that sometimes you understand little or even nothing at all: later on you will understand. This too is obedience and if you still need to be fed on milk, you can certainly not take solid food (cf. 1 Cor.3.2 & Heb.5.12). At this point, if there is any amount of comprehension, ponder the words in your heart (the Fathers’ *ruminatio*), then apply them to your situation, avoiding getting lost in psychologism, introspectionism, and without coming to end up with an examination of conscience. It is God who speaks to you: listen to him, not to yourself. Don’t let yourself be paralyzed by a scrupulous analysis of your limits and shortcomings in the face of the divine demands that the Word has made to you. Indeed, the Word is also judgement, it penetrates your heart, convinces you of sin, but remember that God is greater than your heart (cf. 1 John 3.20) and that this pricking of the heart from God is always done in truth and mercy.

Be amazed instead that he should speak to your heart, that he should give you his food, abundantly or not, but always nourishing, be amazed that the Word should be deposited in your heart, without you having to go to heaven or beyond the seas to know it (cf. Deut.30.11-14). Let yourself be allured by the Word that transforms you into the image of the Son of God without you knowing how. The Word that you have received is life, joy, peace, salvation for you! God speaks to you and you must listen to him, astonished like the Jews of the exodus who saw him operate wonders, like Mary who sings: “God has done great things for me, holy is his name!” (Lk.1,49). God reveals himself to you: receive his ineffable Name, his face of a Lover: you are in the sphere of faith! God teaches you: model your life on that of the Son. God who gives himself to you in his Word; receive him as a child and enter into communion with him. God kisses you with a holy kiss: it’s the espousal of the Loved one with the Lover, hence celebrate in your heart his love that is greater than death, than *sheol*, than your very sins. God gives you life as *logos*, spoken word; as a son accept to be generated so as to be the Son himself of God. Meditation, *ruminatio*, must bring you to this: to become the dwelling place of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit! Your heart is a *liturgical place*: and your entire person is a temple, a divine-human reality.

## 9. Pray!...

Now speak to God, respond to him, to his invitations, his appeals, inspirations, reproaches, to the messages he is sending to you through the Word enlightened by the Spirit. Are you not aware that you have been accepted into the Trinitarian circle, in an ineffable interchange with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Do no longer linger on reflexion, but enter into dialogue and speak as a friend speaks to a friend (Det.34.10). Try no longer to conform your thoughts to his, only look for him. *Meditatio* was intended to lead you to *oratio*. Now you have made it! But do not indulge



in spiritual idle talk: speak to him with confidence and without fear, away from introspection, enraptured by the face of the Lord Jesus as revealed by the text. Let loose your creative capacities of sensibility, emotivity and evocation, and put them to the service of the Lord. I cannot give you many suggestions, because here every one knows his own way of encountering the Lord and cannot direct the others nor show them anything of himself. What can be said of the fire when we are in the midst of it? What can be said of prayer-contemplation at the end of *lectio divina* except that it is the blazing bush that burns without consuming and which sets on fire the heart of the believer making it burn with love for the Lord?

As an ineffable art of the experience of divine presence, *lectio divins* aims to take you here, where you, as the Loved One, contemplate, repeating the Lover's words in joy, amazement, and in the forgetfulness of yourself. Do not think that this journey is always painless, straightforward and easily done to the end: fear and passionate love, thankfulness and spiritual aridity, enthusiasm and physical apathy, words spoken and words unsaid, your silence and God's silence, are present and alternate in your daily *lectio divina*.

What matters is to be faithful to this encounter: soon or later the Word makes an opening in our hearts, overcoming our obstacles, those that are always present in a journey of faith and prayer. Only those who are steadfast with the Word know that God is faithful, always available and open to speak to the heart. They know there are times when the Word of God is rare(1 Sam.3.1), though followed by an epiphany of the Word, and know that these difficult times are a grace that reminds them of the long distance that remains to the full knowledge of God.

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 both their good and bad deeds. Try to join the food of the Word and that of the Eucharist. Treasure what you have seen, heard, relished in the *lectio*, keep it alive in your heart and memory; go out among people and humbly share with them the peace and blessings that you have received. You will find also the strength to operate with them, realizing the Word of God in all your social, political, professional activity. God needs you as an instrument in the world to make new heavens and a new earth. Another day is waiting for you, a day when, seeing God face to face in death, you will show whether you have been a *living letter* carved by Christ, the Son of God himself.

*Yours Enzo*

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