



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Listen readily to holy reading" HR 4:55.

"Idleness is the enemy of the soul; therefore the brethren should be occupied at certain fixed times in manual labour, and at other fixed times in lectio divina ... One or two seniors should be deputed to go around the monastery while the brethren are supposed to be reading. They must check that no brother be found so apathetic that he wastes his time in idleness or chatter to the neglect of his reading: thereby not only being useless on his own account, but also distracting others. If such a one be found, God forbid, he must be reproved" HR 48:1,17-19.

"What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?" HR 73:3

MONASTIC VOICES

"Abba Poemen once said: 'The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard. But if water ceaselessly falls drop by drop, the stone is worn away. So it is with the word of God. It is soft and our heart is hard; but the one who hears the word of God often, opens his heart to the fear of God.'"

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: 4th century Egypt

"I saw a hand stretched out towards me, holding a rolled up scroll. It then spread out the scroll before me, and I saw that it was written on within and without' (Ezk 2:9). In this vision the prophet represents all preachers of the Gospel, and the scroll given to him represents holy Scripture. It is rolled up, since the words of Scripture are often obscure. Because of their profundity they are not easily understood by everyone. But the scroll is then spread out before the Prophet, because holy preachers are able to reveal the hidden meaning of Scripture to the faithful. Truth Himself opened out this scroll when He opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Lk 24:45).

The scroll was written on within and without because scripture has a literal or historical sense and a spiritual or allegorical sense. The writing "without" is the plain sense of the letter, attainable by the weak. The writing "within" is the spiritual understanding, given only to the strong. It is "within" because it promises invisible things, whereas what is written "without" is visible and earthly. It is "within" when it sets forth heavenly realities, and "without" when it shows how earthly things should be rightly used, or properly excluded from what we may rightly desire.

The Prophet continues: 'On the scroll were written lamentations, songs and woe' (Ezk 2:10). By this he means that holy scripture contains everything we need to edify and instruct us. Have you sinned, and bitterly regret what you have done? Here you will find lamentations, teaching you how to repent. Do you yearn for the consolation of heavenly joys? Here you will find a song for your comfort. Are you a sinner who not only refuses to repent, but even disdains the hope of heavenly rewards? Here you will find written the woes of your condemnation. It remains for us then, brethren, to wake up to the words of this scroll. Let us afflict ourselves with tears for the sins we remember having committed, in order that through our lamentation we may come at last to the song of life. The dreadful alternative is to experience woe without end. We do not despair of avoiding that, because the magnitude of our sickness cannot compare with the greatness of the divine doctor, to whom be

praise and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

From Homily 9 of Pope St. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) on Ezekiel.

“See, my most noble and beloved son, how we are distant from one another in body, yet intimately present to each other in love. To prove that, I have your letter before me, and the testimony of all your good works. Now I must presume on this mutual love of ours to say something to you which I think you need to hear. God the Holy Trinity has given you so many gifts: intelligence, wealth, compassion and charity. Because of them you find yourself incessantly occupied with multiple duties and cares; and with that excuse you neglect your daily reading of the words of your Redeemer. But what is holy Scripture other than a letter sent by Almighty God to those he has created? Imagine if the Emperor had sent you a personal letter! No matter where you were or what you were doing, you’d make it a priority to find out what he wanted to say to you. Well: the Emperor of heaven, the Lord of angels and of men has sent you these letters in order that you might draw life from them: yet you fail to make the effort even to read them! Study and meditate on your Creator’s words every day, I beg you! Learn the heart of God from the words of God, so that you may long more ardently for eternity; so that you may be ever more inflamed with desire for the joys of Heaven. Your rest there will be all the greater, the more you’ve refused to rest from loving your Creator here and now.”

From a Letter of Pope St. Gregory the Great to his friend Theodore, physician to the Emperor, dated June 595

Dear Oblates and friends,

I’ve touched on the subject of *lectio divina*, or “prayerful reading” more than once before, most notably in my letter 5, of May 1998. That was written in Eastertide, with the emphasis on *lectio* as holy leisure for God, in anticipation of heaven. I’d like to return to the subject now, especially since I’m writing this in lent. According to Chapters 48 and 49 of the Holy Rule, special attention should be given to *lectio* during lent. In lent we’re reminded that *lectio divina* will always remain an excellent discipline of the spiritual life, and the best possible nourishment for its arduous journey. As before, in this letter I want to focus on *lectio* specifically as the reading of holy Scripture.

The value, even necessity, of frequent personal encounter with holy Scripture was something assumed by all the Fathers of the Church. St. Benedict was simply following the tradition when he made *lectio divina* one of the three essential elements in his plan of monastic life: together with communal prayer and manual work. Here at Pluscarden our timetable allows about two hours for spiritual reading on ordinary weekdays, with more time available in lent and on Sundays or special days of recollection. Not all of that time has to be spent just with the Bible, but reading holy Scripture must always remain our priority. In addition to this individual reading, we daily hear passages of Scripture read in public at every Hour of the Divine Office, as well as at every Mass. In the refectory at lunch time we wade through the whole Bible, from Genesis to Apocalypse, in the order it comes, starting again at the beginning as soon as we get to the end. In this way we monks are fortunate enough to gain quite considerable daily exposure to God’s Word. We hope that like the dripping water on Abba Poeman’s stone, this will have its effect on our hearts: to soften and teach them, and so gradually to move them towards union and conformity with the Heart of Christ.

Oblates committed to living according to the Spirit of the Holy Rule will certainly not want to miss out on this personal encounter with God’s holy Word. It’s true that you have to create space for this without the abundant helps and support enjoyed by the monks: but it’s also important you realise you’re not alone in your task. Just as when you pray the Office, so when you read the Bible: you do so in union with the monks of our community, and with your fellow oblates. You also do so in union with the whole Church. One of the striking features of the Church in our day is precisely a widespread rediscovery of the value of *lectio divina* for anyone who is serious about following Jesus Christ. There are plenty of good new books on the subject; lots of parishes have groups which meet for communal *lectio*; many of the modern Church movements strongly recommend the practice. An enduring reference point for this renewed appreciation of Scripture in the Church is the Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). There we read: In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. Such is the power and force of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life (n. 21). The Council urges all the Christian faithful to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine scriptures (DV 25). It quotes St. Irenaeus (c. 130 - c. 200), for whom prayer is speaking to God, and reading (scripture) is listening to what he in turn wants to say to us.

We believe that reading scripture is unlike reading any other sort of literature, however holy and spiritually helpful it may be. As the inspired Word of God, scripture remains always “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). There is one Holy Spirit who inspired the sacred authors, who breathes still through the canonical text, and is in us as we read. We can study scripture as an academic subject with much profit, and we’ll find a great deal of help in understanding if we read learned commentaries, both ancient and modern. But *lectio divina* properly so called is different from study. St. Benedict and the Council Fathers want us above all to come to the text as it were on our knees, with no other aim than to seek God, to listen to him, and to know what is his will for us. Some people say they never do *lectio divina*. Perhaps they don’t do it privately; but if they go to Mass, they certainly do it as members of the Church. In fact the liturgy is where *lectio divina* most authentically happens. Here the community of faith, assembled as Christ’s Body here on earth, sits at his feet, as the first disciples did, and listens to him. Here his word is publicly proclaimed, and after humbly receiving it, the faithful respond with praise. The only trouble is: it’s hard to attend to every word that’s read in the liturgy without distraction, and to grasp it first time with complete understanding. Hence the great value of preparing the Mass readings in advance, and using them as set passages for personal *lectio*. Those who do this are able, in the words of the Council, to participate in the liturgy more “consciously, actively and fruitfully” (cf. e.g. SC 11). The care they’ve taken to open themselves as fully as possible to Christ in his Word will also prepare them to participate more fully in his Sacrifice, and in sacramental Communion.

One of the best known monastic treatises on *lectio divina* is *The Ladder of Monks*, written about 1190 by Guigo II, Prior of the Grand Chartreuse. Guigo teaches that reading will normally lead in sequence to meditation, to prayer, and to contemplation, ‘when the mind is lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness’. In reading, he says, we bring the heavenly food of God’s word to our mouth; in meditating we chew it; in prayer we absorb it in the depths of our heart; in contemplation we enjoy its refreshment. This mediaeval analysis of *lectio divina* in a four-fold structure reflects the Patristic understanding of four “senses” of scripture. The early Church Fathers accepted the plain sense of the text as its literal or “historical” meaning. But underneath that they looked for hidden meanings: the “moral” which teaches us how to live; the “spiritual” or “allegorical”, through which we discern the figure of Christ, and the “heavenly”, which points us towards our eternal destiny (cf. CCC 115-118).

All this ancient tradition of scriptural understanding is part of our inheritance and birthright as Benedictines. We value it and often draw from it. But here I want to recommend that our oblates approach their *lectio divina* with the utmost simplicity. We come to the Bible, as we come to prayer, just as we are; convinced that reading Scripture is worth it for its own sake, quite apart from any learning or spiritual experience that may be derived from it. So my first advice is not to be too concerned with theories and techniques, but just to pick the book up and read it.

Having picked up the book: then what? Perhaps all of us have had the experience, at times, of reading some text of scripture which struck us in a joyful moment of insight. Sometimes it’s even as if some dark place were suddenly filled with light. Sometimes we’ve felt this light powerfully lifting us up to God. Yet surely all of us have also at times, and perhaps more frequently, felt discouraged and even dismayed by the sheer obscurity of what we read. Reading scripture is often difficult; to persevere with it daily often seems uphill work. A strong resolve is required; and perhaps every now and then a little dose of encouragement: such as this letter is designed to give!

I know that many of our oblates could teach me a great deal about *lectio divina*, from long years of faithful practice. But others I know lack confidence, and might welcome some hints or tips from me on how best to proceed.

The only hard and fast rule I offer is that there are no hard and fast rules. It’s the same as with prayer: we need to be ready to vary our approach, depending on our circumstances, and on the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Then: as with prayer, it’s good to decide in advance a set time, and stick to it. An alarm clock may be a better way of signalling the end than frequent glances at the clock.

Again, as with prayer, we should always start by consciously putting ourselves in the presence of God. We can ask the Holy Spirit to be present to us: perhaps saying the prayer *Veni Sancte Spiritus* or the *Deus in adiutorium*. A verse or two from Psalm 118/119 makes another excellent prayer to start. It’s a Catholic instinct also to make gestures of reverence: to kiss the book; trace a sign of the cross on the page to be read, perhaps even light a candle.

Speed reading is the enemy of *lectio divina*. A good discipline is sometimes to stay with quite a brief text for the whole of our set time. Interestingly, the example of *lectio* Guigo chooses is a single verse: one of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:8). Another way of slowing ourselves down is to write out a passage which strikes us, and maybe also try to learn it by heart. But then: sometimes we feel we're getting bogged down in all this slow reading; so we need to get on more fluently. One way of varying this approach is to listen to a recording of someone reading the scripture for us.

Haphazard reading can also be an enemy of good *lectio*. So it's good to adopt some plan, or set schema of readings. I've already mentioned the possibility of simply following the daily Mass readings. The Divine Office also offers a treasure trove of texts. If we chew over these in the context of *lectio*, they will certainly be more meaningful to us as we come across them liturgically. Alternatively, there are published courses such as Bible Alive which offer guides to reading. For some years now I've been using (admittedly not without many a slip and detour) a plan of reading that takes you through the whole of the New Testament in a year, and the whole of the Old Testament in two years. Actually, this plan skips sections like the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, but personally I take pleasure in reading them through anyway, just so as to be sure not to miss anything! An oblate though might well not feel up to a rather ambitious project like this. So: if all you can manage at present is quite a small selection from scripture, perhaps even just the Gospels, that's OK. You're in contact with the word of God, and will find a blessing in it.

On the same note, it seems right to add some nuance to the oft-quoted remark of St. Jerome (c. 342-420) that 'Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ'. This is great if it spurs us on in our determination to keep up our habits of *lectio divina*; but some very good people I know could find the remark quite discouraging. I think they need to be told that it shouldn't be taken too literally. There have been plenty of great Saints - good friends of Christ - in the history of the Church who knew very little of Scripture. Many of them might never have had access to a complete Bible in a language they could understand. So it remains true that if we want to grow in knowledge of Christ, we will also want to deepen our knowledge of his word. Yet, as St. Jerome would be the first to acknowledge, an unbeliever or heretic might achieve an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible, but have no real knowledge of Christ at all.

St. Gregory the Great was fond of saying that the difficulties of scripture are good for us. The harder it is for us to find out the meaning, he says, the sweeter will be the discovery when we do. And today no less than in the 6th century, a general knowledge of scripture will often help unravel any particular difficulty. The New Testament can never be separated from its irreplaceable background in the Old, and we Christians will always interpret difficulties of the Old Testament by reference to the New. Sometimes though it happens that we simply have to pass by a problematic passage, accepting that we just don't understand it. That's OK too. We want God to be in control of this process, not ourselves. We'll certainly never understand everything, and it's good for us humbly to acknowledge that.

I end by mentioning just one companion to *lectio* I've always found exceedingly useful. The New Jerusalem Bible, Study edition, (DLT, 1985) has abundant footnotes and cross references, maps, various useful tables, and an introductory essay to each book. The notes aren't infallible, and sometimes betray a "merely" modern mind set, but they do give us easy access to the learning of the scholars. Then, once we've benefited from the information they provide, we return simply to the text, convinced that it's good for us to drink directly from these life-giving streams.