

Sentences on "Lectio Divina"
Dom Bernardo Olivero, OCSO

Editor's note:

Early in each new year, the abbot General of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance traditionally writes a circular letter addressed to the communities of the Order. For a number of years now, each of these letters has generally dealt with a particular theme. This year's letter, dated January 26, 1993 (the solemnity of the Abbot Founders of Citeaux) was no exception. The theme was lectio divina, the technical term for a particularly intense reading and meditation on a biblical text or something analagous. The main part of the Dom Bernardo Olivero's 1993 letter took a very special form, which he explains in his introductory remarks:

I want to spare you the fatigue and annoyance of a long and wide-ranging document. For this reason I have written what follows in the form of brief maxims or sententiae. I trust that t his will prove more profitable and, perhaps, more pedagogical. I follow in this the examples of the ancient spiritual writers. Many of them were accustomed to draft their works in sentence-form, each conveying a central theme. The sentence is a brief and succinct saying offering advice and a rule of living, or shows forth a doctrine, morals and good sense, and, in the best examples, wisdom. But for the sentence to convey wisdom it is necessary that he who writes and they who read feel and savor the taste of what they do and live.

All communities of our Order, of course, have already received copies of our Abbot General's current circular letter. But the topic dealt with by Dom bernardo, and his profound treatment of it, will be of deep interest to a much, much wider readership than that of just the monks and nuns of our Order. With no more ado, then--

Prelude

1. The Spirit inspired the Scriptures; therefore, it is present and speaks through them. If it breathes in, it also breathes out.
2. The Scriptures breathe life by the inspiration of the Spirit; that is why they are the breath of the Christian monk.
3. All of this living book converges on Christ. The Divine Scriptures are one book only: Christ. He is the concise, living and efficacious Word.
4. All Scripture points to the mystery of Christ: prefigured in the Old Testament and present in the New, interiorized by each Christian and consummated in glory.
5. Because God is infinite, he Word is also infinite: Scripture enshrines infinite mysteries, its meaning is unfathomable.
6. The literal meaning of the text is always the point of departure: The letter reveals the deeds and presents the persons; history is the foundation.

7. The Spirit takes us beyond the letter; our theological life opens the doors of meaning to us:
 - Allegorical, building faith through the discovery of Christ and his Church.
 - Tropological, teaching us to act in the truth of love.
 - Analogical, showing us and drawing us towards that for which we yearn.
8. The Gospel is the mouth of Christ, ever ready to offer to us the kiss of eternity.
9. The Gospel is the power of God because it shows us the way and gives us the strength to follow it.
10. The Gospel is the power of God because it shows us the way and gives us the strength to follow it.
11. Herein is found true life, and my spirit neither has nor desires anything but the prayerful reading of these mysteries!
12. The Church is the only sounding-board of the Word of God. Because she is the Body of Christ, she herself is also the Word. Scripture gives us life in the Spirit when received in the ambitus of tradition and magisterium.
13. Our Lectio Divine should prolong the profound meaning of the Word beyond the Liturgy in order to prepare us for a more fruitful celebration of the same.
14. The cenobite understands the profound meaning of the Word only when living in communion and concord with his brothers.
15. Monastic conversatio should create a biblical climate allowing each and all to be protagonists in the dialogue of salvation.
16. The humus of humility is the good soil in which the Word produces abundant fruit.
17. Only he receives who is recollected; only in silence is heard the beating of the heart of God.
18. We speak to God when we pray with love; we hear God when we read his Word with faith.
19. When we are "nailed" to the Book through our perseverance and assiduity in Lectio, then we will comprehend the folly of the good God.
20. To know Christ crucified we must be crucified to the world.
21. "Here I am; may god write in me what he wills," said Mary. When the heart is a letter written by God, all of God's letters resound in the heart.
22. He who lives the Good News offers the world reasons to live and die.

First Movement: *riposato*

23. Lectio Divina is:
 - A meditated reading, above all of the Bible, prolonged in contemplative prayer.
 - A reading about God with the eyes of a spouse and the heart of the Church.
 - A reading gratuitously made in order to gratuitously receive the Author of grace.
 - A transformative reading that evangelizes us, makes us evangelizers.
 - An interpersonal relationship in faith and love, with Christ who speaks to us, in the Spirit who teaches us, and under the gaze of the Father who regards us.
 - A pilgrimage of words towards the Mystery of the Word.
 - A slow assimilation of saving Truth whilst in dialogue with the Savior.
 - An enamoured faith that seeks the Face of God in order to anticipate what is yearned for.
 - Immersion, conpenetation, divinization, emersion.
24. Lectio is divina:
 - for God is read in his Word and with his Spirit;
 - because we are brought before the Mystery and it is made present in the heart;
 - when God who speaks is heard and his presence tasted.
25. Because Lectio Divina is dialogue it is therefore reception, self-gift and communion. Reception by attention and reflection; self-gift through our response; communion through encounter.
26. Mary of Nazareth, in dialogue with Gabriel, offers us a captivating example of Lectio vere divina.
27. Because Lectio Divina is life it is also movement. Movement in that different moments of experiences can be discerned: reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation...
28. Reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation ... is what normally occurs when we give it time to happen.
29. The gratuity of Lectio Divina is different from the utility of study. Study endeavors to master the word; Lectio Divina surrenders and yields before it.
30. Lectio Divina also differs from spiritual reading. The latter can have as its end the acquisition of knowledge, the formulation of convictions or the stimulus for generous self-giving. The aim of the former is union with God in faith and love.

Second Movement: *corragioso ed ampio ma non troppo*

31. Lectio Divina is not, as a rule, immediately gratifying. It is an active and passive process of long duration. One does not reap the day following the sowing! The worm is not instantly transformed into a butterfly!
32. There is nothing a purifying as enduring the silence of the Word. But all who know how to

wait reap the reward.

33. If you allow yourself to be possessed by the Word, you will hear even his silence.
34. In Lectio Divina there is also room for the Fathers of the Church and Citeaux; their writings confirm and amplify the biblical message. Because of their Christian spirit they are sure guides of correct interpretation; and by their holiness of life, they teach us how to live, and help us to commune in the Holy Spirit.
35. Other books are helpful in the measure that they allow us to assimilate the Mystery and be transformed by it.
36. When the beginner says: "for me, everything is Lectio Divina," it is to be understood that for him Lectio Divina is meaningless.

Third Movement: *adagio pero continuo*

37. Pay attention: it is God who wishes to speak to you and awaits your reply!
38. The various experiences of Lectio Divina come together in one movement of the spirit. They can co-exist and mutually overlap; they and even alternate in an ever-changing order. The pedestrian makes many movements, but all come together in one action: walking.
39. Asiduous practice lessens rigidity. He who exercises little increases rigidity and makes slow progress. he who does not exercise does not advance.
40. Lectio Divina is a daily practice for the monk and nun at a privileged hour, all the time that is necessary to bring about a dialogue with the most faithful of friends.

Reading

41. Reading is a form of listening that allows of always being able to return to what was heard. And listening is being and letting be. Without listening, there is no interpersonal relationship.
42. If you read to read and not to have read, then your lectio is serene, restful and disinterested.
43. Do not waste time in looking for a text that is pleasing. Choose your text beforehand, perhaps the day's liturgical readings; or follow some theme, or a consecutive reading of the whole Bible.
44. The fool falls into the temptation of saying: I already know this text! The wise man knows that it is one thing to know the chemical formula of water and another to savor it by a spring on a summer's day.
45. If you do not comprehend what you are reading, ask the Lord to help you to understand.

And you help the Lord by this: if you read the text in its context, compare it with parallel texts, find the key words, determine the central message...

46. If you have read well, you will be able to say what the text means.

Meditation

47. To meditate is to chew and ruminate, for it is to: reflect, remember, interpret, penetrate ... One who thus mediates on the Word is transformed according to the Word and becomes a mediator of the Word.
48. If the text read means nothing to you, love the Word beyond the words and do not hesitate to surrender yourself without reserve. And if the text is a hard saying and you apply it to your neighbor, try re-reading it in the first person.
49. There is no meditation without distraction. Return, then, to the reading. Concentrate on the key words.
50. When the text speaks to your heart, you have reached and received a precious fruit of meditation.

Prayer

51. Prayer during Lectio Divina can take many forms; praise, petition, thanksgiving, compunction...
52. Having listened by reading and meditation, you can now speak in prayer. If you know that the text says and what it says to you, what do you say to Him?
53. Silence can also be a response, as much for the one who prays, carried out of himself, as for Him who knows all.

Contemplation

54. To contemplate is to take silent delight in the Temple which is the Risen Christ.
55. To contemplate is to encounter the Word, beyond words.
56. To contemplate is to live in the Risen One, rooted in the now of this earth, reaching out to the beyond of the heavens.
57. Contemplation is vision. The contemplative sees the resurrection in the cross, life in death, the Risen One in the Crucified.
58. Contemplation is the thirst caused by the seeming absence or the satiety of mutual presence.

59. The contemplative is at a loss for words, simply because he knows.

Fourth Movement: codetta

Collatio

60. Collatio Is contribution or provision, confrontation or dialogue. It is to provide fuel for meditation, fire for prayer, light for contemplation, motivation for acts ...

Action

61. Action refers, before all, to the conversion of one's heart, behaving as a disciple and under the discipline of the Truth revealed for our salvation.

Collaboration

62. Every good work is in collaboration with the One who does all things well. he who collaborates with Him works and prays with all.

Postlude

63. The Bible is not intended only to tell us about God but to transform us according to the form of Christ.

64. Scripture is the word that informs, giving us the form of Christians.

65. The virginal conception of the Virgin Mother is a mystery of redemption and also a model for imitation: conceiving the Word in the womb of the heart, embracing the will of the Father, makes us brother, sister, and mother.

66. The Word and the words are for man, and not man for the words, because man is for the Word.

67. He who has progressed in Lectio Divina experiences the need for fewer words and more of the Word.

68. He who has been transformed by the Word can read it in the events of each day, and in those signs of the times which are voices of God manifested through the deepest human aspirations.

69. He who has revealed truth engrave in the innermost depths of his heart, does not depend on the sacred text and is for others a living Bible.

70. If you want to know and reach Christ, you will arrive at it much sooner by following him than by reading about him.

Some of the concluding lines from Dom Bernardo's covering letter are well worth quoting as well. After identifying a certain kind of activism as 'capital vice,' Dom Bernard notes that "We are dealing with a pernicious vice, for it unsettles monastic otium, shatters the desire for eternal life, interferes with the continual search for the face of God, and alters, finally, the very nature of contemplative life. I know of a powerful weapon with which to attack and conquer this most unnatural activism: the equilibrium and alternations between Lectio Divina, liturgy and work. And the best way to safeguard this equilibrium is to give Lectio Divina a place of priority. Credete expertibus!" In another paragraph, Dom Bernard quotes a pertinent text by Gilbert, abbot of Hoyland, and then proceeds to point to William of St-Thierry as a model and great master of Lectio. And these are his final words:

This letter has no conclusion. It is for each of you to continue it. But, please, let no one bring it to a close. Let us leave it unfinished, as a sign of the search that is to continue until it ends in Infinity.

Dom Bernardo Olivera, ocso
Abbot General