

Praying with the Scriptures

By Fr. Callistus Isara, MSP

Introduction

I wish to express with deep sentiments of joy my profound gratitude to God for this opportunity to share this reflection with you. I want to thank the Adult Faith Formation Team of St. Michael's Church for organizing this talk. My appreciation goes to Mrs. Ruth Stone who stays in touch with me all year long. I also want to thank all of you for taking time to be here this evening for this talk.

The first half of this talk will focus on our attitude as Catholics to sacred scripture, the public and private reading of sacred scripture and the necessity to share sacred scripture with others. The second half of this talk will underscore the ancient practice of praying with the scriptures known as *lectio divina* as a means of acquainting ourselves more and more with the Word of God.

A. Our Attitude to Sacred Scripture

What is our attitude as Catholics to the Bible? Catholics have often been labeled as not reading the Bible. Do you agree that Catholics don't read the Bible? I would say there is some element of truth to this assertion in the past but that can no longer be said of many Catholics today. There has been a renewed interest and revival in scripture by Catholics since the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council's document on Divine Revelation, **Dei Verbum**, attests to the renewed interest of the Church in the centrality of the sacred scripture in the Christian life. Oftentimes Catholics have felt intimidated by other Christians' proficiency in citing the Bible. The best way for Catholics to respond to this felt intimidation is to cultivate a deep love and interest in reading and studying the Bible. Since the Second Vatican Council, Bible study groups have flourished in many parishes which have resulted in a renewed zeal for reading and praying with the scriptures. For their part, *The Catholic Charismatic Renewal* has revived the interest of many Catholics in the Bible.

As Christians, it is indispensable to cultivate a habit of reading the Bible daily. One could use the scripture readings for weekday Mass. One could also pick a Book of the Bible and read it passage by passage until one has finished it and then move on to another Book of the Bible. Family prayer that incorporates reading a portion of the Bible is another way of stimulating interest in the scriptures. For parents, it is necessary to acquaint their children with the Word of God especially when they are still very young so that they can grow up with the love of scripture. Ordinarily, parents work very hard to provide the best for their children in life. This effort should include the religious upbringing of their children. Furthermore, it is relevant to discover one's favourite scripture texts. That is, the texts that you find very touching and inspiring in your life. It is good to repeatedly read and meditate on those texts so that they can continue to strengthen your faith and shape your life.

It is pertinent to ask ourselves: How often do I read the Bible? Do I spend time everyday to read and meditate on the scriptures? Has the Word of God found a home in my heart?

B. Liturgical Proclamation and Private Reading of the Word

The Second Vatican Council's document on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* exhorts all Christians to constantly read the scriptures (**Dei Verbum 25**). The liturgy is the most sacred and

profound point of contact with the Word of God which is proclaimed during the readings and explained during the homily. However, the proclamation and explanation on the Word of God at the Holy Mass do not exhaust the riches of the Word of God. Thus flowing from the proclamation of the Word in the liturgy is the great need to read the scripture so that it can speak personally to me and I can respond to it through prayer, song, praise, sorrow, conversion, joy, and even tears. Remember the reaction of the people of Israel when Ezra the priest read the Book of the Law of Moses to them after their return from exile:

- **“His Excellency Nehemiah and the priest-scribe Ezra and the levites who were instructing the people said to all the people, ‘Today is sacred to Yahweh your God. Do not be mournful, do not weep.’ For the people were still in tears as they listened to the words of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:9).**

Thus there is a vital connection and continuity between hearing the Word of God at Mass and the private reading of the sacred text. Undoubtedly, the liturgy takes a pride of place in hearing the Word of God. The Second Vatican Council’s document on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, points out that it is Christ himself “who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church” (**Sacrosanctum Concilium 7**). According to Archbishop Mariano Magrassi in his book **Praying the Bible**, “Just as all ecclesial proclamation of the Word is directed towards liturgical proclamation as its final end, so all personal reading of the sacred text finds its center in liturgical hearing__as preparation for it or as a continuation” (**Praying the Bible, p. 4**). If one has cultivated over a period of time, the habit of personal reading of the scriptures, and one has been spiritually enriched by it, one will even be more readily disposed to the Word of God as proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. Private reading of the scriptures complements its public proclamation in the liturgy.

A loving, quiet, calm and personal reading of the scripture is indispensable in order for the sacred text to permeate one’s entire being. As Archbishop Mariano Magrassi has noted, “God speaks not only to his people; he also addresses me personally” (**Praying the Bible, p. 7**). He further notes that, “the Church and the individual are not too different realities__not just because the individual is part of the Church but because the entire mystery of the Church is in some way contained in every soul” (**Praying the Bible, p. 9**). Thus the *continuum* between the public liturgical proclamation of the Word of God and the personal reading of the scripture, in the sense that when one is deeply touched by the Word, one ponders, prays, mulls over it, and the desire leads one back again to the fountain of the liturgy to listen even more attentively and ardently to the Word of God.

St. Gregory the Great (540-604) captures quite excellently the impact of private reading of the scriptures:

- **Often, through the grace of the almighty Lord, certain passages in the sacred text are better understood when the divine Word is read privately. The soul, conscious of its faults and recognizing the truth of what it has heard, is struck by the dart of grief and pierced by the sword of compunction, so that it wishes to do nothing but weep and wash away its stains with floods of tears. Meanwhile it is sometimes rapt in the contemplation of higher things and, in its desire for them, tormented by sweet weeping.... And because it still lacks the strength to cling to heavenly things, exhausted, it finds no rest save in tears.**

To read the scriptures is not simply to encounter a piece of good and inspiring writing but to encounter God. Through the scriptures, we encounter God in a profound way. Hence as Christians guided by the Holy Spirit, we must go deep into the mystery of the Word in order to encounter Christ. St. Jerome said that we cannot understand scripture without the help of the Holy Spirit who inspired it. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35) did not understand the scripture until Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures by explaining to them “the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself” (Luke 24:27). Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch did not understand the scripture passage he was reading until Philip helped him to understand it and then preach Jesus to him (Acts 8: 26-40). Through the scripture, the Church seeks the One whom she loves. Through private reading and praying with the scriptures, I personally desire to be fed at the table of God’s Word.

C. Sharing the Word of God with Others

Sharing the Word of God with another is a basic duty of Christians. St. Paul expressed this truth quite succinctly: “Let the Word of Christ, in all its richness find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and whatever you say or do, let it be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, in thanksgiving to God the Father through him” (Col 3:16-17).

In order to share God’s word with another, one must be familiar with the Word of God through reading and praying with the scriptures. As the saying goes, ‘no one gives what one does not have.’ One must regularly acquaint oneself with the Word of God through the private reading and meditation on scripture and listening attentively to the homily at Mass. One must also focus on relating God’s Word to concrete life situation, so that those who suffer pain, anguish, loneliness, bereavement, grief, failure, joy and success, may find solace, strength, comfort and courage in the Word of God to embrace the challenge of that same Word. As a Christian, not to be acquainted with the scriptures, or have a desire for the Word of God means not to be acquainted with Christ because Christ is the Word of God. As St. Jerome has magnificently pointed out, “Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

Sharing the Word of God with one another takes place in various settings: During family prayer when the scripture is read and members share what touches them from the passage; through Bible study groups; through prayer meetings and pious societies’ devotions; through faith sharing exercise; through retreats, workshops, seminars, etc. Catechesis is also a very important means of sharing the Word of God with others. Catechesis is the deepening of the faith and the sacred scripture is the source of catechesis. Our adherence to the Word of God ensures the deepening and strengthening of our faith.

D. Origin and Meaning of Lectio Divina

The private reading of scripture was initiated by the Fathers of the Church and popularized by the monks. *Lectio Divina* is a method that enhances the effective and fruitful reading and praying with the scriptures. *Lectio Divina* gradually became an integral aspect of the monastic tradition. The Fathers of the Church, who used the term *Lectio Divina*, underscored its importance in prayer life. *Lectio Divina* simply means *divine reading*. *Lectio Divina* is an ancient practice of both personal and communal reading of sacred scripture. The key to *Lectio Divina* is the continuous and prayerful reading of a passage of scripture as one listens attentively to the voice of God. The exercise of *Lectio Divina* requires inner silence in order to listen to the

Word of God; in silence we discover God's invitation to us in the light of His Word. *Lectio Divina* is a simple but rich way of relating sacred scripture to one's personal life. *Lectio Divina* can be practiced individually and also by a group.

Guigo, the Carthusian, describes *Lectio Divina* as "the careful study of the scriptures, concentrating all powers on it" (**Praying the Bible, p. 17**). J. Leclercq has a very concise definition of *Lectio Divina* as "prayed reading." *Lectio Divina* is a dialogue between God and persons. It is also being always present with God. Let us look at some of the Fathers of the Church on *Lectio Divina*:

- According to St. Ambrose, "we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles."
- Similarly, St. Jerome notes that "if you pray, you are speaking to your spouse; if you read, he is speaking to you."
- For St. John Chrysostom, "even if the phrase is short, its power is great. Often one word taken from there is enough to serve as *viaticum* for an entire lifetime."

E. The Main Parts of *Lectio Divina*

It was Guigo, the Carthusian and prior of Grande Chartreuse (d. 1188), who gave a systematic format to *Lectio Divina*. Although *Lectio Divina* goes way back to the era of the Fathers of the Church, there was no methodology with regard to the practice of *Lectio Divina*. The Fathers of the Church and the early Christians did not want to be constrained to a particular method of reading and praying with the scriptures less there becomes rigidity which in turn could stifle the spontaneity and the fluidity of reading the Word of God. The early Christians felt that no methodology was adequate enough to encapsulate the reading of scripture. They did not want any methodology to extinguish the freedom of the children of God in reading the scripture.

Guigo gave a format to what was prevalent in the patristic and medieval periods of the Church. The difference is that the Fathers of the Church and the early Christians were not interested in methodology or logic. However, it became eventually necessary to have a format for reading and praying the scriptures. As one becomes immersed in *Lectio Divina*, one does not bother that much about the methodology, though very important; instead, one becomes subsumed and consumed by the Word and the feeling of being present to the Word.

The traditional format for prayed reading was: "reading, reflection, study, meditation, prayer, contemplation (in Latin: *lectio, cogitatio, studium, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*)" (**Praying the Bible, p. 104**). Guigo retained four of the format: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. These four steps are interconnected. It is a cycle that one can go through over and over again. As Guigo has aptly described it:

- "Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness which gladdens and refreshes" (**Praying the Bible, p. 104**).
- "Reading works on the outside, meditation on the pith: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found" (**Praying the Bible, p. 104**).

Let us examine separately the different aspects of *Lectio Divina*.

i) Reading

In order to hear the Word of God, one must read the scriptures with commitment. This means that one is calm, the heart is open, and all distractions and worries are excluded, after which one slowly, gently, and not in a hurry, read the scriptures. The preparation consists of finding a suitable and conducive environment to read the scriptures. There is no universal formula on how to read the Bible and what part of the Bible to focus on. What is advisable is to follow the liturgical cycles by reading the Weekday readings. Also, one could pick a book of the Bible and read it passage by passage. One does not have to read a whole chapter since a chapter is often broken down into several passages.

ii) Meditation

This has to do with creating space in our hearts for the Word to permeate it. During meditation, one listens to the inner echo of the Word until it has permeated every fiber of our heart; one takes to heart the Word. Meditation is likened to what God said to the prophet Ezekiel: “Son of man, take to heart everything I say to you, listen carefully, then go to your exiled countrymen and talk to them” (Ezekiel 3:11).

Meditation is to ruminate over the words of scripture and to repeat them over and over; it's kind of like a mantra. One may be moved to use mantras such as ‘Speak Lord, your servant is listening,’ ‘Lord, have mercy,’ ‘Come Lord Jesus,’ ‘Jesus I love you,’ ‘Your words are spirit Lord and they are life,’ ‘Come Holy Spirit,’ ‘Lord I am not worthy,’ and so on. It should be noted that this is not a monotonous repetition of the text but the “joyful discovery of a Word ever fresh and new” (**Praying the Bible, p. 112**). Meditation is a time when the mind reflects and seeks to understand. In meditation, one's thought, imagination, emotion, and desire are focused on the Lord as one listens and reflects on Word of God. Meditation is a time to attune one's mind to the Lord through His Word by listening to Him.

iii) Prayer

Prayer is pretty much our response to the meditative reading of sacred scripture. Prayer emanates from our reading and meditation on the Word of God. It comes from a heart that has heard God in his word. The prayer is thus a response to God's Word which could take the form of praise, thanksgiving, regret for sins, intercession, and so on. The prayer of the Church in the liturgy is a response to God and the mysteries of salvation. As Christians, we should model our prayer after the prayer pattern of the Church in the liturgy. As Archbishop Mariano Magrassi has observed:

- “In order to pray, we do not need to rack our brains, artificially evoking interior acts, thoughts, or excessively refined affections. All we need to do is react in the presence of the text with free and spontaneous prayer. And when this spontaneous outpouring stops, we return to the text for fresh nourishment” (**Praying the Bible, p.114**).
- “All Christian prayer, the highest forms of contemplation included, fits into this pattern of listening and response which is prayed reading” (**Praying the Bible, p. 115**).

iv) Contemplation

Ordinarily, contemplation is the highest point of prayer. The early Christians described it as a rich religious experience and a fruition that seems to anticipate the joy of heaven. It is feeling like one has died and gone to heaven. As I remarked in my paper on *Prayer*, “contemplation is the deepest form of prayer; it is the peak of prayer. One reaches a stage in which at prayer, one is deeply aware of God’s presence and one is subsumed in the presence of God that words don’t matter. One is at peace and at rest in the Lord. It is an intense moment of prayer that one just enjoys being in the presence of the Lord.”

Archbishop Mariano Magrassi describes contemplation as a “flight in which the soul, going beyond the words of the text, enters into union with the divine Word in anticipation of heaven” (***Praying the Bible*, p. 117**). Words are inadequate and powerless to describe the experience of contemplation. Contemplation is the final stage of *Lectio Divina*. From contemplation, one can go no further because one is at the threshold of vision. The soul is at peace. The heart rests in the Lord. The beloved finds the Lover and the beloved rests in the bosom of the Lover.

Conclusion

My beloved brothers and sisters, the constant reading of the scriptures fosters the desire and hunger for the Word of God. The practice of *Lectio Divina* challenges us to spend time with the Word of God. It should be noted that the methodology of *Lectio Divina* is not sacrosanct. One does not have to adhere to it mechanically. The format is very essential at the initial stage of the practice of *Lectio Divina*. As time goes on, one becomes so consumed and subsumed with the Word of God that even the methodology becomes secondary. Thanks be to God, the practice of *Lectio Divina* has been retrieved in the post-Vatican II Church. It is spiritually beneficial to practice *Lectio Divina* as a form of prayer. With *Lectio Divina*, one does not have to worry about what to say in prayer. The Word of God is there to guide and direct us. Having received His Word in scripture, one will eventually respond to it in prayer. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts so that the Word of God will always find a home in our hearts! Amen.

Thank you once again and God bless you.

- **Being a paper presented at St. Michael’s Catholic Church, 100 Oak Drive South, Lake Jackson, Texas, 77566, on Sunday, August 1, 2010.**