

MEDITATING DAY AND NIGHT ON THE LAW OF THE LORD AND KEEPING VIGIL IN PRAYER
Carmelite reflections on Lectio Divina – the prayerful reading of the Bible

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*Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby,
pondering the Lord’s law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers...
(Carmelite Rule: Chapter 10).*

Introduction

Lectio Divina (‘holy reading/listening’) is the ancient method of prayerfully reading the Bible, the Word of God. Originally cultivated by monastic orders – but now an important part of the lives of many Christians from different traditions – *Lectio Divina* enables us to contemplate God and God’s will in our lives. If prayed regularly, *Lectio* can deepen our relationship with God.

In the Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert* we can glean how the first Carmelites, in fidelity to a long tradition, tried to nourish their lives with the Word of God.

Today, we Carmelites – brothers and sisters – face a challenge. While life makes us sense the need for a prayerful reading of the Bible, and the people look to us for direction, we still have difficulty in giving a response because we ourselves were never given a preparation for reading the Bible as prayer.

There are many difficulties: pastoral pressures lead us to read the Bible more for others than for ourselves; we have too little time to stop and allow the Word to penetrate into our lives; often, our way of reading smacks more of study and discussion than of meditation and prayer. Also, there is a certain rationalism in us and the remains of forms of fundamentalism, which disturb us with questions like: Did it really happen like that? And, how could God allow that to happen? All of this makes peaceful attention to the Word of God more difficult.

A prayerful reading of the Bible within what is traditionally called *Lectio Divina* is an urgent task if we are to be faithful to what God asks of us today. It is something like curing the veins where the blood which keeps us alive has to flow.

To this end we offer five helps:

1. A brief account of what the *Rule of Saint Albert* says, directly and indirectly, about *Lectio Divina* or the prayerful reading of the Bible.
2. Ten words of advice about the 'mystical' life which must guide our prayerful reading of the Bible; that is, the light which needs to be in our eyes when we do our *Lectio Divina*. In these words of advice, reference is made to the *Carmelite Rule*, written by Saint Albert of Jerusalem in the early thirteenth century (the paragraph numbering follows that agreed by the Carmelite and Discalced Carmelite Orders in 1999).
3. Ten points of orientation (the least possible) for personal and daily reading of the Bible (each person will gradually develop his or her own way of communicating with the Word of God).
4. Seven suggestions for reading the Word of God in groups; in these there is a reflection of the tradition of the 'four steps' of *Lectio Divina*.
5. A set of Biblical texts relating to the two 'foundational' figures of Carmel: the prophet Elijah, and Mary the mother of Jesus.

1. The *Rule* of Carmel and the Reading of the Bible

The way in which the *Rule* uses and presents the Bible

The *Rule of Saint Albert* appears to be a collection of phrases, almost all of which were taken from the Bible. It would be difficult to know how many times exactly the Bible is used to express the *propositum* presented by the first Carmelites to the Patriarch Albert. Some believe it is more than a hundred.

The author of the *Rule* knew the Bible by heart and he had made it so much part of his life that it is difficult to distinguish between his own words and those of the Bible. He uses the Bible without giving references. He quotes the Bible without checking the text. He joins and divides phrases at will, he changes and adapts texts to suit his own purpose, just as if he was dealing with his own word. This way of using the Bible is the result of long and assiduous reading, marked by familiarity, freedom and fidelity.

Even though Chapter XV shows a certain preference for the Letters of St. Paul, the Carmelite *Rule* uses, cites and evokes, without distinction, the Old Testament as much as the New. The explicit recommendation to read Paul's Letters did not determine the spirituality of the Order. Its spirituality continued to be centred on the two Biblical figures - Mary and Elijah.

The framework in which the *Rule* uses and understands the Bible is:

1. The desire to live in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, expressed in the Prologue
2. The desire to imitate the ideal community of the first Christians, which we find throughout Chapters VII to XI. This was the point which inspired the renewal of the Church at the beginning of the 13th century.

The teaching of the *Rule* is not to be found only in what teaches about reading the Bible but also in the way in which the *Rule* itself uses the Bible. It is able to incarnate the Word of God even to the point of assuming it as its own. Paraphrasing the words of St Paul, it might say: *I speak, but it is not I, but the Word of God which speaks in me* (Gal 2:20).

How the *Rule* recommends that we use and read the Bible:

Directly and indirectly, the *Rule of Saint Albert* recommends eight times that we read the Bible:

- Listen to the Sacred Scriptures during meals in the refectory (IV)
- Ponder the Lord's Law day and night (VII)
- Pray the psalms (the Hours) (VII)
- Take part in the daily Eucharist (IX)
- Be fortified by holy meditations (which come from prayerful reading) (XIV)
- The Word must dwell in your mouth and in your heart (XIV)
- Work at all times in accordance with the Word of God (XIV)
- Read frequently the Letters of St Paul (XV)

In these recommendations, our *Rule* shows the three doors through which the Word of God enters the lives of Carmelites:

- The door of personal private reading
Meditation in one's cell. Pondering the Word which passes from the mouth to the heart.
- The door of community reading
Listening to the Word during meals in the refectory and in the Eucharist (we do not know whether in that remote beginning on Mount Carmel the Divine Office was celebrated in common).
- The door of ecclesial reading
The Carmelites followed the Divine Office and the Eucharist and, in addition to that, in their own lives they assimilated and assumed the renewal of the Church which was going on at that time.

In these recommendations we can also see the pedagogy which the Carmelites followed in order to learn and assimilate the Word of God in their lives. We can identify four points:

- First of all, the Word has to be heard or read
 - in the refectory
 - in the Eucharist
 - in the Divine Office
- Afterwards, the Word which has been heard and read has to be pondered and ruminated
 - This meditation has to be done by day and by night, without ceasing, above all in the cell.
 - By this mediation (rumination) the Word reaches from the mouth to the heart and produces holy thoughts.
- The Word, once it has been heard and pondered, has to be enveloped in prayer
 - It must turn into prayer in the Divine Office, and in the Eucharist
 - and in the cell where the Carmelite must keep vigil in prayer, day and night.
- As a result of this kind of reading the Word of God invades our thoughts, our heart and our actions and so everything is done in the Word of the Lord.

These points of pedagogy, taken from the *Rule*, reflect that the age-old practise of *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio divina*, or the prayerful reading of the Bible, was always the spinal column of religious life, going right back to the very beginning. It was an important part of the life of the first Carmelites.

The reflections which follow have the purpose of showing the value of the practise of *Lectio Divina* for us today. This is with a view to better fulfilling our duty to meditate day and night upon the Law of the Lord.

2. The Process of *Lectio Divina*: Ten words of advice

1. When you begin a *Lectio Divina* of the Bible you are not concerned with study; you are not going to read the Bible in order either to increase your knowledge or to prepare for some apostolate. You are not reading the Bible in order to have some extraordinary experience. You are going to read the Word of God in order to *listen* to what God has to say to you, to know his will and thus 'to live more deeply in allegiance to Jesus Christ' (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 2*). There must be poverty in you; you must also have the disposition which the old man Eli recommended to Samuel: 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening' (*1 Samuel 3:10*).
2. Listening to God does not depend on you or on the effort you make. It depends entirely on God, on God's freely-made decision to come into dialogue with you and to allow you to listen to the voice of God. Thus you need to *prepare yourself by asking him to send his Spirit*, since without the Spirit of God it is impossible to discover the meaning of the Word which God has prepared for us today (cf. *John 14:26; 16:13; Lk 11:13*).
3. It is important to *create the right surroundings* which will facilitate recollection and an attentive listening to the Word of God. For this, you must build your cell within you and around you and you must stay in it (*Carmelite Rule: Chapters 6 & 10*), all the time of your *Lectio Divina*. Putting one's body in the right position helps recollection in the mind.
4. When you open the Bible, you have to be conscious that you are opening a Book which is not yours. It belongs to *the community*. In your *Lectio Divina* you are setting foot in the great Tradition of the Church which has come down through the centuries. Your prayerful reading is like the ship which carries down the winding river to the sea. The light shining from the sea has already enlightened the dark night of many generations. In having your own experience of *Lectio Divina* you are alone. You are united to brothers and sisters who before you succeeded in 'meditating day and night upon the Law of the Lord and keeping vigil in prayer' (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 10*).
5. An attentive and fruitful reading of the Bible involves three steps. It has to be marked from beginning to end, by three attitudes:

First Step/Attitude – Reading (*Lectio*): First of all, you have to ask, *What does the text say as text?* This requires you to *be silent*. Everything in you must be silent so that nothing stands in the way of your gleaning what the texts say to you (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 21*) and so that you do not make the text say what you would like to hear.

Second Step/Attitude – Meditation (*Meditatio*): You must ask, *What does the text say to me or to us?* In this second step we enter into *dialogue* with the text so that its meaning comes across with freshness and penetrates the life of the Carmelite today. Like Mary you will ponder what you have heard and 'meditate on the Law of the Lord' (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 10*). In this way 'the Word of God will dwell abundantly on your lips and in your heart' (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 19*).

Third Step/Attitude – Prayer (*Oratio*): Furthermore, you have to try to discover *What does the text lead me to say to God?* This is the moment of *prayer*, the moment of ‘keeping watch in prayer’ (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 10*).

6. The result, the fourth step, the destination of *Lectio Divina*, is *contemplation* (*contemplatio*). Contemplation means having in one’s eyes something of the ‘wisdom which leads to salvation’ (2 *Timothy 3:15*). We begin to see the world and life through the eyes of the poor, through the eyes of God. We assume our own poverty and eliminate from our way of thinking all that smacks of the powerful. We recognise all the many things which we thought were fidelity to God, to the Gospel, and to the Tradition; in reality they were nothing more than fidelity to ourselves and our own interests. We get a taste, even now, of the love of God which is above all things. We come to see that in our lives true love of God is revealed in love of our neighbour (*Carmelite Rule: Chapters 15 & 19*). It is like saying always ‘let it be done according to your Word’ (*Luke 1:38*). Thus ‘all you do will have the Lord’s word for accompaniment’ (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 19*).
7. So that your *Lectio Divina* does not end up being the conclusions of your own feelings, thoughts and caprices, but has the deepest roots, it is important to take account of *three demands*:

First Demand: *Check* the result of your reading *with the community* to which you belong (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 15*), with the faith of the living Church. Otherwise it could happen that your effort might lead you nowhere (cf. *Galatians 2:2*).

Second Demand: *Check* what you read in the Bible *with what is going on in life around you*. It was in confronting their faith with the situation existing around them that the people of God created the traditions which up to today are visible in the Bible. The desire to embody the contemplative ideal of the Carmelite Order within the reality of ‘minores’ (the poor of each age) brought the first Carmelite hermits to become mendicants among the people. When the *Lectio Divina* does not reach its goal in our life, the reason is not always our failure to pray, our lack of attention to the faith of the Church, or our lack of serious study of the text. Oftentimes it is simply our failure to pay attention to the crude and naked reality which surrounds us. The early Christian writer Cassian tells us that anyone who lives superficially – without seeking to go deeper – will not be able to reach the source where the Psalms were born.

Third Demand: *Check* the conclusions of your reading *with the results of biblical studies* which have shown the literal meaning of the words. *Lectio divina*, it has to be said, cannot remain chained to the letter. The Spirit’s meaning has to be sought (2 *Corinthians 3:6*). However, any effort to identify the Spirit’s meaning without basing it in the written word would be like trying to build a castle on sand (St. Augustine). That would be a way of falling into the trap of fundamentalism. In this day and age, when so many ideas are flying about, common sense is a most important quality. Common sense will be nourished by critical study of the written word. So that we will not go astray on this point, the *Carmelite Rule* tells us to follow the example of the Apostle Paul (*Carmelite Rule: Chapter 24*).

8. The Apostle Paul gives various bits of advice on how to read the Bible. He himself was an excellent interpreter. Here are some of the norms and attitudes which he taught and followed:

When you set yourself to read the Bible...

(a) *Look upon yourself as the one to whom the word is addressed*, since everything was written for our instruction (*1 Corinthians 10:11; Roman 15:4*). The Bible is *our* book.

(b) *Keep faith in Jesus Christ in your eyes*, since it is only through faith in Jesus Christ that the veil is removed and the Scripture reveals its meaning and tells of that wisdom which leads to salvation (*2 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:15; Romans 15:4*).

(c) Remember how Paul spoke of 'Jesus Christ Crucified' (*2 Corinthians 2:2*), a 'stumbling block for some and foolishness for others'. It was this Jesus who opened Paul's eyes to see how, among the poor on the outskirts of Corinth, the foolishness and the stumbling block of the cross was confounding the wise, the strong, and those who believed themselves to be something in this world (*1 Corinthians 1:21-31*).

(d) *Unite 'I' and 'We'*: It is never a question of 'I' alone or 'We' alone. The Apostle Paul also united the two. He received his mission from the community of Antioch and spoke from that background (*Acts 13:1-3*).

(e) *Keep life's problems in mind*, that is, all that is happening in the Carmelite Family, in the communities, in the Church, and among the people to which you belong and whom you serve. Paul began from what was going on in the communities which he founded (*1 Corinthians 10:1-13*).

9. When you read the Bible, be always aware that the text of the Bible is not only a fact. It is also a *symbol* (*Hebrews 11:19*). It is both a window through which you see what happened to others in the past and a *mirror in which you can see what is happening to you today* (*1 Corinthians 10:6-10*). A prayerful reading is like a gentle flood which, little by little, waters the earth and makes it fruitful (*Isaiah 55:10-11*). In beginning to dialogue with God in *Lectio Divina*, you grow like a tree planted near streams of water (*Psalms 1:3*). You cannot see the growth but you can see its results in your encounter with yourself, with God, and with others. The song says: 'Like a flood that washes clean, like a fire that devours, so is your Word, leaving its mark upon me each time it passes'.
10. One final point to be born in mind: When you do a *Lectio Divina*, the principal object is not to interpret the Bible, nor to get to know its content, nor to increase your knowledge of the history of the people of God, nor to experience extraordinary things, but rather to *discover, with the help of the written Word, the living Word which God speaks to you today*, in your life, in our lives, in the life of the people, in the world in which we live (*Psalms 97:5*). The purpose is to grow in faith, like the prophet Elijah, and to experience more and more that 'the Lord lives, and I stand in his presence' (*1 Kings 17:1; 18:15*).

3. Ten points for personal *Lectio Divina*

The attitude of the faithful disciple:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word the one that is weary. Morning by morning God wakens, wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. (Isaiah 50:4).

1. Opening prayer: an invocation of the Holy Spirit
2. Slow and attentive reading of the text
3. A moment of interior silence, to recall what I have read
4. Look at the meaning of each phrase
5. Bring the word into the present, ponder it in relation to my life
6. Broaden my vision by relating this text to other biblical texts
7. Read the text again, prayerfully, giving a response to God
8. Formulate my commitment in life
9. Pray a suitable psalm
10. Choose a phrase which captures the meaning and memorise it

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. I gave my back to the smiters... For the Lord God helps me; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. (Isaiah 50:5-8).

4. Seven suggestions for group *Lectio Divina*

Jesus stood in their midst and said: Peace be with you. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. (Luke 24:36, 45).

And Jesus said: the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you ... the Spirit will guide you into all the truth. (John 14:26; 16:13).

1. **Welcome and prayer**
 - A word of welcome and of sharing expectations.
 - Opening prayer, asking for the light of the Holy Spirit.
2. **Reading of the text**
 - Slow and attentive reading, followed by a moment of silence.
 - Remaining silent, allowing the Word to come.
 - Repeating the text by asking each one to recall a word or phrase from it, until the whole text is heard again.
3. **What does the text say?**
 - Share impressions and questions as to what the text is saying.
 - If necessary, read the text again and help one another to understand it.
 - A moment of silence in order to assimilate all that has been heard.
4. **Its meaning for us**
 - Ponder the text and discover its meaning for today.
 - Apply the meaning of the text to the situation in which we live today.
 - Broaden the meaning, by relating this text to the other texts in the Bible.
 - Situate the text in God's plan which is accomplished in human history.
5. **Pray with the text**
 - Read the text again with great attention.
 - A moment of silence in order to prepare our response to God.
 - Share, in the form of intercessions, the lights and strengths which have been received.
6. **Contemplation and commitment**
 - Formulate the commitment to which the prayerful reading has led.
 - Choose a phrase which captures the whole message in order to take that phrase with you throughout the day.
7. **A psalm**
 - Pick a psalm which is in tune with all that has been experienced in the meeting.
 - Conclude the meeting by reciting the psalm.

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.'... And now Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servant to speak your word with all boldness...' And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:24-26, 29, 31).

5. A selection of Biblical texts linked to the foundational figures of Carmel

Biblical texts relating to the prophet Elijah

1 Kg 17:1-6 Depart from here ...

The Word of God intervenes, giving the order to depart.

1 Kg 17:7-16 Bring me a morsel of bread ...

Sharing produces an abundance of goods.

1 Kg 17:17-24 I know that you are a man of God ...

The prophet is a life-giving instrument.

1 Kg 18:1-19 It is you, you troubler of Israel.

Who is responsible for the ills of the people?

1 Kg 18:20-40 How long will you remain hopping from one foot to the other?

Choose, again and again, the God of life.

1 Kg 18:41-46 Go up now, look toward the sea.

Small signs which keep our hope alive.

1 Kg 19:1-8 It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life.

Crisis which reveals hidden defects.

1 Kg 19:9-14 I have been very zealous ... The gentle breeze.

God is present where we do not expect God to be.

1 Kg 19:15-21 Go and anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place.

Know how to transmit the charism to future generations.

1 Kg 21:1-26 Have you killed, and also taken possession?

Profit making produces injustices.

2 Kg 1:1-16 O man of God, come down quickly.

So that life will have value for you.

2 Kg 2:1-7 The sons of the prophets.

God will not abandon you.

2 Kg 2:8-18 Let me have a double portion of your spirit.

The Spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha.

Ecc 48:1-14 His word flaring like a torch ...

In Elijah's word, God's Word is at work.

Biblical texts relating to Mary the mother of Jesus

Lk 1:26-38 The Annunciation. Let it be done to me according to your word.
To be open, so that the Word of God can take flesh.

Lk 1:39-56 The Visitation.
Recognise the Word of God in the events of life.

Mt 1:17-25 Mary and Joseph. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.
Accept the Word even when you do not expect it.

Lk 2:1-20 The Nativity She kept all these things in her heart.
The marginalised recognise and accept the Word.

Lk 2:21-32 The Presentation. My eyes have seen your salvation.
Many years of life purifies the eyes.

Lk 2:33-38 Simeon and Anna. A sword shall pierce your heart.
To be Christian is to be a sign of contradiction.

Mt 2:1-12 The Wise Men came from the East. We saw a star in the East and we came.
Recognise the saviour in a child.

Mt 2:13-23 The Flight into Egypt. The King wants to kill the child.
The new and definitive exodus has begun.

Lk 2:39-52 In the Temple when Jesus was twelve years old. Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?
Obedience and disobedience go together.

Jn 1:1-12 The Wedding Feast at Cana. Do whatever he tells you.
What did they do with the wine which was left over?

Lk 11:27-38 Jesus praised his mother. Blessed is the womb that bore you.
Blessed is the one who hears the word and lives by it.

Jn 19:25-28 At the foot of the Cross. Behold your son. Behold your mother.
New life is born at the hour of death.

Acts 1:12-14 In the Upper Room. They persevered in prayer, together with the women.
The first community: seed and ideal.

Rev.12:1-17 A great sign in the heavens. A woman clothed in the sun.
Fragile life conquered the power of death.