

MEDITATING DAY AND NIGHT
KEEPING VIGIL IN PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

In the Rule of St 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.

To come back to a prayerful reading of the Bible 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 I offer five helps:

- A. A brief account of what the Rule of St Albert says, directly and indirectly, about *lectio divina* or the *prayerful reading of the Bible*.
- B. Ten Words of advice about the mystical life which must guide our prayerful reading of the Bible, i.e., the light which needs to be in our eyes when we do our *lectio divina*.
- C. Ten points of orientation for personal and daily reading of the Bible (each person will gradually develop his/her own way of communicating with the Word of God).
- D. Seven suggestions for reading the Word of God in groups. In these there is a reflection of the tradition of the four steps of the *lectio divina*.
- E. A set of Biblical texts on the prophet Elijah and Mary the mother of Jesus.

A. THE RULE OF CARMEL AND THE READING OF THE BIBLE

1. The way in which the Rule uses and presents the Bible

The Rule of St 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 Rules 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

- I. The desire to live in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, expressed in the Prologue
- II. 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 thirteenth century.

The teaching of the Rule is not to be found only in what it 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* (Galatians 2:20).

2. How the Rule recommends that we use and read the Bible:

Directly and indirectly, the Rule of St 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:**
 - ◇ Mediation 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 (ruminating) 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*.

B. NINE 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. Neither are you 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* (Prologue). 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* (1Samuel 3:10).
2. **Listening to God does not depend on you or on the effort you make.** It depends entirely on God, on his freely made decision to come into dialogue with you and to allow you to listen to his voice. Thus you need to *prepare yourself by asking God to send his Spirit*, since without the Spirit of God, it is impossible to discover the meaning of the Word which God had prepared for us today (cf. John 14:26; 16:13; Luke 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 and around you, and you must stay in it (VII) 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 not alone. You are united to brothers and sisters who, before you, succeeded in *meditating day and night upon the Law of the Lord and in keeping vigil in prayer* (VII).
5. **An attentive and fruitful reading of the Bible involves three steps** and their related attitudes. It has to be marked, from beginning to end, by them:

First step and the attitude of Lectio –

First of all, you have to ask: *What does the text say as text?*

This requires that you *be silent*. Everything in you must be silent, so that nothing stands in the way of your gleaning what the texts say to you (XVI) and so that you do not make the text say what you would like to hear.

Second step and the attitude of 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 heard and *meditate on the Law of the Lord* (VII). In this way, *the Word of God will dwell abundantly on your lips and in your heart* (XIV).

Third step and the attitude of Oratio –

Furthermore, you have to try to discover: *What does the text lead me to say to God?*

This is the movement of *prayer*, the moment of keeping watch in prayer (VII).

6. **The result, the fourth step, is the destination of lectio divina – contemplation.** Contemplation means having in one's eyes something of the *wisdom which leads to salvation* (2Timothy 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 of the Order, were in reality 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 (IX, XIV). It is like saying always, *Let it be done to me according to your Word* (Luke 1:38). *Thus, all you do will have the Lord's word for accompaniment* (XIV).
7. **So that your lectio divina does not end up being the conclusions of your own feelings,** thoughts and caprices, but have the deepest roots, it is important to take account of three demands:
 - **Check the results of your reading with the community to which you belong** (XI), with the faith of the living Church. Otherwise it could happen that your effort might lead you nowhere (cf. Galatians 2:2).
 - **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 our Order within the reality of the *minores* (the poor of each age) brought the first Carmelites to become mendicants. When *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. Often it is simply our failure to pay attention to the crude and naked reality which surrounds us. Anyone who lives superficially, without seeking to go deeper, will not be able to reach the source where the psalms were born, Cassian tells us.
 - **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 (2Corinthians 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 rule tells us to follow the example of the Apostle Paul (XV).

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

When you set yourself to read the Bible:

- Look upon yourself as the one to whom the Word is addressed, since everything was written for instruction (1Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4); the Bible is our book.
- 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 (2Corinthians 3:16; 2Timothy 3:15; Romans 15:4).
- Remember how St Paul spoke of Jesus Christ Crucified (2Corinthians 2:2), *a stumbling block for some and foolishness for others*. It was this Jesus who opened his eyes to see how, among the poor on the outskirts of Corinth, the foolishness and stumbling block of the cross was confounding the wise, the strong and those who believed themselves to be something in this world (1Corinthians 1:21-31).
- Unite 'I' and 'we'; it is never a question of I alone, or we alone. The apostle also united the two. He received his mission from the community of Antioch and spoke from the background (Acts 13:1-3).
- Keep life's problems in mind: 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 (1Corinthians 10:1-13).
- 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* (1Corinthians 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 (Psalm 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*.

9. **One final point to be borne in mind:** when you do *lectio divina*, the principal object is not to interpret the Bible, not to get to know its content, not 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 (Psalm 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* (1Kings 17:1; 18:15).

C. 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 to 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 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** to prayer.
9. **Pray** with a suitable psalm.
10. **Choose a phrase** which captures the meaning and memorise it.

The Lord 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; who vindicates me is the one near (Isaiah 50:5-8).

D. 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).

E. PROGRAMME OF BIBLICAL TEXTS CONCERNING MARY AND ELIJAH

Texts relating to the prophet Elijah:

1. 1Kings 17:1-6: *Depart from here...*
The Word of God intervenes, giving the order to depart.
2. 1Kings 17:7-16: *Bring me a morsel of bread...*
Sharing produces an abundance of goods.
3. 1Kings 17:17-24: *I know that you are a man of God...* The prophet is a life-giving instrument.
4. 1Kings 18:1-19: *It is you, you troubler of Israel.*
Who is responsible for the ills of the people?
5. 1Kings 18:20-40: *How long will you remain hopping from one foot to the other?*
Choose, again and again, the God of life.
6. 1Kings 18:41-46: *Go up now, look toward the sea.*
Small signs which keep our hope alive.
7. 1Kings 19:1-8: *It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life*
Crisis which reveals hidden defects.
8. 1Kings 19:9-14: *I have been very zealous... The gentle breeze.*
God is present where we do not expect God to be.
9. 1Kings 19:15-21: *Go and anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place.*
Know how to transmit the charism to future generations.
10. 1Kings 21:1-26: *Have you killed, and also taken possession?*
Profit making produces injustices.
11. 2Kings 1:1-16: *O man of God, come down quickly.*
So that life will have value for you.
12. 2Kings 2:1-7: *The sons of the prophets.*
God will not abandon you.
13. 2Kings 2:8-18: *Let me have a double portion of your spirit.*
The Spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha.
14. Ecclesiasticus 48:1-14: *His word flaring like a torch...*
In Elijah's word, God's Word is at work.

Texts relating to Mary, the Mother of Jesus

1. Luke 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.
2. Luke 1:39-56: *The Visitation.*
Recognise the Word of God in the events of life.
3. Matthew 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.
4. Luke 2:1-20: The Nativity She kept all these things in her heart.
The marginalised recognise and accept the Word.
5. Luke 2:21-32: The Presentation. *My eyes have seen your salvation.*
Many years of life purifies the eyes.
6. Luke 2:33-38: Simeon and Anna. *A sword shall pierce your heart.*
To be Christian is to be a sign of contradiction.
7. Matthew 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.
8. Matthew 2:13-23: The Flight into Egypt. *The King wants to kill the child.*
The new and definitive exodus has begun.
9. Luke 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.
10. John 1:1-12: The Wedding Feast at Cana. *Do whatever he tells you.*
What did they do with the wine which was left over?
11. Luke 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.
12. John 19:25-28: At the foot of the Cross. *Behold your son. Behold your mother.*
New life is born at the hour of death.
13. Acts 1:12-14: In the Upper Room. *They persevered in prayer, together with the women.*
The first community: seed and ideal.
14. Apocalypse 12:1-17: A great sign in the heavens. *A woman clothed in the sun.*
Fragile life conquered the power of death.