

The *lectio divina* and the School of the Word in French-speaking Switzerland.

A contribution to Christian Unity.

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The path to the School of the Word in French-speaking Switzerland

In 1989 I came into contact with Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the then Archbishop of Milan. He had suggested that the young people of his diocese start practising the School of the Word, so that they could get used to reading the Bible according to the *lectio divina*. At the time I was director of the Swiss Bible Society and I had got in touch with a number of youth workers in French-speaking Switzerland to interest them in this experiment. We visited Mgr Martini and then took part in a celebration of the School of the Word in Milan, with about a hundred young people.

Because of the young people's positive response we decided to open the School of the Word in French Switzerland. The first celebration was held in January 1994 in the Cathedral of Lausanne, and it was packed.

In the first years many young people took part in the celebrations in all the French Swiss cantons. But the wild enthusiasm of the first years has given way to something more modest. And the average age has risen.

Today, the committee of the School of the Word, which is made up of Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical, Lutheran and Orthodox Christians, publishes a booklet for seven celebrations every year. It is used in some thirty places in French Switzerland.¹

The successive steps of the *lectio divina*

What does *lectio divina* consist of? There are several ways to do it, with some constant elements. Traditionally there are four steps: preparation; reading; meditation; prayer. In modern times a fifth, communication, has been added. Here they are:

¹ See: <http://www.la-bible.ch/fr/mainpages/bible/lectio-divina>

a. Preparation

The essential part of the preparation is the invocation of the Holy Spirit. We ask the Spirit, who has inspired the Scriptures, to come and enlighten us. I begin each reading with an invocation, which prepares the participants to read the Word with a free heart.

b. Reading

The next step is to read and reread the text several times. While the text is being read, the important thing is silence. Silence is one of the most important tools in the *lectio divina*. It is the sign that we are there not only to listen but to interact with the text, analysing it, memorising it, and relating it to other texts.

c. Meditation

During the reading, I ask myself what the text says; during the time of meditation I ask myself what it says to *me* today, in my life, in the Church, in the world. This is the moment when I ask myself how the text connects with me.

d. Prayer

In this step I respond to Christ, who speaks to me through the text. I take the words of the prayer from the words of the Bible. To speak to Christ with his own words is the first fruit of the *lectio divina*.

One of the most beautiful prayers is the Magnificat, a tapestry of verses from the Old Testament uttered by Mary under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which had just visited her (Luke 1, 46.55). St Luke's Gospel depicts Mary as 'meditating these words in her heart'. (Luke 2,19). In some sense she is the model of the *lectio divina*.

e. Communication

The following step is to share what we have experienced during the reading. It is important in the spiritual life not to keep to ourselves what we have received. This appears in many accounts of the gospels where people shared what they experienced with Jesus. But, sometimes, Jesus asks them also to remain silent. We too must learn to communicate or to shut up, becoming witnesses of God's mercy by our words or by our silences.

How to live the lectio divina?

You may live it alone or in small groups. The School of the Word proposes also the lectio divina liturgically.

I try every day to take a time for lectio divina (but I do not always succeed). I live it also with my wife (one to two times per week); over years that moment has become the spiritual center of our common life: the moment when, in the light of the Gospel, we read our life.

I also practice the lectio Divina in groups. Some meet monthly, others are more casual, like during a retreat. I just guided two lectio divina during the meeting of the International and Interconfessional Association of Religious People (monks and nuns, EIRR), last month, in Tallinn in Estonia. Once more, I experienced the power of the Word of God to unite Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants.

I note that there is a sort of back and forth between the personal reading and community reading. Living together a lectio divina always encourages me to persevere in my personal reading, because it is every time an experience that lights in me the fire of the Spirit.

The *lectio divina* in the writings of the Fathers

For the Fathers of the Church, the recommendation to pray without ceasing (I Thess 5, 17) is coupled with that of consulting the Bible. St. Jerome gave Demetriada, one of the young Roman women belonging to his house church, the following recommendation: 'Read the Holy Scriptures often, indeed let reading them never be set aside from your hands'!

Another Father, St. Ambrose of Milan, gave this advice: 'Meditate the Word of God throughout the day. Take Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul and John as your councillors. Take Jesus Christ as the supreme councillor in order to acquire the Father. Speak with them and meditate with them the whole day.'

The Fathers of the Church in both East and West prayed in this way, becoming infused with Scripture through continuous meditation. 'Apply yourself constantly and assiduously to sacred reading. Do this until continual meditation fills your mind as it were forms it in its likeness, making it a kind of ark of covenant...' St. John Cassian recommends.

For St. John Chrysostom this familiarity with the Bible is not just for monks, it is something for every believer: 'When you go home together with your wife and children you should take the Scriptures and re-read them and repeat the Word you have heard (in church). [...] Those who live in the midst of the world and are wounded by it every day are in even more need of remedies. Thus even worse than not reading is to think that reading is pointless and useless.'

The School of the Word and the Orthodox Church

In French Switzerland the School of the Word appears not to have reached many Orthodox. There is a certain distrust of *Bible study groups*. And if a *reading group* is formed, it is rather to read Patristic texts or modern spiritual fathers.

But the School of the Word is not a Bible study group. And its purpose should interest Orthodox people, since it uses a traditional method, the *lectio divina*, practised and recommended by the Fathers and Tradition, gathering the faithful around God's Word, The Word, the Logos, the Son of God.

To read the Word liturgically, in the Church, as Orthodox Church practice is, is to remember Christ's words: 'When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them.' The School of the Word does not seek to satisfy a curiosity, a cultural interest, it knows that the Word, Christ himself, is what *creates the Church*.

To progress towards Christian unity, Orthodox believers would benefit greatly from taking part in the School of the Word. Instead of encountering other Christians around topics which are often a source of conflict, given people's different histories, gathering around the Word means uniting around something essential which we can share, around a genuine *real presence*, that of the Word of God, in celebrating it, praying it and living it.

To practise the *lectio divina* is to follow in the footsteps of the Church Fathers, who always recommended the practice of the Word, welcoming it, meditating it, assimilating it, living from it. At the heart of the Church, there are the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist: the Word of Life and the Bread of Life. We can at least all share the Word of Life.

The *lectio divina* and Christian unity

Permit me to conclude with some reflexions on Christian unity. After more than 20 years of practising the *lectio divina*, I have arrived at the following conviction. The *lectio divina* unites us with God and with each other in a very profound way. This is not a new experience; it is that of Christians throughout the ages. By reading the Holy Scriptures we come closer to Christ, and in him we come closer to each other. St. Jerome said in this connection: 'Not to know the Scriptures is not to know Christ.'

Here we have a magnificent experience: a spiritual spring bursts forth when Christians become more deeply familiar with the sacred texts through prayerful reading. Through it they invite into their souls the loving presence and voice of their Bridegroom, he who nourishes our souls, enabling us to discern his will and gives us strength to advance on the sacred journey towards his Father and our Father.

Our pilgrimage towards unity, as Christ wishes it, can only draw strength and renew itself through constant listening to the Word of God. Moreover, we will benefit even more from listening to the Word as we do so together, I mean, among Christians of different confessions.

In praying and listening to the Word of God together, in exchanging our impressions about the cords which the Word of God causes to vibrate in our souls when we read it, we not only enrich ourselves through others' spirituality, but we come to understand each other better. And that is of incalculable benefit for Church unity.