

“ARE YOU AFRAID
OF THE THIEF?”
A CORDIAL APPROACH
TO *LECTIO DIVINA*¹

• Simeon Leiva-Merikakis •

“This movement toward Jesus, a real paschal ‘exodus’ out of our previous existence, requires courage and generosity because we know we shall not remain the same, and such awareness is, for our poor fallen nature, both thrilling and frightening.”



On 4 August 1897, as she lay dying in the infirmary of the Lisieux Carmel, Thérèse Martin confided a regret to her sister Pauline between painful bouts of hemoptysis:

Only in heaven will we see the whole truth about each thing. On earth this is impossible. And so, even regarding Sacred Scripture, isn't it sad to see all of these differences in translation? If I had been a priest, I would have learned Hebrew and Greek. I wouldn't have been satisfied with Latin. In this way I would have come to know the true text dictated by the Holy Spirit.²

¹An earlier version of this text was presented to the priests of the Archdiocese of New York on 9 December 2010, at a lecture sponsored by the American Bible Society.

²“C'est seulement au ciel que nous verrons la vérité sur toute chose. Sur la terre, c'est impossible. Ainsi, même pour la Sainte Écriture, n'est-ce pas triste de voir toutes les différences de traduction? Si j'avais été prêtre, j'aurais appris l'hébreu et

Our unschooled Carmelite is here echoing unawares the famous rabbi who said that “reading the Scriptures in translation is like kissing your wife through a handkerchief,” and the erotic nuance of this remark is significant for *lectio*. I offer these words of Thérèse at the outset because, in addition to their surprisingly critical outlook, they also evoke for us the holy hunger for God’s undiluted Word that ought to fuel our own quest for Wisdom. Thérèse’s is a truly prophetic hunger like that of Jeremiah, who in a ravenous ecstasy cries out to his God: “When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16).

Thérèse’s hunger for the authentic Word had nothing bookish about it; it sprang from her burning desire to enter as deeply as possible into intimacy with the Beloved of her heart, the Word Incarnate. Something draws me strongly to the spirit that animated this provincial young woman who, at the end of a decadent bourgeois century and in the midst of intense suffering in the last stages of tuberculosis, would show such passionate interest in “the whole truth of each thing” and in particular the original texts of Scripture. Across the turbulence of cultures and all the upheavals in Church and society since her day, her incandescent passion for the fullness of truth addresses a challenge to you and me today.

What Thérèse expressed in colloquial terms is identical with the more categorical assertion of her countryman, Blaise Pascal:

Not only do we know God only through Jesus Christ, but we know ourselves only through Jesus Christ. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Outside Jesus Christ we know neither what our life is nor what our death is nor what God is nor what we ourselves are.³

Now, as Christians we believe that God’s revealed Word is the ordinary and indispensable means by which we come to know Jesus Christ, as the *Catechism* teaches:

le grec, je ne me serais pas contentée du latin, comme cela j’aurais connu le vrai texte dicté par l’Esprit Saint” (*Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992], 1076).

³“Non seulement nous ne connaissons Dieu que par Jésus-Christ, mais nous ne nous connaissons nous-mêmes que par Jésus-Christ. Nous ne connaissons la vie, la mort, que par Jésus-Christ. Hors de Jésus-Christ nous ne savons ce que c’est ni que notre vie, ni que notre mort, ni que Dieu, ni que nous-mêmes” (*Pensées*, fragment 729 [548]).

From the swaddling clothes of his birth to the vinegar of his Passion and the shroud of his Resurrection, everything in Jesus' life was a sign of his mystery. His deeds, miracles, and words all revealed that "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). . . . Christ's whole earthly life—his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking—is *Revelation* of the Father. . . . Because our Lord became man in order to do his Father's will, even the least characteristics of his mysteries manifest "God's love . . . among us" (1 Jn 4:9).⁴

On this crucial point of how biblical words and signs, especially in the Gospel, give us access to the inner mystery of Jesus, and through him to the Father, Hans Urs von Balthasar affirms:

All external scenes of Jesus' life and sufferings are to be understood as a direct revelation of the interior life and intentions of God. This is the fundamental meaning of biblical symbolism and allegory, without which the whole Gospel remains nothing but superficial moralism. Thus, for instance, Jesus' silence before Caiaphas, the *Ecce Homo* episode with Pilate, the figure of the Lord covered with the cloak and flogged, his nailing to the Cross, the piercing of his Heart, his words on the Cross, and so on. All of this is a direct portrayal and exegesis of God (Jn 1:18), accessible to the senses.⁵

The mystical core of Christianity is, indeed, *Christ Jesus*, "God's love revealed to us" (1 Jn 4:9), which implies Christ's ability to portray God directly to us, at once spiritual and carnal beings that we are. From this life-giving center of the Christian experience all else radiates, and on it all else converges. By recalling it we have already laid the surest foundation for *lectio divina*. For *lectio's* goal can be no other than an encounter with the living Christ Jesus, the encounter in mutual knowledge and love that, naturally tending toward union, gradually transforms us into his very image and person. For we become like what we admire, love, and adore.

However, there are problems of all sorts along this path of the true knowledge of the person of Christ. Over a century and a

⁴CCC, 515–516.

⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 58.

half ago, Blessed John Henry Newman was already voicing a tendency in our modern approach to the figure of Jesus Christ that, if anything, has intensified in more recent times. Warning his fellow Christians of the danger of losing their vital grasp on the real Christ by indulging too abstract and moralistic an attitude, Newman wrote:

It is very much the fashion at present to regard the Saviour of the world in an irreverent and unreal way—as a mere idea or vision; to speak of him so narrowly and unfruitfully as if we only knew of his name; though Scripture has set him before us in his actual sojourn on earth, in his gestures, words and deeds, in order that we may have that on which to fix our eyes.

In place of the flesh-and-blood, historical Jesus of Nazareth, whose concrete life the evangelists went to great lengths to record faithfully—the Jesus who at every step surprises and even scandalizes us by his unpredictable independence—we tend to construct an ideal, domesticated Jesus, more in keeping with our own notions of goodness and a fulfilled existence.

We reduce our image of Jesus, Newman goes on to say, to “vague statements about his love, his willingness to receive the sinner, his imparting repentance and spiritual aid and the like,” and we refuse to “view him in his particular and actual works, set before us in Scripture.” By performing this half-conscious substitution of a vaporous Jesus for the actual Jesus of Scripture, we can no longer “derive from the gospels that very benefit which they are intended to convey.” The particular danger to our faith involved here, Newman insists, is our creation of an amorphous and elusive Savior who mutates arbitrarily according to our own moods and ideas: “It is to be feared, while the thought of Christ is but a creation of our minds, it may gradually change or fade away, it may become defective or perverted.”

Our culture has instilled into us such a subjectivistic mindset that we may initially have difficulty recognizing clearly that *thought about Christ* is not whatsoever the same as the *reality of Christ*, and that what we desperately need (because that only saves us) is the real person and presence of Jesus. Newman concludes magisterially:

When we contemplate Christ as manifested in the gospels, the Christ who exists therein, external to our own imaginings, and who is as really a living being, and sojourned on earth as truly as any of us, then we shall at length believe in him with a convic-

tion, a confidence, and an entireness, which can no more be annihilated than the belief in our senses.⁶

In trying to correct in ourselves this tendency to create a subjective pseudo-Jesus in keeping with our own image and likeness, a projected Jesus who can be conveniently manipulated to suit our every whim, our only alternative is to quiet down such “creative” impulses and strive to put ourselves in a contemplative attitude of receptivity before the text itself of the Gospel.

In faith we believe that the Father is always offering us his Son, his Word. Therefore, it is our greatest responsibility as believers to open wide the eyes of our soul, heart, and intellect in order to perceive the true Word the Father is speaking to us, the living Son he is offering for our contemplation through the power of the inspiring Spirit.

Once we perceive the presence of the Son with all the senses of our interior being, we next hear him calling us to himself. At that point we should be willing to drop all the baggage we are still holding and leave even our own shabby egos and all their scheming behind in order to advance, naked and poor, toward the one calling us. It is he who is drawing us into his sphere of being and influence, and so we should not attempt to reduce him into our cramped presuppositions. If we are to enter that new sphere of pure life we must let go of all else, above all our compulsion to control minutely everything occurring within our intimate mind and heart. We must allow Another to take over all of our interior processes and guide us to all truth.

1. A practical example: Mark 3:13–15

In preparing these reflections I decided against too theoretical an approach. Rather, I would like to engage in the actual practice of *lectio*. However, a friendly warning is first called for, because to attempt to write down, and then share with others, what goes on in one’s mind, heart, and imagination during a session of *lectio divina* is a highly artificial endeavor, practically a contradiction

⁶J. H. Newman, “The Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus,” *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, III, 10 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 562–63.

in terms. The open-ended, silent, and watchful spirit of freedom that ought to be the very atmosphere of *lectio* vanishes almost at once when you try to “catch” interior movements and insights on the page. When you write for others, a certain self-consciousness is inevitable that immediately begins translating itself willy-nilly into rhetorical strategies of persuasion and argumentation. The spontaneous illuminations possible during *lectio* will then tend to degenerate into categorical affirmations and even fragments of a commentary.

All of this tends to be foreign, and even inimical, to genuine *lectio*, which should lead only to amazed discovery, wonderment, and deeply peaceful acts of love, praise, and self-surrender. What I will now offer, then, will be only a distant echo of the living act of *lectio*.

That being said, however, I can only hope that my meditation will at least witness to the fact that *lectio* is an end in itself, as disinterested in particular achievement as the glances exchanged between two lovers. The decision actually to do *lectio*, actually to expose ourselves frequently, patiently, and lovingly to the power of God’s Word, is the sole object of my present endeavor.

I now invite the reader, then, to reflect prayerfully with me on Mark 3:13–15, the passage of Mark’s gospel that describes the formal calling of the Twelve. Hopefully, my treatment of this passage will provide both an example of one way of doing *lectio divina*, and also a sort of “parable” of the internal dynamics of *lectio*, that is, of the possibilities it offers as the trysting place with God’s incarnate Word.

After completing this *lectio* on the passage from Mark, we will draw up a list of the qualities characteristic to *lectio* that emerged in the process.

Greek text:

Καὶ ἀναβαίνει εἰς τὸ ὄρος καὶ προσκαλεῖται οὓς ἠθελεν αὐτός, καὶ ἀπήλθον πρὸς αὐτόν. Καὶ ἐποίησεν δώδεκα, ἵνα ὦσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἵνα ἀποστέλλῃ αὐτοὺς κηρῦσσειν καὶ ἔχειν ἐξουσίαν ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαιμόνια.

1. And he went up the mountain
2. and he called to himself those whom he wanted
3. and they came over to him.

4. And he made twelve
5. in order that they might be with him
6. and in order that he might send them forth
 - a) to proclaim [the Kingdom]
 - b) and to have power to drive out demons.

1. And he went up the mountain

Solitude. Jesus goes up “the mountain,” which evokes both Sinai and Tabor, places where God communicates his secrets and his glory in an eminently personal way. This upward movement at the heart of our religious experience symbolizes the need for us sometimes to transcend along with Jesus all that is earthly and historical in order to encounter the eternal God and abide with him in his own solitude, “alone with the Alone.” The disciples’ following Jesus to a place apart expresses a special consecration of their persons to him: they are now separated from profane existence and are lifted up sacrificially so that they become Jesus’ personal possession.

Jesus is both leading them to God and embodying God for them. This communal solitude recalls the Jews’ long trek in the desert as well as Jesus’ nights of prayer with the Father alone, culminating in Gethsemane. It is from this elevated and solitary location, symbolic of the Heart of the Father, that Jesus will call the apostles to himself. He is inviting them to enter the interior space of filial intimacy that is the foundation of his own being as Son, Word, and sacrificial Lamb.

2. And he called to himself those whom he wanted

Calling. What explains the mystery of this election? Surely Jesus has come to save all; but, at least for the moment, he does not call all to this intimate fellowship with himself. One aspect of it is that some must first come to truly know him so that they will become his heart and hands, so to speak, and thus collaborate with him in the redemption of the world. The privilege of the call is not for the sake of the called but for the good of all the others they will serve. This mystery is fraught with the apostles’ sense of their own

personal unworthiness, since there is absolutely nothing that sets them apart from the mediocrity of the multitude.

Only Jesus’ freedom of election—and thus pure grace—explains their transformation from nobodies into apostles. This origin of our vocation in Jesus’ absolute freedom of election, rather than in any preexisting personal qualities and talents of our own, will determine *everything* that follows in our discipleship and ought to be an unceasing source of compunction, wonderment, and thanksgiving. “Why have you chosen me, Lord, sinner that I am?”

The mystery only deepens when we wonder how he knew their names. In this version of the calling, it seems Jesus is summoning the apostles by name out of the wide multitude. Jesus’ calling certain men to himself on “the mountain” is a clear realization of the way the God of Israel had called Moses to speak to him on Mount Sinai, face to face, as friend speaks with friend (Ex 33:11), an intimacy stressed by God when he assures Moses: “You have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name” (Ex 33:17).

On occasion, too, when continuing to respond to the requirements of discipleship becomes difficult, the mystery of election may also be a source of irritation and revolt in our hearts. We might even find ourselves blurting out in exasperation: “Right now I wish you *hadn’t* chosen me! I so long to be able to take my life back into my own hands!” The sense of mysterious vocation will thus, throughout our lives, be the source *both* of our greatest elation and humble gratitude *and* of the greatest frustration and revolt on the part of our separate ego.

3. *And they came over to him*

Response. Those who now go toward him accomplishing a personal Passover do so, not on their own initiative, but responding to his call. As they move toward Jesus and converge on his person, they cannot help coming closer to one another like the spokes of a wheel, and they witness how their destinies are united by virtue of the common call. Our fraternal communion is thus rooted in the freedom of Jesus’ call, which has brought us together and so created something new in the world: the Church.

The surprise element in our election (“Why me? Why you?”) ought never to disappear from our hearts, for it alone

guarantees the freshness and, yes, the delightful whimsy of our vocation. It will also fuel the freedom of our own response, which has to be continually renewed. We must always cultivate in prayer the memory of the origin of our vocation in God's inscrutable freedom. We did not choose him first, we did not love him first. We never initiate but, at best, reciprocate. We are in his permanent debt. If it weren't for his loving and merciful initiative, we would still be crouching in the darkness of our ignorance and conceit.

And yet it is crucial that, activating their own fumbling human freedom, they did respond to the call, and that phrase *they came over to him* reveals our need to fully engage our will, our emotions, and our body in our response, and let our feet do the walking toward Jesus. He will not force us to come; he can only invite and call—and wait. They must have been joyfully taken aback at hearing Jesus pronounce each of their names: “Come to me, Peter! Come to me, Thomas! Come to me, Judas!”

4. *And he made twelve*

Re-creation. The Greek verb here is not the fancier *he appointed* or *instituted* that we read in most translations—terms more proper to a legal or political vocabulary—but the theologically stronger verb ἐποίησεν (*he made* or *created*), which evokes the first chapter of Genesis and God as the primordial originator of our being and shaper of our lives. *Vocation is nothing less than a re-creation.*

Our life begins anew as a result of the call and our response, and this is why our specific vocation, and the life-form in which it casts us, is the full realization and ultimate consequence of our baptismal rebirth. Out of our nothingness and corruption Jesus shapes disciples, capable of understanding the motivations of his heart and obeying his will: capable of bringing delight to God.

Twice the text says that Jesus gave new names to some of the apostles, and this name-giving is a sign of being made anew, since a name contains the essence of a person and is the expression of God's will for him or her. The number 12 evokes the tribes of Israel, so that this little group is in a real sense recapitulating the history of the Jews. They are to be the shepherds of the new Israel, the mediators between God and humankind, and the light of the nations.

Like a sculptor or potter Jesus is creating what he wants out of the shapeless clay of our natural persons, choosing us and taking us just as he finds us. By going toward him we are entrusting ourselves fully into his creating and molding hands. This movement toward Jesus, a real paschal “exodus” out of our previous existence, requires courage and generosity because we know we shall not remain the same, and such awareness is, for our poor fallen nature, both thrilling and frightening. Everything in our persons, histories, attitudes, and lifestyle must now change, and continue evolving according to God’s secret design.

By calling us to himself on the high mountain of his divinity, and inviting us to enter his own dwelling-place with the Father, Jesus is telling us that he intends to make us anew, according to his own Heart. By the creating power of God, he is forming within us a new heart, a heart of flesh like his own, to be inserted into the place of our old hearts of stone; a heart capable of feeling, thinking, and loving like God himself, a heart transplanted into us when Jesus breathes his Spirit upon us (cf. Gn 2:7, 20, 22–24; Eph 5:25–27, 30–31; Jn 20:22).

We may say, in fact, that he is actually making us the gift of his own Heart, since only his Heart can love as he commands us to love: “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48); “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). How could we love in such a perfect, divine manner unless Jesus were himself doing the loving within us, but in such a unified way that his loving in and through us is also truly our loving out of him?

Jesus cannot freely do his work within us unless we become totally available to his shaping touch. By responding and going to him we are willingly moving into a great unknown, and we do not know what will become of us. We are taking a great risk, because who can guarantee that we will continue to cooperate in faith until the end? Who can guarantee that revolt and infidelity will not dominate us eventually; and then, what and where would we be? Neither of the world nor of God! And we know what happens to the lukewarm (cf. Rev 3:16).

5. *In order that they might be with him*

Communion. Mark now spells out solemnly what Jesus' primary purpose here is: *he made them in order that they...* The construction of the sentence is based on an emphatic purpose clause. For what specific end is Jesus calling and forming the apostles? Above all else, *in order that they might BE with him.* The supreme purpose motivating Jesus as he draws us to himself is his desire to establish with us a holy intimacy, a permanent friendship, a fruitful companionship. Through such bonds of human closeness, Jesus is going to share his all with us—everything he has and everything he is, which includes the redemptive mission entrusted to him by the Father as well as all the secrets of the divine life.

Jesus did not come to earth to bring us anything material, or a political program, or tips for the attainment of fame and success, or even to teach us a wise “philosophy of life” guaranteeing peace and contentment and mental health: many other religious systems already offered such a philosophical wisdom, and impressively. But Jesus says: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and *where I AM, there also will my servant BE*” (Jn 12:26).

Jesus came, not to give us any *thing* but to *deliver himself* to us, to surrender his substance to us in the way proper to those who truly love one another. In this Jesus infinitely outdoes all frail human possibilities of union. He came so that none of us would ever again be alone, because now we can forever share his very life, his very joys, sufferings, hopes, and triumphs. Everything that is his is now ours. He wants his life to become the exclusive source of our life, and his life consists purely of joy in the Father and the bliss of never-ending trinitarian love. His resurrection is also ours because his death is ours, and his death is ours because he first took our death and made it his.

The call to discipleship, then, is thoroughly *eucharistic* in its very nature. It is a self-bestowing call on Jesus' part, inviting a similar response on ours.

This intimacy with himself to which Jesus invites us—wholly apart from all activity, projects, ideas, even of the most urgent kind—is the very center of Christian life; and this is why *prayer is the Christian's principal action*, prayer as the indispensable environment for such communion with Christ to thrive. To pray

is to cultivate companionship with Jesus actively, to strive to be as present to him as he is to us, in mutual surrender, without barriers or conditions.

Such intensely lived love cannot but be fruitful, in ways we cannot even imagine. “There is only one good thing,” wrote Maurice Blondel in his diary: “to abandon ourselves to God just as he has abandoned himself to us. ‘I have given you an example,’ Jesus says; ‘do you likewise’” (cf. Jn 13:15).⁷ If we do this, everything else—all our apostolic efforts to alleviate the world’s sufferings and to proclaim the Word—will fall into place.

He called us to himself and made us in order that we might BE with him: Such an intention, revealing what lies in Jesus’ inmost Heart, declares wonderfully the primacy of *being* over *having* and *doing* in human existence. *To be* what God has meant us to be, what we have been created for, is infinitely more precious in God’s sight, and more fruitful within the plan of redemption, than any self-defined goal we may pursue, than anything we may produce or any function we may perform, even of the apparently most helpful and charitable kind. In St. Augustine’s lapidary formulation: *For you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

Being-with-Jesus is here revealed as the absolutely highest form of having existence, of living our being. By participating in Jesus’ divine I AM in this intense way, our own created I AM acquires substance, permanence and fullness of reality. By coinhering habitually with the being of Jesus, we come to share in God’s attribute as pure act in our own creaturely mode.

But how could Jesus expect so much from us, expect us to *leave everything* in order just to be with him, pure and simple? Only a God-man can extend such an invitation to exclusive relationship with himself. This is evidently more than one mere relationship among others, even if we rank it as the very first; it is, rather, a lasting union of being that is all-sufficient and eternal by deepest tendency. Now, if Jesus were not God, his invitation and declaration of purpose would be the monstrous blasphemy of a religious egomaniac, of which the world has seen many. For, *who but God can make us for the sole purpose that we might be with him?*

⁷“Il n’y a qu’une chose bonne, c’est de s’abandonner à Dieu, comme il s’abandonna à nous” (*Exemplum dedi; fac.* Maurice Blondel, *Carnets intimes*, I [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961], 217).

Who but God himself can lay an exclusive claim to our lives and persons such as we here see Jesus do with "those whom he calls to himself"? And, too, if Jesus were not God, we would ourselves be raving maniacs in relinquishing our entire existence into the hands of another mere mortal.

As it is, however, the one thing that can bring lasting peace, fulfillment, and joy to our hearts is abiding permanently in the company of Jesus, resting on the breast of Jesus like John at the Last Supper (Jn 13:25). And only this union with Jesus, this rooting of our being deep into his being, is going to give worth and promise to any other activity or relationship we may engage in.

Union with Jesus is not only the center of my life, and my relationship with him not only the most important of all my relationships; union with Jesus is, in fact, *the whole of my life*, and relationship with him is the primal relationship that includes and invigorates all others, because in him, the eternal Word, "all things hold together" (Col 1:17). Christ must reign as all-powerful and all-wise Logos over my own microcosm, infusing all its parts with life and meaning and harmonizing the whole, just as he reigns over all creation.

But let us make bold for a moment with Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity and ask what *God's* own interest might be in pursuing our creaturely love as relentlessly as we claim he does. To put it almost impertinently: What does God expect to "get" by sharing his being with me? In one extraordinary passage, the Dijon Carmelite peers lightning-like into the abyss of God's Heart and returns to us with luminous words:

It would give immense joy to the heart of God if we would devote ourselves, in the heaven of our soul, to the occupation of the Blessed, and cling to him by the simple contemplation that brings the creature close to the state of innocence in which God had created it. "In his image and likeness" (Gen 1:26): such was the Creator's dream—to be able to contemplate himself in his creature, to be able to see there all his own perfections and all his own beauty beaming forth as through a pure and flawless crystal. Is this not, in a way, the extension of his own glory? The soul then . . . allows the divine Being to reflect himself in her, and all his attributes are communicated to her. Truly, this soul is a *Laudem glorie*, the praise of the glory of all his gifts; through everything, even the most commonplace acts, she sings the

canticum magnum, the *canticum novum* [of the Apocalypse (Rev 14:3)], and this canticle makes God quiver to his very depths.⁸

To delight in us, to find joy in us, to see his dream fulfilled in us: this is what was “in it” for God, this is what God so ardently pursues! In the Incarnation and the Cross, the Word sought us out *so that he could delight in us*. How many of us have ever considered that *giving joy to God* is an essential aspect of the human and Christian vocation? And yet, without that, what would it mean to say that God loves us and that we love him in return? For, what is love without mutual joy and enjoyment between persons, at both the human and the divine levels?

We should never lose sight of the fact that this mutual delight between human beings and God in the person of the Word Incarnate is the goal of all divine and human efforts: *delight* is the deepest secret inscribed in the very heart of Being itself. And it is through the doors and windows of the Gospel’s words that we will find our way into the interior abode where we can *be with Jesus in God*.

6. *And [he made them] in order that he might send them forth to proclaim [the Kingdom] and have power to drive out demons.*

Mission. Our mission toward others flows only from this vital center of intimate union with Jesus, as a result of our transformation

⁸“Il me semble que ce serait donner une joie immense au cœur de Dieu que de s’exercer dans le ciel de son âme à cette occupation des Bienheureux, et d’adhérer à Lui par cette contemplation simple qui rapproche la créature de l’état d’innocence dans lequel Dieu l’avait créée. ‘À son image et à sa ressemblance’ (Gen 1:26), tel a été le rêve du Créateur: pouvoir se contempler en sa créature; y voir rayonner toutes ses perfections, toute sa beauté comme au travers d’un cristal pur et sans tache. N’est-ce pas là une sorte d’extension de sa propre gloire? L’âme par la simplicité du regard avec lequel elle fixe son divin objet, se trouve séparée de tout ce qui l’entoure, séparée aussi et surtout d’elle-même; alors ‘elle respandit de la science de la clarté de Dieu’ (2 Cor 4:6), dont parle l’Apôtre, parce qu’elle permet à l’Être divin de se refléter en elle, et tous ses attributs lui sont communiqués. En vérité, cette âme est la louange de gloire de tous ses dons; elle chante à travers tout et parmi les actes les plus vulgaires le *canticum magnum*, le ‘*canticum novum*’ (Apoc 14:3), et ce cantique fait tressaillir Dieu jusqu’en ses profondeurs” (Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Écrits spirituels*, ed. P. Philipon [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1948], 211).

in his image and of being continually nourished by the juices of divine life welling up from Jesus the Vine:

Abide in me, as I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. (Jn 15:4–6)

John's text here does not say, "he who produces no fruit shall be cast forth"; that fate, rather, will befall the one who "does not abide in me," since separation from Jesus is tantamount to deprivation of life. The intrinsic worth of our person is not ultimately judged by the quantity of our visible output but by the quality of our communion with Life himself and the depth of our rootedness in him.

This "being-with-Jesus" of which we have been speaking, then, is obviously not a mere stage of spiritual development one eventually leaves behind, or a retreat from "real life" in order to "recharge one's spiritual batteries" so as to return to more efficient action, or an option available to those among us who happen to have "mystical" inclinations. Being-with-Jesus should be every Christian soul's natural, necessary, and permanent state of being, because *being with Jesus is the condition itself for receiving true life*.

At the practical level, the tasks of "proclaiming [the Kingdom] and driving out demons" do indeed require the outlay of massive amounts of physical and psychological energy, and the nursing of many disappointments and failures. The so-called "active" apostolate can clearly be challenging and exhausting, to say the least. Nevertheless, there is good reason for Mark to place visible apostolic activity as only the *sixth* element in his text, as an endeavor growing organically out of a long and unending process of underground gestation and transformation.

The apostolate, theologically speaking, is the overflow of the Word and the Power that have been *conceived* within us by our union with Christ. Before birthing Christ into the world we have to be pregnant with him, and such pregnancy can only be the result of intimate, loving encounter with the Word. Apostolic ministry is more mystical fruit than willful goal; and so it would be ironical and self-defeating for the active ministry to obstruct our tender cultivation of relationship with Christ. At the very center of our person

there ought to reign a habit of silent receptivity to God’s promptings that can grow only through prayer.

When Moses was about to give the Israelites specific instructions about the building of God’s Dwelling in their midst, the very first and most important of all the divine prescriptions he communicates to them is this: “On six days work may be done, but the seventh day shall be sacred to you as the sabbath of complete rest to the Lord. Anyone who does work on that day shall be put to death” (Ex 35:2). The construction of the Tabernacle by the Israelites in the desert may clearly be seen as a prefiguration of the building-up of the Church by the apostles in the New Testament; and in both cases the supreme principle that governs all human activity, even of the highest and most sacred kind, is the absolute centrality of *resting in the Lord*. Indeed, the harsh sentence of death Moses enjoins here for violators of the sabbath is only an exact description of what happens to the soul which does not cultivate interior intimacy with God, even in the face of the most pressing apostolic needs: it will wither and die.

Mission is but the *second* of Jesus’ intentions in calling us to himself, and as such it remains dependent for its authenticity, fruitfulness, and very existence on his *primary* intention of bestowing the gift of his presence and friendship on us. But such a gift has to be continually and deliberately received. The central act of the apostles’ life is, thus, to embrace with their whole being the Lord who sends them. And this embracing in itself is the foundational act of the apostolate, for it is from this habitual embrace and from nowhere else that all our fruitfulness will flow. The dichotomy between the mystical and the ministerial life (even for the sake of “division of labor” in the Church) is perilous and utterly false.

Thus far my *lectio* on the text from Mark.

2. *Nine qualities of lectio divina*

In the traditional monastic scheme, *lectio* is but the first phase of a fourfold movement of encounter with the Word of God: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. *Lectio* provides both the threshold and the favorable milieu where intimacy with God may grow. Though indispensable, by its very nature *lectio* leads beyond itself to ever deeper lived union with God in *silent prayer*. The written Word

of God in the Bible, even when profoundly meditated, brings us to the threshold of the living person of Jesus, the living Word written in the flesh of Mary. Nothing can substitute for this personal encounter, this merging of my horizons with those of Jesus, this convergence of my existence with his. And the growing reality of this process should occupy my every waking and sleeping moment.

However, *lectio* is the foundation and nourishing culture of this process, and if we want to practice *lectio* so as to foster such a momentous encounter, we should first recognize some of the elements that make it what it is so as to allow them to guide us habitually in our practice.

What, then, are some of the *qualities* of *lectio divina* that we can cull from our meditation on Mk 3:13–15? How is the act of doing *lectio divina* different from all other forms of spiritual reading and meditation? The distinct Latin name of the practice points to its distinct character.

As I afterwards analyzed what I had instinctively done, I singled out *nine qualities* that sum up my own experience. Obviously, I am by no means proposing these as either normative or exhaustive, only as generally descriptive guidelines. Nor do I mean to imply that each of these qualities is to be deliberately inserted into every session of *lectio*! These are qualities that coexist simultaneously; some are more instinctual, and some have to be learned more consciously. And all are mere aspects of a mysterious and complex central act of loving encounter.

Lectio divina is, first of all:

1. *Leisurely*. It cannot be rushed. Its rhythms flow from total open-endedness. No specific amount of text must be “covered.” This leisurely quality requires a slowing down of our mental processes, a quieting of our emotions and desires, a putting on hold of our need to achieve something palpable and take away a concrete result or lesson. Leisure, Josef Pieper has famously said, is “the basis of culture,” and *lectio* too cultivates the human heart so as to activate its highest potencies. The leisure required to seek God and hear his voice should be for us, in a sense, a return to Eden, to the *sanctum otium* of paradise, to which the monastic authors closely relate the *paradisus Scripturarum*, “the paradise of the Scriptures.” Leisure and paradise go together. We know that all of us give our free time spontaneously only to what we truly love and gives us delight.

But today we live in a culture of busyness, even in monasteries, and we have to make a gigantic effort to create islands of leisure in our life in order to cultivate those relationships (whether with God or with our brothers and sisters) without which we could simply not be ourselves or tap into deep joy. Pascal spoke of our colossal fear of falling into our own nothingness, should we be perfectly at rest for even five minutes; and yet our salvation lies precisely in plunging fearlessly into the dreaded abyss of our *acknowledged* nothingness, which faith can transform into the enfolding abyss of God’s merciful love.

Is it not a major test of where our heart’s treasure really lies to ask ourselves to what it is that we gladly devote our free time and with whom we wish to spend our leisure? Our personal time is perhaps the greatest gift we can give anyone. Will we deny it to God?

2. *Ruminative*: Visualize a placid cow lying out in the middle of a summery field, chewing its cud in most leisurely fashion, and you will have a good picture of what you and I should look like while “browsing” in the lush Eden of the Bible. For me, “ruminating the Word” (a favorite monastic image⁹) means, among other things, staying very closely with the text itself, turning its individual words over and over in the “mouth” of my intelligence and imagination, until all their potential for nourishment has been depleted, at least for the present.

The love of the Incarnate Word impels us to become lovers of the many inspired words that point to him. And this love is an energy that translates itself automatically into the intelligent desire to delve as deeply as possible into the inspired text so as to derive from it maximum acquaintance with the mystery it houses.

It is important to attend to the language itself used, and not just the ideas or the general meaning. For example, my *lectio* today on Mark was largely based on delving into the literal meaning of the Greek words: ἐποίησεν (“he made,” as opposed to the bureaucratic “appointed”), ἵνα (“in order that,” a conjunction introducing a purpose clause, as opposed to a mere complementary infinitive), and ὥσιν (“that they might BE,” in the strong ontological sense, as

⁹See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

opposed to the palling around of mere camaraderie, as some translations would have it). Compare the very different impact of my literal translation (*He made them twelve in order that they might be with him*) and that of the NJB version (*He appointed twelve; they were to be his companions*).

Now, even though at least a little knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is very helpful, I am not suggesting one needs to take up the study of the biblical languages in order to do serious *lectio*, although St. Thérèse would be mightily pleased! But it is very useful at least to compare different translations to make sure that your reading is not needlessly impoverished by the necessarily reductive choices that every translation must make. Such a comparing of translations would also set a nice leisurely rhythm that is not rushing to get anywhere. My own favorite tool is the Zondervan edition of the New Testament that has the Greek text in the middle with a strictly literal interlinear translation, and then the NRSV and NIV versions in columns to right and left.¹⁰

3. *Cordial*: *Lectio* thrives on the freedom of the heart to follow its own instincts, like a dog on a leash that is always thwarting its master's preconceived trajectory by lunging into the bushes and tugging its owner along. Cordial logic—the logic of the heart—must be granted primacy over strict linear logic and efficient reasoning, because the logic of the heart is the logic of love and it dares to make adventurous forays and leaps where reason only trudges one secure step at a time. This cordial logic is also a logic of fire, because sparks of illumination and longing can fly off in every direction and ignite flames in the most inconvenient places.

Thus, *lectio* is quite distinct from studying Scripture according to the historical-critical method which, by imposing strict scientific principles of its own, necessarily excludes cordial freedom. This does not mean that a cordial approach to *lectio* is uncritical or anti-intellectual, or that it can allow itself any fanciful extravagance; it simply aims at something different, unique, and vital.

4. *Contemplative*. For me this word refers to rather fundamental spiritual attitudes: a listening heart, a high receptivity of spirit

¹⁰ Alfred Marshall, ed., *The Interlinear NRSV-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publications, 1993).

and imagination that makes us permeable to transcendental realities. In practice, however, as we all know, the readiness to listen often proves very difficult. It requires a certain atmosphere of interior silence and the temporary cessation of goal-oriented acts. We must “unplug” our attention and our field of consciousness, so to speak, from the endless distractions that are continually sating us with dizzying images, useless information, and the buzz of relentless background noise. We must be willing to cut ourselves off from the overstimulation that crowds our senses and imagination, creates in us a host of pseudo-needs and -desires, and alienates us from our own deeper self.

Only then can we allow the Word of God to re-create within us a real world according to the mind of God. “Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14), making ours “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), is an excellent way to describe the goal of *lectio divina*, and this does not happen without habitual and assiduous contemplation of the mystery of God in Christ. *Lectio* is the constant viaticum that nourishes our yearning to see God by equipping us with the faculties necessary to do so.

There is a Pauline passage that lends itself to rich practical application in connection with this contemplative aspect of *lectio divina*:

All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit For God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6)

Here we have in a nutshell the whole dynamism of the Christian mystery: its origin, its goal, and the means to reach it. The uncreated Light of God has made itself perceivable to our human nature in the Incarnation, and our contemplative act of *gazing upon God’s glory on the face of Christ* results in our being transformed into what we contemplate, namely, the divine nature.

Obviously, we can say very little about what such contemplative gazing involves in the intimate recesses of each soul. However, we do know for certain that, if “gazing on the glory of the Lord” is going to be something real and not remain a figment of pious wishful thinking, we have to devote specific times out of our

day to sacred reading and prayer. The ever-accessible, ordinary place where we experience “the glory of God shining into our hearts from the face of Jesus Christ” is the text of Scripture, and the process whereby “Christ is formed in us” (Gal 4:19) is inconceivable apart from the frequent immersion of our heart, mind, and imagination in the regenerating bath of the Word.

5. *Disinterested.* *Lectio* should be “disinterested” in the sense of being without predetermined goals or functions, in the same way that the so-called “liberal arts” are free because they are their own end. And, just as the study of the liberal arts (reading great literature, for instance, or studying philosophy) should transform the whole person practicing it rather than produce anything extrinsic, so too *lectio* affects directly only the person doing it. It is quite distinct, for instance, from working on a biblical text in order to prepare the Sunday homily or a Bible study session.

However, just as a liberal arts education affects *everything* a person may henceforth do because it has radically changed him or her at the core, the practice of *lectio* will paradoxically be all the more fruitful for a priest’s or a teacher’s homiletic or classroom effectiveness in proportion as it has no intentional connection with preaching the Word. *Lectio* should be thought of as belonging deep within the spiritual life of the priest or teacher, as the privileged wellspring and sustaining ground of his prayer. *Lectio* will bear the fruits that only it can produce precisely if it is cultivated for its own sake. For, as we have already said, the apostolate is a byproduct of a person’s union with Christ.

6. *Provocative.* The Word of God must never be a soothing narcotic. A test of the depth and seriousness of our faith is our willingness to be jolted by God, and our exposing ourselves to being shocked by him into a higher awareness. The living Word and our encounter with it are a “pro-vocative” experience in the sense that here God *calls us forth* imperiously out of our comfort zone and offers us new life on his own conditions.

Already in paradise Adam and Eve hid from God, and in his love for them, in his desire to be with them, God had to be provocative, literally so: “The Lord God then called the man forth and asked him, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself’” (Gn

3:9–10). This tense bit of dialogue is precisely the situation in which we, too, will often find ourselves in the “paradise of the Scriptures,” as God seeks to bring us to himself out of hiding. He will not let us cower in self-protective gloom! And who can understand the depth of our own shady complexity and self-contradictoriness as we seek simultaneously both to encounter God and to hide ourselves from him?

To hear, perceive, and *conceive* the Word of God presupposes our willingness to be dramatically changed in the center of who we are. If we expose ourselves deeply and humbly to the power of God’s Word, he will come to us as both gentle rain (Dt 32:2, Is 55:10–11) and two-edged sword (Heb 4:12), as both a consuming fire and a hammer shattering rocks (Jer 23:29) *and also* as a soft caressing breeze (1 Kgs 19:11–13), as both principle of new life and fruition *and* as a scalpel in the hand of a surgeon who must painfully cut if he is to heal. Hannah best expressed it in her great prayer of thanksgiving when she exclaimed: “The Lord puts to death and gives life” (1 Sam 2:6)—in that order, we might add! Only after it has inflicted pain can God’s Word console. Bernanos said that the therapeutic Good News of damnation must precede the consoling Good News of salvation. And let us not forget that sometimes, too, God wishes simply to share with us his own inconsolable sorrows, a realization that made Teresa of Ávila exclaim to her sisters: *Ayudad a llorar a vuestro Dios*—“Help your God with his weeping!” Only a great mystic could encourage us to pray like this, out of the depth of her own passion for God and bold insight into his nature.

In the light of the Word our life comes under a scrutiny that judges and induces change and transformation, something our nature instinctively abhors. Blessed be God who, along with Thérèse and Pascal and Teresa, has given us too a desire for his love and truth that is stronger than all the combined forces of our fallen nature, which recoils in horror at the prospect of a thorough makeover.

7. *Ecclesial*. We read the Bible with unending gratitude to the Church, because it is she who is its rightful owner and guardian as primary recipient of the Word of her Bridegroom. It is from the Church that we receive the Bible, both as proclaimed in the liturgy, its native element, and in its written form. We read the Bible within the Church as members of the Church, which means that we read it with the heart and mind of the Church and in the light of the

Church's faith, which we have freely made our own at Baptism and Confirmation. If we do not listen to the Word in harmonious union with the Church, we will be tone-deaf and distort everything we hear.

An ecclesial reading must, above all, be *christocentric*, since the Church, like the bride of the Canticle and like John the Baptist, perceives the voice of her Bridegroom behind every word of Scripture, and she sees every word of Scripture as converging upon the living Word that Christ is. If the Father has eyes only for his Son, so too does the Bride.

All revelation comes to us refracted through the prism of Christ's humanity and ultimately leads only to Christ in glory. An ecclesial and christocentric reading must therefore, in the concrete, occur in the presence of the whole God-Man. It must be resolutely Nicæan, Ephesian, and Chalcedonian, something of great importance given the pandemic of practical Arianism and Gnosticism in our time.

To say that *lectio* should be ecclesial is, in the end, to say that it should be Marian. Along with our Lady we listen to God's Word and conceive it, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of our faith as members of the Church. Mary/Church/our individual soul forms but one richly layered and concentric reality. As the *Catechism* asserts, quoting the Constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II: "Since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is [a] principle of correct interpretation, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. *Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written,*"¹¹ the same Spirit that overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation. One of the practical implications of this momentous principle, naturally, is that Scripture cannot be understood or bear fruit outside of a prayerful disposition that listens in order to receive and surrender.

8. *Transbiblical.* With this word I refer to the need for our *lectio* to "breathe" freely by our allowing a tranquil free-association to occur between our particular text and many other texts that may be evoked by it in our minds. In other words, we must never lose from sight the *totality* of Scripture as God's integral self-revelation.

¹¹CCC, 111; *Dei Verbum*, 12, 3.

My *lectio* of Mk 3 would obviously not have been possible without putting this passage into a wider scriptural context so that, for instance, the truly astonishing connotations of Jesus’ call for us radically *to be with him* cannot be fathomed apart from God’s manifest desire from the beginning “to find his delight with the sons of men” (Prov 8:31) and dwell among his people.

The freedom of a transbiblical approach rests on the fact that, from the *ecclesial standpoint*, the Bible is the complete inspired canon of God’s one revealed Word, richly varied and endlessly complementary in its sources and genres and yet admirably unified and deeply harmonious in its internal correspondences and the homogeneity of its divine intent.

From the standpoint of the *historical-critical method* the Bible may be an unwieldy mass of disparate documents from wildly different periods and milieux, somewhat haphazardly thrown together, and which could never be reconciled with one another or reduced to a common authorial purpose or meaning. And yet there is no necessary conflict between the historical-critical and the ecclesial approaches, as responsible scholars like John P. Meier demonstrate. Such historical-critical scholars make but extremely modest claims for the specifically religious contributions their scientific method can make to the life of faith.¹²

Very recently Pope Benedict XVI has made a typically lucid and succinct evaluation of both the need for and the limits of the historical-critical approach to the Bible:

If we believe that Christ is real history, and not myth, then the testimony concerning him has to be historically accessible as well The historical-critical method will always remain one

¹²John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991): “Such a limited consensus statement, which does not claim to act as a substitute for the Christ of faith, is the modest goal of the present work” (2). “In what follows I will try my best to bracket what I hold by faith and examine only what can be shown to be certain or probable by historical research and logical argumentation” (6). “A treatment of the resurrection is omitted not because it is denied but simply because the restrictive definition of the historical Jesus I will be using does not allow us to proceed into matters that can be affirmed only by faith” (13). “This entire work is, in a sense, a prolegomenon and an invitation to theologians to appropriate from this particular quest what may be useful to the larger task of a present-day christology—something this book pointedly does not undertake” (13–14).

dimension of interpretation. Vatican II made this clear. On the one hand, it presents the essential elements of the historical method as a necessary part of access to the Bible. At the same time, though, it adds that the Bible has to be read in the same Spirit in which it was written. It has to be read in wholeness, in its unity. And that can be done only when we approach it as a book of the People of God progressively advancing toward Christ. What is needed is . . . a self-critique of the historical method; a self-critique of historical reason that takes cognizance of its limits and recognizes the compatibility of a type of knowledge that derives from faith; in short, we need a synthesis between an exegesis that operates with historical reason and an exegesis that is guided by faith. We have to bring the two things into a proper relationship to each other. That is also a requirement of the basic relationship between faith and reason The important point is this: The only real, historical personage is the Christ in whom the Gospels believe, and not the figure who has been reconstituted from numerous exegetical studies.¹³

It is satisfying to see that on these crucial points the historical-critical exegete John P. Meier and Pope Benedict XVI are in perfect accord. It seems that the scholar Meier already practices the self-critique the pope calls for and has thus brought his scholarship into harmony with his priesthood.

In advocating such a holistic, free-associating, “transbiblical” approach, I am precisely *not* referring to systematically looking up all the parallel references indicated marginally in our Bible, but to spontaneous echoes of other biblical words and passages that I allow to come and interact with my present contemplation. Scripture is its own best commentary, as the whole New Testament attests in its use of the Old.

Because of the internal unity of the Word of God, inspired by the one Spirit, any one part of Scripture requires completion by every other part. We may say that every word of Scripture possesses a hidden instinct that naturally impels it forward, like a homing pigeon, to nestle in the Heart of Christ.

A deepening penetration into the total unity of revelation—and hence into the mind of God—will gradually unveil hidden correspondences between the two Testaments, between the

¹³Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Sign of the Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. M. Miller and A. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 171–73.

synoptic Gospels and John, and between the Gospels as such and the apostolic letters. And certain situations in the Gospels cry out for verses from the Psalms to be put into the mouths of their protagonists, because over and over again *lectio* will make us experience how God’s promises and human yearnings, so well formulated by the Psalmist, can find fulfillment only in Jesus’ presence.

Nothing can more graphically illustrate this internal coherence and unity of all Scripture, clearly perceived by the Church’s loving eyes of faith, than any random page of a patristic commentary or, indeed, any random page of the Roman Missal. In either place we will find the most luminous and fertile marriage of very wide-ranging texts, which have now finally converged to reveal together but a single, multi-layered truth: *Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of the Father*.

This freely evocative approach I recommend has characterized the *lectio* of all the Fathers of the Church and all the saints. On any one page of Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, there can be anything from five to twenty direct or indirect allusions to biblical texts other than the one he is pondering. And yet, these are not really “quotations” or “supporting texts.” There is ample evidence that almost always he is spontaneously “belching” (his word: *eructare!*) biblical passages that are always fermenting in his memory. Bernard so internalized the whole of Scripture by a lifetime of assiduous *lectio* that what he offers in his writings is a seamless and magnificently nourishing text of his own. At first glance you would not notice its transbiblical nature if it were not for the editorial footnotes and italics.

9. *Mystagogical*. This quality, above all the others, is what merits for *lectio* the adjective *divina*. *Lectio divina* requires that the person engaging in it open himself or herself up subjectively to transformation—indeed, to *divinization*—by habitual contact with God’s fiery Word. “Mystagogical” refers, then, to the interior process whereby the disciple, led by the Spirit, gradually puts on the mind of Christ and is gradually initiated into the mysteries of his Heart: “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike” (Mt 11:25). “I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who

chose you I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth” (Jn 15:15–16;16:12–13).

Reveal these things, tell everything, call you friends, choose for myself, guide to all truth: Jesus himself is the great Mystagogue (i.e., the “leader into the mysteries”) who, in word, sacrament, and prayer leads his disciples step by step along the stages of initiation into a divine intimacy consisting of union with God in reciprocal knowledge, love, and fruitfulness. This union is already now so real and dynamic that it admirably anticipates the beatific vision and the bliss of the eternal Marriage Feast. Each session of *lectio* should be a modest foretaste of this heavenly experience.



A very simple truth should have dawned on us by now: namely, that *our lives themselves should naturally tend to become a living exegesis of the Word*, or, put another way, that our persons, history, and very bodies, deeds, and gestures should *become an incarnation of the Word we hear and read*, for: “You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pt 1:23). “We are always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:10–11).

In other words, we are to *embody* and *live* the Paschal Mystery that is the central plot of Scripture: we are to *impersonate* Christ mystically. And so, in conclusion, I would like to return to our friend St. Thérèse on her deathbed at the Lisieux Carmel, because from there she offers us a most eloquent example of such living exegesis.

3. St. Thérèse and the Thief

During that final summer of 1897, as she lay dying from tuberculosis, the twenty-four-year-old future doctor of the Church dwelt repeatedly on the image of *Jesus as thief* which she had

encountered in Mt 24:43: *If the master of the house had known on what nightwatch the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.* On June 9 Thérèse muses:

It's said in the Gospel that God will come like a thief. He will come to steal me away in the nicest way possible. Oh, how I'd love to aid the Thief!¹⁴

Then on 7 July, after she had once again coughed up blood, her sister Pauline asked her: “Are you afraid of the Thief? This time he's at the door!” To which Thérèse shot back:

No, he's not at the door, he's already come in. But how can you ask me, my dear Mother, whether I'm afraid of the Thief? How could I be afraid of someone I love so much?!¹⁵

Three days later, on 10 July, after another hemoptysis around midnight, Thérèse exclaimed: “No one can make me endure one minute longer than the Thief wants.”¹⁶

On 31 July she assumes the role of thief herself as someone who, by frequent association, has picked up from Jesus the habit of stealing and simply presumes that everything that is his is hers as well. She reassures Pauline: “Yes, I'll steal . . . Many things will disappear from Heaven because I'll bring them to you. I'll be a little thief; I'll take whatever I please.”¹⁷ Later the same day she even

¹⁴“Il est dit dans l'Évangile que le bon Dieu viendra comme un voleur. Il viendra me voler tout plein gentiment. Oh! que je voudrais bien aider au Voleur!” (*Ceuvres complètes*, 1013). Because *voler* means both “to steal” and “to fly,” Thérèse possibly has some sort of wordplay in the back of her mind, so that at the same time she could mean “he will come to steal me away” and “he will come to [make] me fly.”

¹⁵“*Avez-vous peur du Voleur? Cette fois il est à la porte! Non, il n'est pas à la porte, il est entré. Mais qu'est-ce que vous dites, ma petite Mère! Si j'ai peur du Voleur! Comment voulez-vous que j'aie peur de quelqu'un que j'aime tant?!*” (*ibid.*, 1026).

¹⁶“On ne me prolongera pas une minute de plus que le Voleur ne veut” (*ibid.*, 1033).

¹⁷“ . . . Oui je volerai . . . Y disparaîtra bien des choses du Ciel que je vous apporterai . . . Je serai une petite voleuse, je prendrai tout ce qui me plaira . . . ” (*ibid.*, 1068).

manages to make up a humorous little jingle in colloquial French, celebrating her longed-for intruder with paschal joy:

*L'Voleur viendra
Et m'emport'ra
Alleluia!*

[The Thief will come, ah,
Carry me off, ah,
Halleluyah!]¹⁸

And a little later in the day she uses the Gospel image for the last time: “I was thinking I should be a dear and wait for the Thief very quietly.”¹⁹

What is most impressive in all of this is the way in which, during her last agony and with her usual playfulness, so indicative of interior freedom, Thérèse Martin accomplishes a *living exegesis* of the Gospel text, re-writing it, quite literally, with her life-blood. In this way, and not by learning Greek, did she come to know “the true text dictated by the Holy Spirit.” Among the last words that her sister Céline recorded on 30 September, minutes before Thérèse died, we read:

I can't go on . . . I can't go on! and yet I must go on . . . I am . . . I am reduced . . . No, I would've never believed you could suffer so much . . . never, never!

But her very last words are: “My God . . . I . . . love you!”²⁰ The ellipses in the printed text of all these final statements poignantly remind us of the immense difficulty she must have had in uttering any words at all—and what words they are!

It is deeply moving to observe here how Jesus' predictions to his disciples about the end of the world and his own parousia in

¹⁸Ibid., 1069.

¹⁹“J'ai pensé qu'il fallait que je sois bien mignonne et que j'attende le Voleur bien gentiment” (ibid., 1069).

²⁰“Je ne peux plus . . . je ne peux plus! et pourtant il faut bien que je dure . . . Je suis . . . je suis réduite . . . Non, je n'aurais jamais cru qu'on pouvait tant souffrir . . . jamais, jamais! [. . .] Mon Dieu . . . je . . . vous aime!” (ibid., 1164–65).

Mt 24 are being fulfilled in Thérèse’s own flesh and life-story as she lies dying. Can we not speak of the fullest possible *realization* of a Gospel text in the life of this saint—“realization” in the strong sense of a thing foreshadowed that now, in the fullness of time, becomes utterly concrete reality? Yes: just as the text of the Old Testament prefigures the text of the New, so does the New Testament itself foreshadow the text of our own lives, calling out for its realization in us.

This is the moment in which the young nun experiences her own cosmic “tribulation,” as the sun of her irrepressible joy is darkened and all the stars that have guided her seem to be falling from the sky (Mt 24:29). This is the moment when, as life all around her pursues its ordinary course “as in the days of Noah,” the cataclysm of her own death descends like a devastating flood upon her whole being (vv. 38–39), creeping toward her in excruciatingly drawn-out fashion precisely like the silent steps of a stealthy thief.

This is, indeed, the moment when the Son of Man comes to Lisieux “to gather his elect.” His presence is announced by a shattering trumpet blast only Thérèse can hear. In her agony, Thérèse joyously welcomes the irruption into her deepest being of the One who had promised her: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I AM you also may BE” (Jn 14:3)—“so that where *I am God* you also may have fullness of being.”

As she sinks deeper into death’s torment, she allows her love so to fire her imagination that she transforms the terrifying final scenario of human disintegration into the experience of Jesus’ intimate parousia to her in glory. She becomes a living icon of the Gospel, so that we can see the Lord’s eschatological discourse take flesh in her. Thérèse becomes an existential realization of its very text, and she does it with a delicacy of feeling and even a juvenile coquettishness and hilarity that conceal the impatience of the robust mystic to embrace the only Beloved of her soul. *She even saves him the trouble of having to break into her house.*

Far from being afraid of the Thief, Thérèse exposes his hoax and anticipates his arrival by flinging open the gates of her being so as to deliver herself at last into the divine Thief’s greedy hands.

The Parable of the Thief blended in her imagination into the Parable of the Ten Virgins, so that the state of fearful anticipation of the thief’s arrival became transmuted into a state of bursting

impatience for the appearance of her Lord. No doubt this is just the way these two back-to-back parables in Matthew were meant to be read by the Spirit who inspired them. The midnight cry, “Behold, the Bridegroom!” (25:6), could only trigger in Thérèse, by a daring inversion, the ardent response, “Welcome, my long-awaited Thief!”

And this is how we, too, ought to do our *lectio divina* every day: with patience, passion, and divine humor, allowing ourselves to be wooed by God’s Word into the merry dance of grace. □

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