

“The Prayerful Reading of Sacred Scripture”

· Benedict XVI ·

Excerpt from Verbum Domini, n. 86-87

The prayerful reading of sacred Scripture and “lectio divina”

86. The Synod frequently insisted on the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer, in the various ministries and states in life, with particular reference to *lectio divina*.¹[290] The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality. The Synod Fathers thus took up the words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*: “Let the faithful go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day. Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture”.²[291] The Council thus sought to reappropriate the great patristic tradition which had always recommended approaching the Scripture in dialogue with God. As Saint Augustine puts it: “Your

¹ *Propositiones* 9 and 22.

² No. 25.

prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God”.³[292] Origen, one of the great masters of this way of reading the Bible, maintains that understanding Scripture demands, even more than study, closeness to Christ and prayer. Origen was convinced, in fact, that the best way to know God is through love, and that there can be no authentic *scientia Christi* apart from growth in his love. In his *Letter to Gregory*, the great Alexandrian theologian gave this advice: “Devote yourself to the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures; apply yourself to this with perseverance. Do your reading with the intent of believing in and pleasing God. If during the *lectio* you encounter a closed door, knock and it will be opened to you by that guardian of whom Jesus said, ‘The gatekeeper will open it for him’. By applying yourself in this way to *lectio divina*, search diligently and with unshakable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in great fullness within. You ought not, however, to be satisfied merely with knocking and seeking: to understand the things of God, what is absolutely necessary is *oratio*. For this reason, the Saviour told us not only: ‘Seek and you will find’, and ‘Knock and it shall be opened to you’, but also added, ‘Ask and you shall receive’”.⁴[293]

In this regard, however, one must *avoid the risk of an individualistic approach*, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it

³ *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85, 7: PL 37, 1086.

⁴ *Origen, Epistola ad Gregorium*, 3: PG 11, 92.

is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church. Consequently, *the sacred text must always be approached in the communion of the Church*. In effect, “a communal reading of Scripture is extremely important, because the living subject in the sacred Scriptures is the People of God, it is the Church... Scripture does not belong to the past, because its subject, the People of God inspired by God himself, is always the same, and therefore the word is always alive in the living subject. As such, it is important to read and experience sacred Scripture in communion with the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses to this word, beginning with the earliest Fathers up to the saints of our own day, up to the present-day magisterium”.⁵[294]

For this reason, *the privileged place* for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture *is the liturgy*, and particularly *the Eucharist*, in which, as we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament, the word itself is present and at work in our midst. In some sense the prayerful reading of the Bible, personal and communal, must always be related to the Eucharistic celebration. Just as the adoration of the Eucharist prepares for, accompanies and follows the liturgy of the Eucharist,⁶[295] so too prayerful reading, personal and communal, prepares for, accompanies and deepens what the Church celebrates when she proclaims the word in a

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Address to the Students of the Roman Major Seminary* (19 February 2007): AAS 99 (2007), 253-254.

⁶ Cf. Id., Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 66; AAS 99 (2007), 155-156.

liturgical setting. By so closely relating *lectio* and liturgy, we can better grasp the criteria which should guide this practice in the area of pastoral care and in the spiritual life of the People of God.

87. The documents produced before and during the Synod mentioned a number of methods for a faith-filled and fruitful approach to sacred Scripture. Yet the greatest attention was paid to *lectio divina*, which is truly “capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God”.⁷[296] I would like here to review the basic steps of this procedure. It opens with the reading (*lectio*) of a text, which leads to a desire to understand its true content: *what does the biblical text say in itself?* Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas. Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: *what does the biblical text say to us?* Here, each person, individually but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged. Following this comes prayer (*oratio*), which asks the question: *what do we say to the Lord in response to his word?* Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us. Finally, *lectio divina* concludes with contemplation (*contemplatio*), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves *what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?* In the *Letter to the Romans*, Saint Paul tells us: “Do not

⁷ *Final Message*, III, 9.

be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Contemplation aims at creating within us a truly wise and discerning vision of reality, as God sees it, and at forming within us “the mind of Christ” (1 *Cor* 2:16). The word of God appears here as a criterion for discernment: it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Heb* 4:12). We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.

We find the supreme synthesis and fulfilment of this process in the Mother of God. For every member of the faithful Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God’s word, for she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (*Lk* 2:19; cf. 2:51); she discovered the profound bond which unites, in God’s great plan, apparently disparate events, actions and things.⁸[297]

I would also like to echo what the Synod proposed about the importance of the personal reading of Scripture, also as a practice allowing for the possibility, in accordance with the Church’s usual conditions, of gaining an indulgence either for oneself or for the faithful departed.⁹[298] The

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “*Plenaria indulgentia* conceditur christifideli qui Sacram Scripturam, iuxta textum a competenti auctoritate adprobatum,

practice of indulgences¹⁰[299] implies the doctrine of the infinite merits of Christ – which the Church, as the minister of the redemption, dispenses and applies, but it also implies that of the communion of saints, and it teaches us that “to whatever degree we are united in Christ, we are united to one another, and the supernatural life of each one can be useful for the others”.¹¹[300] From this standpoint, the reading of the word of God sustains us on our journey of penance and conversion, enables us to deepen our sense of belonging to the Church, and helps us to grow in familiarity with God. As Saint Ambrose puts it, “When we take up the sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden”.¹²[301]

cum veneratione divino eloquio debita et ad modum lectionis spiritalis, per dimidiam saltem horam legerit; si per minus tempus id egerit *indulgentia* erit partialis”: apostolic penitentiary, *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum. Normae et Concessionones* (16 July 1999), 30, §1.

¹⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1471-1479.

¹¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1 January 1967): AAS 59 (1967), 18-19.

¹² Cf. *Epistula* 49, 3: PL 16, 1204A.