

93/AG/01

January 26, 1993

My dear Brothers and Sisters:

I trust that this new year will be a year of grace for all of you. The Lord gives himself without measure to those who have infinite desires. Let us pray for one another that the divine action may not be in vain in us.

In my circular letter of last year I presented the Good News of the *Schola Caritatis* in the context of the New Evangelization. My intention was, at the same time, to say something about monastic contemplative identity; or, better yet, attempt to conceptualize my own experience in order to communicate it to you.

Once again, I wish to thank those who have written to me sharing their reactions and reflections. I renew, through this letter, my invitation to dialogue and to a sharing of the gifts the Lord gives us.

I would like today, in the context of the Gospel of the School of Charity, to offer you some thoughts concerning *Lectio Divina*.

I consider that the two pillars of our contemplative life are: the Eucharist, the *Opus dei*, *Lectio Divina*, and *Intentio Cordis*; and these pillars are set upon the foundation of ascetism, work and solitude; all being dynamized by the prudent alternation of these *exercitia*, in the ambitus of a communion of love and convergent pluralism. Not being able to include everything in one letter I will focus on *Lectio*.

I am very much aware that two of my predecessors have written on this most outstanding exercise of our monastic *conversatio*. It is not possible to improve on what has been written. Nor do I think that I can say anything diverse, but I assure you that neither will it be adverse.

In his 1978 letter Dom Ambrose said to us: " If we succeed in developing the practice of *Lectio* it will have far-reaching effects on the quality of our monastic life and the contemplative dimension of our monasteries will be enriched." When I read those words then I could sense and sound all the truth contained in them. Today, being more convinced than ever, I am their spokesman.

Well, enough of preambles. I want to spare you the fatigue and annoyance of a long and wide-ranging document. For this reason I have written what follows in the form of brief maxims or *sententiae*. I trust that this will prove more profitable and, perhaps, more pedagogical.

I follow in this the examples of the ancient spiritual writers. Many of them were accustomed to draft their works in sentence-form, each conveying a central theme. The sentence is a brief and succinct saying offering advice and a rule for living, or shows forth doctrine, morals and good sense, and, in the best examples, wisdom. But for the sentence to convey wisdom it is necessary that he who writes and they who read feel and savor the taste of what they do and live.

PRELUDE

1. The Spirit inspired the Scriptures, therefore: it is present and speaks through them. If it breathes in, it also breathes out.
2. The Scriptures breathe life by the inspiration of the Spirit, that is why they are the breath of the Christian monk.
3. All of this living book converges on Christ. The Divine Scriptures are one book only: Christ. He is the concise, living and efficacious Word.
4. All Scripture points to the mystery of Christ: prefigured in the Old Testament and present in the New, interiorized by each Christian and consummated in glory.
5. Because God is Infinite, his Word is also Infinite: Scripture enshrines infinite mysteries, its meaning is unfathomable.
6. The literal meaning of the text is always the point of departure: the letter reveals the deeds and presents the persons, history is the foundation.
7. The Spirit takes us beyond the letter, our theological life opens the doors of meaning to us:
 - Allegorical, building faith through the discovery of Christ and his Church.
 - Tropological, teaching us to act in the truth of love.
 - Analogical, showing us and drawing us towards that for which we yearn.
8. The Gospel is the mouth of Christ, ever-ready to offer to us the kiss of eternity.
9. The Gospel is the body and blood of Christ, to pray and live it is to eat and to drink it.
10. The Gospel is the power of God because it shows us the way and gives us the strength to follow it.
11. Herein is found true life, and my spirit neither has nor desires anything but the prayerful reading of these mysteries!
12. The Church is the only sounding-board of the Word of God. Because she is the Body of Christ, she herself is also the Word. Scripture gives us life in the Spirit, when received in the ambitus of tradition and magisterium.
13. Our *Lectio Divina* should prolong the Word beyond the Liturgy in order to prepare us for a more fruitful celebration of the same.
14. The Cenobite understands the profound meaning of the Word only when living in communion and concord with his brothers.
15. Monastic *conversatio* should create a biblical climate allowing each and all to be protagonists in the dialogue of salvation.
16. The *humus* of humility is the good soil in which the Word produces abundant fruit.

17. Only he receives who is recollected, only in silence is heard the beating of the heart of God.

18. We speak to God when we pray with love, we hear God when we read his Word with faith.

19. When we are "nailed" to the Book through our perseverance and assiduity in *Lectio*, then we will comprehend the folly of the good God.

20 To know Christ crucified we must be crucified to the world.

21. "Here I am, may God write in me what he wills", said Mary. When the heart is a letter written by God, all of God's letters resound in the heart.

22. He who lives the Good News offers the world reasons to live and die.

FIRST MOVEMENT: riposo

23. *Lectio Divina* is:

- A meditated reading, above all of the Bible, prolonged in contemplative prayer.
- A reading about God with the eyes of a spouse and the heart of the Church.
- A reading gratuitously made in order to gratuitously receive the Author of grace.
- A transformative reading that evangelizes us, making us evangelizers.
- An interpersonal relationship in faith and love, with Christ who speaks to us, in the Spirit who teaches us, and under the gaze of the Father who regards us.
- A pilgrimage of words towards the Mystery of the Word.
- A slow assimilation of saving Truth whilst in dialogue with the Savior.
- An enamoured faith that seeks the Face of God in order to anticipate what is yearned for.
- Immersion, conpenetration, divinization, emersion.

24. *Lectio* is divina:

- for God is read in his Word and with his Spirit.
- because we are brought before the Mystery and it is made present in the heart.
- when God who speaks is heard and his presence tasted.

25. Because *Lectio Divina* is dialogue it is therefore reception, self-gift and communion. Reception by attention and reflection; self-gift through our response, communion through encounter.

26. Miriam of Nazareth, in dialogue with Gabriel, offers us a captivating example of *Lectio vere divina*.

27. Because *Lectio Divina* is life it is also movement. Movement in that different moments or experienced can be discerned: reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation...

28. Reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation ..is what normally occurs when we give it time to happen.

29. The gratuity of *Lectio Divina* is different from the utility of study. Study endeavors to master the word, *Lectio Divina* surrenders and yields before it.

30. *Lectio Divina* also differs from spiritual reading. The last can have as its end the acquisition of knowledge, the formulation of convictions or the stimulus for generous self-giving. The aim of the former is union with God in faith and love.

SECOND MOVEMENT: coraggioso ed ampio ma non troppo

31. *Lectio Divina* is not, as a rule, immediately gratifying. It is an active and passive process of long duration. One does not reap the day following the sowing! The worm is not instantly transformed into a butterfly!

32. There is nothing as purifying as enduring the silence of the Word. But all who know how to wait reap the reward.

33. If you allow yourself to be possessed by the Word, you will hear even his silence.

34. In *Lectio Divina* there is also room for the Fathers of the Church and Citeaux, their writings confirm and amplify the biblical message; because of their christian spirit they are sure guides of correct interpretation; and by their holiness of life, they teach us how to live, and help us to commune in the Holy Spirit.

35. Other books are helpful in the measure that they allow us to assimilate the Mystery and be transformed by it.

36. When the beginner says: for me, everything is *Lectio Divina*; it is to be understood that for him *Lectio Divina* is meaningless.

THIRD MOVEMENT: adagio pero continuo

37. Pay attention: it is God who wishes to speak to you and awaits your reply!

38. The various experiences or moments of *Lectio Divina* come together in one movement of the spirit. They can co-exist and mutually overlap, they can even alternate in an ever-changing order. The pedestrian makes many movements, but all come together in one action: walking.

39. Asiduous practice lessens rigidity. He who exercises little increases rigidity and makes slow progress. He who does not exercise does not advance.

40. *Lectio Divina* is a daily practice for the monk and nun at a privileged hour, all the time that is necessary to bring about a dialogue with the most faithful of friends.

READING

41. Reading is a form of listening that allows of always being able to return to what was heard. And listening is being and letting be; without listening, there is no interpersonal relationship.

42. If you read to read and not to have read, then your lectio is serene, restful and disinterested.

43. Do not waste time in looking for a text that is pleasing, choose your text beforehand, perhaps the day's liturgical readings, or follow some theme, or a consecutive reading of the whole Bible.

44. The fool falls into the temptation of saying: I already know this text! The wise man knows that it is one thing to know the chemical formula of water and another to savour it by a spring on a summer's day.

45. If you do not comprehend what you are reading, ask the Lord to help you to understand. And you can help the Lord by: if you read the text in its context, compare it with parallel texts, find the key words, determine the central message...

46. If you have read well, you will be able to say what the text means.

MEDITATION

47. To meditate is to chew and ruminate, for it is to: repeat, reflect, remember, interpret, penetrate...One who thus meditates on the Word is transformed according to the Word and becomes a mediator of the Word.

48. If the text read means nothing to you, love the Word beyond the words and do not hesitate to surrender yourself without reserve. And if the text is a hard saying and you apply it to your neighbor, try re-reading it in the first person.

49. There is no meditation without distraction. Return, then, to the reading. Concentrate on the key words.

50. When the text speaks to your heart, you have reached and received a precious fruit of meditation.

PRAYER

51. Prayer during *Lectio Divina* can take many forms; praise, petition, thanksgiving, compunction...

52. Having listened by reading and meditation, you can now speak in prayer. If you know what the text says and what it says to you: what do you say to Him?

53. Silence can also be a response, as much for the one who prays, carried out of himself, as for Him who knows all.

CONTEMPLATION

54. To contemplate is to take silent delight in the Temple which is the Risen Christ.

55. To contemplate is to encounter the Word, beyond words.

56. To contemplate is to live in the Risen One, rooted in the now of this earth, reaching out to the beyond of the heavens.

57. Contemplation is vision. The contemplative sees the resurrection in the cross, life in death, the Risen One in the Crucified.

58. Contemplation is the thirst caused by the seeming absence or the satiety of mutual presence.

59. The contemplative is at a loss for words, simply because he knows.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: codetta

Collatio

60. *Collatio* is contribution or provision, confrontation or dialogue. It is to provide fuel for meditation, fire for prayer, light for contemplation, motivation for acts

Action

61. Action refers, before all, to the conversion of one's heart, behaving as a disciple and under the discipline of the Truth revealed for our salvation.

Collaboration

62. Every good work is in collaboration with the One who does all things well. He who collaborates with Him works and prays with all.

POSTLUDE

63. The Bible is not intended only to tell us about God but to transform us according to the form of Christ.

64. Scripture is the word that informs, giving us the form of christians.

65. The virginal conception of the Virgin Mother is a mystery of redemption and also a model for imitation: conceiving the Word in the womb of the heart, embracing the will of the Father, makes us brother, sister, and mother.

66. The Word and the words are for man, and not man for the words, because man is for the Word.

67. He who has progressed in *Lectio Divina* experiences the need for fewer words and more of the Word.

68. He who has been transformed by the Word can read it in the events of each day, and in those signs of the times which are voices of God manifested through the deepest human aspirations.

69. He who has revealed truth engraven in the innermost depths of his heart, does not depend on the sacred text and is for others a living Bible.

70. If you want to know and reach Christ, you will arrive at it much sooner by following him than by reading about him.

Having arrived at this point in the letter I realize that I have written more than I had intended to, but certainly much less that the subject deserves. There are many aspects of *Lectio Divina* that have been left out, and others that I have never experienced.

We all know that one of our capital "vices" is activism. Dom Gabriel had already mentioned this in 1955, and in the house reports of the last General Chapter it appeared with great frequency. We are dealing with a pernicious vice, for it unsettles monastic otio, shatters the desire for eternal life, interferes with the continual search for the face of God and alters, finally, the very nature of contemplative life.

I know of a powerful weapon with which to attack and conquer this most unnatural activism: the equilibrium and alternation between *Lectio Divina*, liturgy and work. And the best way to safeguard this equilibrium is to give *Lectio Divina* a place of priority. *Credete expertibus!*

Allow me to share some words of Gilbert, abbot of Hoyland, that challenged me deeply during my first years of monastic life, and have preserved for me until the present all of their prophetic weight.

You, who pray on the run but dally with books, you who are fervent in reading and lukewarm in praying. Reading should serve prayer, should dispose the affections, should neither devour the hours nor gobble up the moments of prayer. When you read you are taught about Christ, but when you pray you join him in familiar colloquy. How much more enchanting is the grace of speaking with him than about him! (Serm. Cant. VII:2)

But, actually, the great master of *Lectio* is William, abbot of Saint Thierry. His prayed meditations are an eloquent testimony to his application to lectio and to his heart, full of desire and divine contemplation. Put yourselves under his tutelage and he, as a good disciple of the one only Teacher, will make masters of you.

This letter has no conclusion. It is each of you who must continue it. But, please, let no one bring it to a close. Let us leave it unfinished, as a sign of the search that is to continue until it ends in Infinity.

I ask your prayers, assuring you of a constant remembrance in the sacrifice of my own.
With a fond embrace, in Mary of St. Joseph.

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General

P.S. I include a synthesis of my comprehension of the Gospel of the School of Charity. It will help you to see the place that *Lectio Divina* holds in it.