

NURIA CALDUCH-BENAGES

Savoring the Word

*On Prayerful Faith-Filled Reading
(lectio divina)*



verbo divino

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Preface

The widespread practice of *lectio divina* is an authentic sign of hope for the church. *Verbum Domini*, the final message of the Synod on the Word, states: *lectio divina* “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” (VD 87). Nowadays *lectio divina* is also known as prayerful reading, faith-filled reading, or even the School of the Word. It is for this reason that this little book is so entitled. It is the result of my participation as an expert in the 12th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (Vatican City, 5-26th October, 2008), of my reading of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, and finally, of my experience in the field of biblical apostolate, in particular, as a guide and leader of groups that practice *lectio divina* in various contexts of the church.

The work is divided into three principal parts. The first part, which is theoretical and informative in character, deals with *lectio divina* as discussed at the Synod of the Word and in the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, its history,

definition, description, and practice in various ecclesial contexts.¹

The second part, which is practical in nature, proposes three examples of practicing *lectio divina*. One is taken from the Old Testament, from the Book of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 37:1-14: “From the four winds, come O spirit”) and the other two are from the New Testament: the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 25:31-46: “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me”) and the Letter of Paul to the Philippians (Phil 3:2-14: “I run towards the goal”). The three examples present an introduction to the text with a commentary that underscores the more relevant aspects of the text and concludes with an application for daily life (“From Text to Life”).

The third part of the book has a documentary character. The text of the Letter of Guigo the Carthusian to his brother Gervase about the Contemplative Life is presented in its entirety. Quotes pertaining to *lectio divina* from *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, and from the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* are also included. The book concludes with a brief bibliography for those who wish to deepen their knowledge of the practice of *lectio divina*.

A word of gratitude goes to Guillermo Santamaría, the director of the publishing house Verbo Divino, for encour-

¹ Nuria Calduch-Benages, “La lectura orante o creyente de la Sagrada Escritura (Lectio Divina),” in Jorge J. Fernández Sangrador and Juan A. Mayoral (eds.), *La Sagrada Escritura en la Iglesia. Actas del Congreso con motivo de la publicación de la Sagrada Biblia, versión oficial de la Conferencia Episcopal Española (7 al 9 de febrero de 2011)* (Comprender la Palabra. Comentarios a la Sagrada Biblia. Versión oficial de la Conferencia Episcopal Española 1), Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2015, 299-317.

aging me to write this book; to Jorge Juan Fernández San-grador, the director of BAC (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos), for allowing me to use the text of my conference paper entitled “La Sagrada Escritura en la Iglesia.”

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Last, a note for English-language readers: in the text and footnotes I have tried, wherever possible, to quote publications in English; as for the original bibliography it has been completely updated with English titles.

Nuria Calduch-Benages,
Rome, 8 September 2016,
on the feast of the Nativity of Mary,
in Catalonia the feast of the
“Mare de Déu de Núria” (*Our Lady of Nuria*)

List of abbreviations

<i>AAS</i>	<i>Acta Apostolicae Sedis</i>
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BAC	Biblioteca de autores cristianos
CBF	Catholic Biblical Federation
CELAM	Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana
CRB	Conferencia de Religiosos de Brasil
CRC	Christian Reformed Church
<i>DV</i>	<i>Dei Verbum</i>
EB	Enchiridion Biblicum
LAS	Libreria Ateneo Salesiano
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PL	Patrologia Latina
PPC	Editorial Pensar, Publicar, Creer
SCPK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SLG	Sisters of the Love of God
<i>Tg. Ps.-J.</i>	<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonatan</i>
<i>VD</i>	<i>Verbum Domini</i>

General Questions on *lectio divina*

Lectio divina at the Synod of the Word and in *Verbum Domini*

One of the prominent themes at the Synod of the Word was *lectio divina*, together with the homily and scripturally informed pastoral work, and in general, the reaffirmation of the priority of the Word of God in the Church in all that she undertakes.¹ It suffices to review the various interventions at the synod to grasp the importance which this monastic practice held and still holds for the universal church.

Synodal fathers from five different continents had ten minutes each to explain the situation of their churches with respect to the Word of God. The common denomi-

¹ For a general presentation of the topics considered at the Synod, cf. Nuria Calduch-Benages, "El Sínodo sobre la Palabra de Dios: balance y perspectivas," *Teología Espiritual*, vol. 53, no. 158 (2009) 147-158, and also *Isidorianum* 35 (2009) 317-338; Salvador Pié-Ninot, "Nota sobre el Sínodo sobre la Palabra de Dios en la Vida y en la Misión de la Iglesia," *Gregorianum* 90 (2009) 857-863, and "Lectura Teológica de la 'Verbum Domini' de Benedicto XVI," *Seminarios* 57, no. 199-200 (2011) 11-24.

nator in their interventions was the place of *lectio divina* in the life of the church.

From Africa, Monsignor John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja (Nigeria), explained how the practice of *lectio divina* had greatly contributed to the biblical apostolate after the Second Vatican Council. In the African continent several methods of reading, meditation and application of Scripture to people's lives have been developed. The Benedictine monastery of Dzogbegan in northern Togo and the Pastoral Center of Lumko in South Africa have, for example, elaborated some methods for practicing *lectio divina*. These methods are currently used, with some variations and modifications, everywhere in the world. The most well-known method is perhaps the *Seven Steps*, also known as the "Lumko method", which presents the encounter with Scripture in seven moments or steps: God's presence, reading, meditation, reflexive pause, communication, informal conversation, and communal prayer.²

From Asia, Monsignor Thomas Menampampil, Archbishop of Guwahati in India, confirmed that enormous efforts have been made to bring the Word of God to the people. In fact, there is an increasing interest in the practice of *lectio divina*. Despite the absence of trained leaders who can guide or lead the practice, a growing number of small groups, which employ the Lumko and Asipa methods, gather to read the Word of God, meditate on it,

² The "Lumko method" was developed in 1978 by two priests "Fidei Donum," Fritz Lobinger and Oswald Hirmer, now Emeritus Bishop of Umtata (South Africa), whose intervention in the Synod consisted in a detailed presentation of the mentioned method. Cf. *Lumko Bible Sharing Method* on the Catholic Biblical Federation web page (<http://www.c-b-f.org>).

pray with it and consequently apply it to their concrete life situations.

From the Americas, Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Madariaga, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa in Honduras, reminded the synod that since the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, one of the priorities of the church has been to encourage the reading of the Bible in daily life, i.e. a prayerful reading that is oriented towards mission. He also noted that the number of “lectionauts” or young people who learn and practice *lectio divina* has grown with more than 300,000 participants. It continues to grow everyday, thanks to an Internet program with the same name.

According to Cardinal Josip Bozanic, Archbishop of Zagreb in Croatia, signs of a renewed interest in the Bible can be seen in Europe. The situation makes the invitation to practice *lectio divina*, the prayerful and meditative reading of the Word of God even more urgent. This practice provides the interior strength to live and carry out a pastoral mission – it is due to this practice that Christians in communist Europe were able to survive. It also lays the fundament for the ecumenical movement and inter-religious dialogue.

As for the Word of God in Oceania, Bishop Michael Ernest Putney of Townsville in Australia mentioned the efforts that have been done in recent years to put into action the recommendations of John Paul II in his exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania* (2001), one of which is to encourage the practice of *lectio divina* among the faithful. Presently, the prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible is one of the priorities of the Australian Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In addition to these reports, thirteen Synodal fathers³ centered their respective interventions on paragraph 38 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which is dedicated to *lectio divina*. Some of them recognized that this practice is not well known among the faithful who attend church regularly. And so, they recommended that priests, deacons and consecrated religious be prepared with an adequate training in order to spread the practice.⁴ Two other interventions deserve a place of mention: Monsignor Florentin Crihalmeanu, Bishop of Cluj-Gherla in Romania, stressed the importance of the use of icons in *lectio divina* (visual theology), especially when it is practiced with children or with individuals who do not know how to read; Monsignor Antoni Dziemianko, Bishop of Lesvi in Belorussia, also noted that *lectio divina* is the only religious reading that priests could carry out during the period of persecution in Belorussia.

The theme of the prayerful reading of scripture stirred such an interest in the synodal room that additional time was given to Bishop Santiago Jaime Silva Retamales of Bela in Chile. After explaining the scope and essential

³ The order of the interventions: Rev. Msgr. Orlando Romero Cabrera (Uruguay), Rev. Msgr. Peter Liu Cheng-Chung (Taiwan), Rev. Msgr. Oswald Georg Hirmer (South Africa), Rev. Msgr. Pierre-Marie Carré (France), Rev. Msgr. Francis Eugene George (United States of America), Rev. Msgr. Florentin Crihalmeanu (Romania), Msgr. Cardinal Claudio Hummes (Vatican City), Rev. Msgr. Héctor Manuel Cabrejos Vidarte (Peru), Rev. Msgr. Antoni Dziemianko (Belorussia), Rev. Msgr. Francesco Coccopalmerio (Vatican City), Rev. Msgr. Víctor Hugo Palma Paul (Guatemala), Rev. Msgr. Joseph Mukasa Zuza (Malawi), and Rev. Mrgr. Jabulani Nxumalu (South Africa). Cf. the summaries of the interventions on the *Bulletin* of the Holy See press office, October 5th to 26th, 2008 on the web page of the Holy See

⁴ Cf. Nuria Calduch-Benages, “La Palabra de Dios en la formación de los sacerdotes y las personas consagradas,” *Seminarios* 57, 199-200 (2011) 25-35.

traits of *lectio divina*, he gave an illustration of this practice based on his experience in the Diocese of Valparaiso.

Echoing the above-mentioned experiences, concerns and desires, *Verbum Domini* dedicates paragraphs 86 and 87 to the “prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture and *lectio divina*.” In light of *Dei Verbum*⁵ and the patristic tradition, which has always recommended a prayerful disposition towards scripture (in dialogue with God), the document cautions the faithful against an individualistic approach, stating that the Word of God “is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it 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.” It is for this reason that the liturgy, the Eucharist in particular, is the privileged place for the prayerful reading of scripture. The document continues to say that “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, so too prayerful reading, personal and communal, prepares for, accompanies and deepens what the Church celebrates when she proclaims the word in a liturgical setting” (*VD* 86).⁶

⁵ We quote the end of the first paragraph of art. 25 only: “Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred scripture, so that it becomes a dialogue between God and the human reader. For, ‘we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.’”

⁶ The sacramental character of the Word of God was introduced at the Synod by Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, the current president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Paragraph 87 explains the four fundamental steps of *lectio divina*: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation) to which a conclusive step of *actio* (action or practical application) is added. It states, “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.” It should be noted that some groups complete this process with the *collatio* (conversation): sharing and reflecting with others, exchanging how the Word inspires, and praying together. *Verbum Domini* also presents Mary as the synthesis and summit of the spiritual path that is followed in *lectio divina* (cf. Luke 2:19, 51). It concludes by emphasizing the significance of the relationship between this practice and the ecclesial indulgences, since the personal reading of Scripture is “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.”

A Brief History of *lectio divina*

Anyone who intends to establish the exact historical moment when the practice of *lectio divina* began, will find out sooner or later that it is an impossible task. There are several authors who have investigated the beginnings of the practice of prayerful reading and it is upon their works that the following discussion will rely.⁷ *Lectio divina* was

⁷ Cf. Denys Gorce, *La lectio divina des origines du cénobitisme à saint Benoît et Cassiodore*, 1: *Saint Jérôme et la lecture sacrée dans le milieu ascétique romain*, Wépion-Sur-Meuse - Paris: Monastery of Mont-Vierge, 1925; Giorgio Zevini, “Il senso spirituale della Scrittura nella tradizione patristico-medievale,” *Parole di vita* 4 (1977) 61-68; Bertrand de Mergerie, *Introduction à l’histoire de l’exégèse*, I-II-III, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1980-1983.

born in a Jewish environment: the rabbis used to say that through reading, meditation and prayer, the human person could assimilate the Torah, that is, the Word, the presence of God in creation. It is evident from New Testament texts that Christianity inherited this method of Jewish reading, which contains the essential elements of *lectio divina*. As Paul writes in his Letter to Romans, “For whatever was written in former days, was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4; cf. 2Tim 3:14-17).

Beginning with Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-253), considered by some to be the father of *lectio divina*, it was especially the Fathers of the Church who employed *lectio divina* widely, giving the basic outlines and encouraging the faithful to practice it. The following fragments from their various writings testify to this:⁸

Jerome (ca. 347-420) advises the virgin Julia Eustochium on how to achieve spiritual perfection:

Practice frequently the lectio... the roll still in your hands; when your head falls, let it be on the *sancta pagina*.⁹

And to virgin Demetrias, he recommends:

Love to occupy your mind with the reading of scripture.¹⁰

⁸ For a good selection of texts, cf. Francisco Contreras Molina, *Leer la Biblia como Palabra de Dios. Claves teológico-pastorales de la lectio divina en la Iglesia*, Estella: Verbo Divino, 2007, reissued 2009, 59.

⁹ Jerome, *Letter* 22, 17.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Letter* 130, 7.

Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340-397), referring to the gospel passage on the temptations in the desert, in particular to the first response of Jesus to the devil (“It is written: One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God”) comments:

See the weapons that Christ uses to defend man against the assaults of the evil spirit, making him stronger and sheltering him against the temptations of greed. He does not use his power as God – what would be the use of it? – but, as a man, looks for a common help, so that occupied with feeding himself with divine reading, he forgets bodily hunger as he obtains his sustenance from the celestial word.¹¹

Augustine writes a letter to Antoninus, who is a husband and head of a household, and advises him about his wife,

That she continues her spiritual walk with the food of *lectio divina* and her son grows according to the wholesome precepts of the Lord.¹²

The reading of and listening to the Word of God acquired great importance especially among monks. At the very beginning of monasticism, the “sayings” of the desert fathers and mothers (4-5th centuries) show the central role that *lectio divina* acquired in the desert. This is how Anthony responded to a brother who questioned him about what he needed to do in order to obtain God’s favor:

¹¹ Ambrose, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke*, IV, 20.

¹² Augustine, *Letter 20*, 3.

Wherever you go, always have God present before your eyes and in anything you do, always rely on the testimony of Sacred Scripture.¹³

Cassian (360-435) occupies a special place in the history of *lectio divina*: he had appropriated the tradition of the Eastern fathers and diffused the same into the West. His reflections on *lectio divina* are addressed especially to monks with the objective of improving monastic life. Here is a well-known fragment:

You must then, if you want to acquire true knowledge of the Scriptures, endeavor first to secure steadfast humility of heart ... next you must by all means strive to get rid of all anxiety and worldly thoughts, and give yourself over assiduously or rather continuously, to sacred reading, until continual meditation fills your heart, and fashions you, so to speak, after its own likeness ... But as the renewal of our soul grows by means of this study, Scripture also will begin to put on a new face, and the beauty of the holier meanings will somehow grow with our growth. For their form is adapted to the capacity of human understanding, and will appear earthly to carnal people, and divine to spiritual ones, so that those to whom it formerly appeared to be wrapped in thick clouds, cannot apprehend its subtleties nor endure its light.¹⁴

The historical overview can be continued with passages from John Chrysostom († 407), Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470-572), Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-ca. 555), Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) or Isidore of Seville (ca. 560-636), who is the author of this famous saying: “When we pray,

¹³ Athanasius, *Apothegm*, 3.

¹⁴ Cassian, *Conferences*, XIV, 10-11.

we talk to God; when we read, God talks to us.”¹⁵ Some centuries later, *lectio divina* was endorsed by monks like Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1095-1141), William of Saint-Thierry (†1148), Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), Isaac of Stella (ca. 1100-1169) and Guigo II the Carthusian (†1188), whose four steps of *lectio divina* will be presented later.

After the Middle Ages, the method of *lectio divina* declined, but continued to be practiced in monastic communities. Outside the monastic communities the prayerful reading of Scripture was replaced with other practices of a more intellectual or devotional, introspective and psychological character. The “exile” of the Word of God from the life of the church and of the faithful began in the latter years of the 12th century and the early years of the 13th century (the period of Innocent III); it lasted for centuries only ending in the course of the 20th century. To be sure, the encyclicals *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) of Leo XIII and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) of Pius XII, the “magna carta” of Catholic biblical renewal, are important witnesses to the gradual liberation of the Word. But it was the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965)¹⁶ that finally put an end to the “exile of Sacred Scripture”, consequently inaugurating a new flourishing of *lectio divina* and a real “epiphany” of

¹⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Sentences*, III, 8,2.

¹⁶ *Dei Verbum* proposes the method of *lectio divina* as a privileged way of interpreting scripture: “The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8). ‘For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’ [...] And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together.” (*DV* 25).