

METHODS FOR READING AND PRAYING SACRED SCRIPTURE

Some Principles

1. The Bible, as God's Word, is more an announcement than a dogma or a refutation. It is the privileged testimony of our forebears in faith, the center of which is the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus we must bear in mind its "kerygmatic" character which makes its message "good news."
2. We should not read it or pray it to learn more things about it, or to broaden our cultural knowledge (history, art, literature, etc., of the people it cites) or out of mere curiosity. Nor should we approach it with an apologetic attitude, as if it were a source of arguments to prove what we want to say; nor with a merely moralizing view, as a catalogue of norms, commandments and obligations.
3. We must relate to the Bible the better to know God, his plans, his thought and his will; to understand the divine meaning of our life and vocation; and to interpret, in the light of God, the reality that surrounds us and in which we are inserted. Hence we must awaken in ourselves some basic ideas that bring us nearer to God's Word, as our Fr. Founder teaches us.

1) As a point of departure, it is necessary *to believe, to have a spirit of faith*. Without faith it is impossible to know the authentic and true value of the Word of God, and hence to penetrate the thought of the Lord and know his will. An obedient faith that is bent on fulfilling the Word. A faith that is ecclesial, lived and nourished in the tradition of the Church. As Claret said, the Word of God, which is the truth and the bread of understanding, must be sought in a milieu of truth and authenticity guaranteed by the Church.

2) *With humility and interior poverty*, like Mary and the poor in spirit. God hides himself from the wise and prudent, the haughty and proud. In contrast, God reveals himself to the simple and lowly. Hence, God will not reveal himself or let himself be manifested in his Word to a person without humility.

3) *With interior silence*. Interior silence lets us hear the voice of God speaking to us through his Word. In silence and inner peace we can pierce "the mysteries" hidden in the sacred books and acquire the "science of the heart" so needed by a missionary. Claret would ask those called "to the ministry of the divine word," following Jesus' example, to retire first and pray alone, meditating on the sufferings of Jesus crucified, in order to acquire that science of the heart without which their word would be but "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal."

4) *With love of God and fidelity to his Word*. Without love it is impossible to understand God's Word. It is charity, which makes us sons of God and like Him, that gives us the capacity to hear him and understand him. This love is manifested and signified by being faithful to the will of God expressed in his Word.

5) *With an open spirit and with a will to profit from the Word*. It is necessary to let ourselves be challenged by it personally and vocationally as Claretian Missionaries:

- To seek a greater identification with Christ. An identification that must be absolute and radical, and in an apostolic perspective. Through the Word, the missionary must imitate Jesus and acquire a gospel mentality by accepting the values of the Gospel and conforming one's own conduct to the evangelical proposals of Jesus.
- To acquire a suitable formation for becoming "good disciples (of Jesus) and fervent preachers." According to Claret, the Word of God occupies a fundamental place in a suitable formation. The Word of God, which must be read and meditated on under the action of the Spirit, is a source of priestly and missionary spirituality, and is a source of the very Spirit who enlivens and illumines the Word, and enlivens and moves that formation of the missionary. In the Word of God, the forandus will find the best models for his life and mission.
- To feel called, sent and identified with Jesus' command to preach the Good News to all people throughout the world. The Word of God will kindle him in apostolic charity and move and impel him to proclaim it as Jesus did. The Lord will enlighten him and the Spirit will inspire him with the words he must speak and announce at any moment. The Sacred Scriptures will also teach the missionary the way he must announce the Word so that it may be effective. And finally, from his reading of the Word of God, the missionary will obtain all the other graces and helps he needs in order to fulfill the sacred ministry of preaching.

I. READING THE BIBLE

1. The right ambiance for reading

- The reading of the text must be immediately preceded by a brief silence, with a prayer to ask the Lord to send us his Spirit and open our understanding and heart in order to accept his Word obediently.
- The texts should be read slowly, without haste. If necessary, read them again in order to be sure we have grasped their message.

2. Reading the text in its context

1) The first step is to ask what the text meant to its first addressees. Avoid the tendency to make an immediate application to our own situation. This sort of reading projects our own concerns on the text and usually results in a moralizing reading, which is a product of our traditional education.

2) The question that ought to guide our reading is: What faith experience has been gathered into this text? When we read the Bible this is exactly what we are seeking: a faith experience that helps us understand our own faith and broadens the horizon of living our faith in a new situation.

3) In order to put the text in its setting, we have some very simple resources:

- Gathering information on the customs of that time; using maps; situating the text historically with the help of introductions, commentaries, etc.
- Bearing in mind that in the Bible we find ways of speaking and writing different from our own (parables, miracle accounts, annunciations...).
- Always remembering that the Bible is an incarnated word and that in it we must distinguish its perennial meaning from what was proper of that time alone (killings, violence, discrimination against women...). The best criterion for

learning this is to read all texts from the viewpoint of the message and life of Jesus, which is the center and key for reading the whole Bible.

3. Reading existentially in order to understand life

1) After this first reading of the text, we must expose our life to the challenge of the message we have discovered. We are convinced that in the Bible God had left us the fundamental guidelines for orienting ourselves in life: we have the word and life of Jesus, the history of the chosen people with their sages and prophets... but all of this has its translation into concrete life today.

2) Hence the second reflection that we should cultivate is never to read a text without asking ourselves how it probes us. This means:

* Keeping a keen eye on the things happening around us, being attentive to life, to things that happen to us and to the people around us, to the signs of each epoch.

* Allowing the message that we have discovered in the text to speak freely, so that it may be like a rain that always makes the earth fruitful.

* Being ready to let ourselves be probed by the message we discover.

4. Prayerful reading

1) The Bible should be read in the spirit in which it was written. Through it God speaks, and in order to hear Him, we must be on the same wave-length.

2) This means that our reading should be done in a climate of faith and prayer, which implies:

- Believing and sincerely opening our heart to receive what God is telling us through his Word consigned to Sacred Scripture.
- Answering God through petition, thanksgiving, reproach..., thus filling out the dialogue when He has begun. Because we listen to God when we read his Word and we speak to him when we address our prayer to him.

5. Community reading

- It is very important that personal reading be complemented with community reading. The Council and the Congregation have helped us discover the value of community and this has an important application for the Bible, the interpretation of which is not a private and personal matter, but rather an ecclesial and community one.
- The Christian and Claretian community is the addressee of this Word, hence it is in a community reading that we best discover God's message for us today. In community reading, the diverse charisms and sensibilities for discovering God's message more fully enter into play, because the diverse contributions arising from our diverse life experiences disclose the wealth of Scripture more clearly than an individual reading. Liturgical reading is the best expression of this community dimension.

6. Committed reading

- Reading the Bible cannot be just an intellectual or esthetic exercise; it must be aimed at life. When we approach the Bible, we bring with us our life and the life of those around us. When we discover its message and allow ourselves to be probed by it, we discover that the Word of God often offers us a life alternative, a way of conversion.
- Refusing to follow this way or disregarding the commitments that it sets before us, leads to a break in our dialogue with God. Normally, when our Bible reading does not issue into a commitment, it becomes harder and harder to understand what we are reading and even why we are reading the Bible.

II. PRAYING TOGETHER WITH THE BIBLE

1. *First step: we invite the Lord*

The leader asks someone in the group to say a prayer inviting the Lord and his Spirit to be with the group. The rest can complete this prayer by adding to it.

2. *Second step: we read the text*

The leader points out the chapter and verses to be read and waits until all have found the place. Next he invites someone in the group to read it aloud. After the reading, all pause for a time in silence.

3. *Third step: we dwell on the text*

All the participants read a word or phrase that was important for them, one that called their attention. After each word we spend a few moments in silence. The participants should inwardly repeat two or three times each word which was mentioned in order to grasp it well. In this way, even the most common words take on special meaning and relief. When all have said their word, the text is read aloud again, and very slowly.

4. *Fourth step: we keep silence*

After this second reading of the text, the leader invites all to keep silence, and he indicates for how long (three or five minutes). This silence prepares us to meditate together on the words of the Scripture.

5. *Fifth step: we share what has affected us*

The participants spontaneously share what the text awakened in their heart. This is the time for uniting the words of the Scripture with the experiences of each one. One should, however, avoid the temptation of addressing a typical sermonette to the rest.

6. *Sixth step: we talk about what the Lord is asking of us*

This is the moment to look at and share concrete life (personal, community, social, religious) in the light of the Good News. First we speak of everyday problems (that involve personal commitments) and of what can be done in everyday life. After this, we can speak of other broader problems or future problems.

7. Seventh step: we pray together

The leader invites everyone to pray. The participants keep offering spontaneous prayers. We can end with a song.

III. "LECTIO DIVINA"

1. Throughout its journey, the Church, following in the footsteps of the people of Israel, has listened to the Word of God and has learned to read it in different contexts in order to discover God's will for each historic moment. This long process of apprenticeship has crystallized in a form of reading the Word which was very early on (from the early 3rd century) called *Lectio divina*.

With the birth of monasticism, LD became the privileged way of spirituality. It became systematized among the monks. A 12th-century Carthusian left us the stages of this way of reading the Word, which nourished the faith of whole generations of Christians until the 14th century, when the disputes of late Scholasticism opened the way to other, more introspective, kinds of prayer (mental prayer, Ignatian meditation...). Vatican II proposed LD as a privileged form of continual and prayerful contact with Sacred Scripture (DV 25), not only for priests (PO 18) or religious (PC 6), but for all the laity (AA 4). The last General Chapter (SW 21.2) also recommended its practice.

LD is not simply a way of reading Scripture, but a form of encounter with God alongside the Bible itself. It starts from the conviction that through Scripture God himself comes out to meet us, and that the written words in it are addressed precisely to us in the midst of the joys, longings, hopes or disillusionments of the personal social moment in which we exist. We will now sum up its most important steps, following the description of Guigo the Carthusian (9th prior of La Grande Chartreuse, _ ca. 1188), mentioned above:

- 1) *INVOCATION OF THE SPIRIT*: Before all else, we must invoke the Holy Spirit (epiclesis) to help us know the will of God expressed in Scripture. When the power of the Spirit comes upon us, we discover the life that underlies the Word, going beyond the letter that kills. Hence, without the invocation of the Spirit there can be no *Lectio Divina*, since the reading of Scripture would otherwise become a mere exercise of intellectual effort.
- 2) *LECTIO*: This consists of reading and re-reading the text with attention and respect. It must be done several times, avoiding haste in reading. It aims at overcoming the reading of the eyes in order to attain the reading of the heart, and listening. God speaks and the *Lectio divina* is only a means of coming to hear (*audire*) and obey (*ob-audire*) him. For this, it is well to let the Scripture itself guide us in understanding the text by reading parallel passages and marginal notes, because Scripture interprets itself, as the Fathers of the Church remind us.
- 3) *MEDITATIO*: This means ruminating over the text (when some monks call this stage *ruminatio*). Go over it again and again, until we discover the message

enclosed in it. For this we need the kind of attentive and deep reflection that reaches the deepest meaning of the text from the standpoint of our own personal and situational reality as believers. In meditation, we strike up a dialogue between our life and what the text encloses. We do not always understand the text or do we always obtain the precise word we are looking for. Obedience to the God who speaks to us will sometimes demand that we wait and even acknowledge that we have not understood anything.

- 4) *ORATIO*: Reading and meditation lead us to prayer, talking with God. Thus far we have been trying to listen to him, to grasp his message for us. Now is the moment to use our heart and sentiments which are expressed in the most varied way: petition, praise, thanks, lamentation, reproach...
- 5) *CONTEMPLATIO*: This is the culmination of the process. Attention is concentrated on the mystery of Jesus, beyond the multiplicity of sentiments. We strive to keep acquiring, little by little, through personal contact with the Word, the view that God has of the world, history, humankind; in a word, to acquire what Paul calls *the mind of Christ* (Php 2:5), even to the point of being able to say that *it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). The aim of the process of LD is not to evade reality, but to dwell *in its most profound center* from the new viewpoint that the Word has offered us, which leads us to commitment and action to make present in this world the saving design of God.

At first sight, LD might give the impression of being an excessively personal and scarcely apostolic way. Hence, some present-day authors have added new steps, such as *collatio*, a moment of sharing the Word with our brothers, and *actio* or *operatio*, making a commitment that springs from the Word. It may not be necessary to add these moments, which of themselves do not belong to the original design, especially if we bear in mind that the most suitable place for apprenticeship in LD is a community or Christian group. The personal effort that LD entails does not mean that it is an individual or private way. All the experts agree that the true place for initiation into a prayerful reading of the Word is the community, and that LD produces more fruit when listening to and meditating on the Word is done in a community climate.

2. In a present-day Claretian key, LD leads us *to be about the Father's affairs* (Lk 2:49) and to feel them as our own. This gives way to prophecy (annunciation and denunciation), as a response to a world that seems little like what God wants it to be.

Here is one of the texts in which we can best see some of the elements of LD in Claret:

“Not only is he [Jesus] your master, but also your model and exemplar, since he first did what he later taught. And the Eternal Father tells each one of us: *Inspice, et fac secundum exemplar quod tibi monstratum est*. Look at Jesus nailed to the cross on Mount Calvary, and copy him within yourself, until you can say: “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me”. Thus, you will become a perfect disciple, so that you will be able to say by your conduct, as the Apostle did: *Imitatores mei estote, sicut et ego Christi*—Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Every day the priest will study his lesson, that is, he will read at least a chapter of the Holy Gospel, and every day he will attend class, that is, meditation, spending an hour or at least a half-hour meditating on the life, passion and death of Jesus Christ (CI 11,5,1,1,: SSW 358). Thus:

- Every day he will study his lesson, that is, he will read at least one chapter of the Holy Gospel (*Lectio*)
- and he will attend class, that is, meditation (*Meditatio*)

- Look at Jesus...and copy him in yourself, until you can say: I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me (*Contemplatio* as the end of the process of acquiring the mentality and attitudes of Jesus).

This way of praying the Word makes real Claret's well-known apostolic prayer: *May I know you (lectio) and make you known (missio); love you (lectio) and make you loved (missio)*, etc. (Aut 233).