

CONFERENCE FIVE

LECTIO DIVINA AND PRAYER

To put these conferences in the context of the three divine persons we will consider them as follows: In speaking of the Father we mentioned the importance of fatherhood for the Church and society. In speaking of the priesthood we looked to the Son Incarnate, Jesus Christ, the High Priest, who continues His mission in His priests. In speaking of lectio divina and prayer we will be dealing with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, besides sending our His apostles and disciples, wanted to have intimate contact with them, to live with them, to form them. In the early Church this living together of disciples, as did Jesus with His apostles, was called the apostolic life. It is the basis for a fruitful apostolate. Hence, it is not dispensable. But now that Jesus is no longer on the earth in His historical presence, how is this companionship and association to include Jesus? In His last discourse as reported by John's Gospel, our Lord tells the apostles that they have received His word. He prays that through this word the Father's love will be in them, and He will be in them. And the Holy Spirit, whom He will send, will teach them all things, and remind them of all He has said.

Jesus tells His apostles that His word is addressed not only to them but also to those who through them will believe. He calls blessed those who have believed and have not seen – that is, have not been present with Him in His historical life, but have believed.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended to inflame the apostles gathered around Mary and to start the Church on its preaching mission. The time after Pentecost is the time of the Church of which Jesus is the head and the Holy Spirit the animating principle, Spirit directing the Church by His inspirations and gifts. It is also the time of the invisible presence of Jesus in His faithful through the Holy Spirit.

This is illustrated by the encounter between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden beside the tomb on Easter Sunday. You recall that Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father." Now why will His ascending to the Father make a difference? Does this "until" mean simply "Do not cling to me" period? What happens when Jesus ascends to the Father? He has promised that if He goes He will send the Holy Spirit. Now when He sends the Holy Spirit, since the three persons are inseparable, He will come also. "If anyone keeps my commandments," Jesus said, "the Father and I will come to him and make our dwelling in him."

May it not be, then, that Jesus was saying to Mary Magdalene, "Do not cling to me now; when I return to make my abode in you, then you can cling to me all you wish." With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost begins the time that will last till the end of the world when Jesus abides in His faithful. "Behold I will be with you until the end of the world," In His sacramental presence, true, but also in His indwelling. In prayer we enter into ourselves to meet Jesus who dwells within us, then we are empowered to meet Him in others. If we do not meet Him within, we are apt to miss Him without.

The word which Jesus gave to His apostles, and through them to all who believe, has been transmitted to us through the Church which He established for that purpose. He

Formation of the Priest -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

endowed it with the teaching authority by which this word would remain inviolate despite its transmission to all generations. A wonderful institution!

Jesus has likened this word to a seed which grows and expands, and our spiritual life to a house which is built upon a rock. These analogies pertain both to His Church and to the individuals comprising it. The word is expansive, it grows and takes root in us, and it increases its influence in our minds, hearts, and behavior. It has led us to the priesthood and maintains us in this holy vocation

It is our part to continue to cultivate the soil so that the seed can continue to fructify and grow, so that weeds may not throttle the fruit of the seed, so that we may continue to move forward and not slip backward. That is why we are here – so that we may cultivate the soil and increase the fruitfulness of the seed. The same means of increasing the fruitfulness of the seed in our priestly souls are applicable to the laity. They are the royal priests called to form a holy nation.

Now we cultivate the soil by removing vices, through the practice of virtue, through confession and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and through prayer. It is through prayer that we have come to love Jesus Christ. It is by prayer that we have become the companions of Jesus Christ and have been formed by Him. We have pondered His lovable qualities and wise teaching on which we have meditated and which we put into practice.

This is the stage of discursive meditation, and it is basic. It is through our fidelity to meditation that we obtained the grace to eliminate whatever was hostile to Jesus Christ and to our true welfare. But discursive meditation is not the final stage of prayer. The Jesuits for a few centuries emphasized the importance of discursive prayer, and this was a good protection against the tendency to try to jump prematurely into contemplative prayer. With the flight to the East and to eastern methods, and with certain prayer movements in the West, there has been a tendency to try to enter into contemplative prayer by ourselves without laying a foundation, sometimes by evoking an empty mind. But if with the help of discursive meditative prayer we put our life in order, God then draws us to simplified prayer, the beginning of contemplation.

In this conference I want to speak of *lectio divina*, spiritual reading – a great help to the life of prayer. St. Cyprian in a letter to his friend Donatus in 256 said that we speak to God in prayer and He speaks to us in *lectio divina*. This saying was taken up by St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and by the Church in the following centuries. *Lectio divina* is primarily the reading of the Scriptures. Jesus did not condemn the scribes for seeking for eternal life in the Scriptures; they were right in doing so. He condemned them for not recognizing that the Scriptures pointed to Him as the Messiah as did the testimony of John the Baptist and His own works (John 5). The great fathers, doctors, and saints of the Church have meditated on the Scriptures for twenty centuries.

In reading books of solid doctrine or biographies of saints we are also doing sacred reading. Since the same solid doctrine is available in various works besides the Scriptures, it is well to choose what is according to our taste, what is agreeable to our mentality. I do not mean that our worldly mentality should lead us to choose what is not solid doctrine, but that this solid doctrine is available in many forms.

Lectio is not theological study. To put oneself in the frame of mind to do *lectio divina* one can pray to the Holy Spirit to indicate through our reading what Christ wants to say to us. Then when something strikes us as important for our spiritual life, we can

Lectio Divina and Prayer

stop and reflect on it. In the terms *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*, which from the third to the sixteenth century were used to describe spiritual reading and mental prayer, meditation is reflection on what we are reading. It can take place at the time of reading or later. In *lectio* we read slowly, not out of curiosity on how the development is going to take place, but out of a desire to hear what Christ wants to say to us. There is a time and place for rapid reading, but it is not in doing our *lectio*.

An article in *Readers Digest* told of Samuel Piddleton who was under house arrest under the Japanese in China for three years and had only one book. To make it last, he did what he called superslow reading. He would stop on phrases, reread them, savor them, and pause to reflect. In our case, doing sacred reading in this fashion, our reflection tends to turn into prayer. After reflecting, we may realize the importance of assimilating the insights we are receiving and this leads us to converse with our Lord about it, or to pray over it. This is *oratio*. The *contemplatio* comes from God when we are ready to receive it and He is ready to give it. It cannot be forced or produced by a method, if what we mean by contemplation is what is meant in this series of terms, a contemplation that comes from above, that is infused into our souls.

Our Lord speaks of those who build their house on sand, and when the tempest comes the house falls. He advises us to build on rock and then our house will stand. Now He is the rock, and He means that we should build on His words. That is why Scripture is so important for our spiritual reading. On the other hand, there is much controversy in the sciences of exegesis and in theology on the meaning of His words. Different interpretations define different religious traditions, Protestant and Catholic. And these controversies now exist in the Catholic Church. Among those who wish to give an interpretation which is accommodated to our times and culture, a necessary enterprise if tradition is to be living and to be passed on, there are various degrees of accommodation. Then there is the conflict between the teaching of our Holy Father the Pope, and that of theologians and officials of the Church who disagree with him on many matters of doctrine and practice. Our decision about the doctrine we will accept as that of Jesus Christ is therefore very urgent today. And so is the choice of books we use for our spiritual reading, and the discernment we are called upon to exercise in listening to the various voices in today's Church.

It is a question of on what we will build our house, our spirituality, and what will be the message we transmit to others and the advice we give them. What is the truth, and how can we know it? Do we base ourselves on opinion, the opinion of certain exegetes and theologians who are in dissent from the teaching authority of the Church? If we do, are we not basing our lives on opinion rather than the certitude of authentic Catholic faith?

If we priests are representatives, not of the people, but of Jesus Christ and of His Church, we must teach the message He has confided to the Church. St. Paul says there are a diversity of gifts and services. Jesus said to Peter who had just declared that He was the Messiah, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church." Peter, *petra*, the name given to Simon by Jesus, as we know, means rock. And lest there be any misunderstanding, Jesus says to Peter that once being converted he will strengthen his brethren. Finally, He gives to Peter the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, saying, "Whatsoever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven." Jesus says this also to all of His apostles as a group, but

Formation of the Priest -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

He singles out only one apostle to whom He says this. The Church interprets this to mean that Peter and his successors are protected by a divine charism in the teaching of the faith, and that a Council of all the bishops, united with Peter, shares this charism as does the Church as a whole. *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church*, repeats this teaching saying that the people of God, from the Pope and bishops to the least of the faithful, corporately possess this charism, but that there is a teaching authority in the Church.

It is to the Church's Magisterium that we must look for the doctrine on which to build our spiritual lives and to teach the faithful for the upbuilding of their lives – on solid rock. *Lectio* then, besides Scripture, should include works of solid doctrine that interpret the Scriptures in accordance with the Church's teaching.

It is the office of exegetes and theologians to help in the development of the implications of this doctrine. In the process of doing so, and in accord with new cultural situations which give rise to new problems needing to be addressed, theologians may develop new teachings. It is the office of the bishops and the Pope to decide whether these new teachings are in accord with the faith of the Church or are deviations from it. New teachings may be of great assistance to the pastoral work of the Church. On the other hand, deviations corrupt the faith. "Hold fast to sound doctrine," St. Paul says, and "If any man teaches you a Gospel other than the one I taught you, let him be anathema." Often "new" teachings are teachings which have been overlooked or neglected and are brought back into focus. That's the case with regard to the recognition that not only does the Passion justify us, but the Resurrection saves us also. Durwell brought this teaching after the Council, but it was already the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, as he noted. Likewise, the teaching of the Council on the role of the priest in building community and leading the community corporately to sanctification was already taught by Pius XII in his encyclical "Corporis Mystici." St. Paul also taught that the faithful corporately are the body of Christ, from which the doctrine of the Church as a mystical body of Christ flows.

Certainly it is wise to base one's spiritual life and one's priestly teaching on doctrines that are already proven and tested. Temperaments differ. Some temperaments are strongly drawn to what is new, some just as strongly to what is traditional. The best solution is to avoid being dominated by one's temperament. If the Church changes, one should change with it. On the other hand, it is wise to wait for the judgment of the Church.

As for the many conflicting voices in the Church today, the following comments may be helpful. Father Stanley Marrow is a Jesuit professor of New Testament at the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He holds a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Gregorian University, and is also the associate editor of "New Testament Abstracts." In his book, *The Gospel of John. A Reading*,² he comments:

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me: yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:39-40).

² Marrow, Stanley B. *The Gospel of John: A Reading*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995.

Lectio Divina and Prayer

Here Father Marrow notes that the real purpose of the Scriptures is to transmit the eternal life by being a witness to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. However, he notes that there are many controversies over the meaning of the words of Scripture, and these unfortunately are often a result of not seeking the eternal life that is in the Scriptures as witnesses of Jesus Christ. On the text that men are seeking glory from one another and therefore are unable to discover the glory that comes from God, he notes that it is evident that many of these diverse opinions stem from scholars seeking the glory that comes from each other. Hence they use certain slogans and catch words that indicate that they are in tune with each other.

No one would want to deny the assiduity of this search of the scriptures down the ages, but especially in our times. Thousands upon thousands of writings, sermons, methodologies, and theories of interpretation attest to it. The ultimate reason for this search can only be the quest for “eternal life.” Nor does John deny that in these scriptures is life. But that life is there only because the scriptures bear witness to the Word. What many of us search for in the scriptures, however, is not that life at all. Our quest for scriptural slogans, our endless squabbles over interpretations, our mindless opposition to everything old, and our unseemly haste to espouse the new in interpretations, and our outrageous claims not just for the infallibility of the text but even the impeccability of its authors, all bear witness to that.

The fact of the matter remains very simply this: for the Christian, the scriptures “bear witness to” Jesus Christ. What life these scriptures possess, they possess because they speak of the Word in every word they speak. All the efforts of exegetes and critics, of theologians, preachers, and commentators are, for the Christian, directed to this one end: to proclaim the revelation of the Word which was in the beginning with God, was God, and became flesh and dwelt among us.

This is in no way a plea to abandon the search of the scriptures in all its rich and enriching aspects. It is a needed reminder that to believe that God has spoken to us, however you may wish to describe the subject, the verb, and the object – is to believe that, at least within the Johannine context, all the scriptures bear witness to him whom the Father sent, and in whom alone we have “life.”

Father Marrow goes on to reflect on the crisis of the Church while commenting on the words of the Gospel of St. John, “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” Incomprehensible though it is to refuse to receive him who alone brings eternal life, it is far more so to contemplate the scramble after those who offer it counterfeits. We are eager to follow anyone except Him who came in the Father’s name. The others who come in their own name are received with an avidity and eagerness that is matched only by their transitoriness.

Fr. Marrow extends his reflections while commenting on the words: “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (5:44).

We so readily flock to others, not because of our love for them, but simply because of our insatiable desire to receive glory from one another. Our search for “glory from one another” is not merely a distraction from the essential purpose of our existence which is to seek “the glory that comes from the only God” (5:44). Were it only that, one

Formation of the Priest -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

might be tempted to dismiss it as just another theological discussion. But it is far more than that. Our search for “glory from one another” is, inevitably, a foredoomed traffic in mutual enslavement. Those who provide me with such transient “glory” are no less aware of my avidity for it than I am of theirs. My dependence on them is no less than theirs on me; and so “deep calls unto deep.”

. . . The glory I seek from others can, of course, be had in shoals. The way to obtaining it is not only broad, but well-charted. The elenchus of acceptability, in brief, slogans, attitudes, religious practices, and moral tenets is all too available to be refused and all too costly to ignore. Embracing it is my surest means of obtaining the “glory” I seek from others. However unpalatable it be, it is in this barter for “glory” that I render myself incapable of believing in him whom the Father sent into the world.

The crisis of the Church today is not just that individual believers have set their hearts on receiving this “glory from men,” but that the whole Church has directed its efforts towards it as well. To that end, nothing is too dear and surely nothing is too sacred to barter or alter, to attenuate or dilute, in order to win the approval of the world, to gain admission to its counsels, and to win the indulgence of its rulers and the complacency of its arbiters of taste.

In summary then, while it is incumbent upon a priest to be acquainted with diverse theological opinions, we priests need to draw our convictions and strength from the Church’s teaching. We have that expressed today in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as in many doctrinal books that are in agreement with this Catechism. I might recommend the books published by Ignatius Press as exemplary in this regard.



All Rights Reserved
(c) Raphael Simon OCSO, July 1999
Published by permission of the Abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey