

Lectio divina

testimony (martyria) to a Presence, and it finds its highest fulfillment in martyrdom, the gift of one's life for love...

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

Scripture asks that we put into practice what we have read if we truly want to understand it, and it is in a community environment

"The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us (...) to live" (Titus 2:11-12). This New Testament passage speaks of Christ as grace personified who teaches humanity to live. If the Spirit is the great instructor in Christian life, Scripture, a sacrament of the will and the Word of God, can be seen as the element that transmits the Spirit's teaching. Certainly, this refers to Scripture interpreted in the Holy Spirit, Scripture read in a spirit of prayer. *Lectio divina*, which finds its roots in the Jewish tradition of Bible reading and the patristic hermeneutic legacy, is the art of making the transition from a Biblical text to our life. Because it helps us make this transition, *lectio divina* is a precious tool that can help us bridge the gulf we often observe in our churches between faith and life, spirituality and daily existence. It is an existential hermeneutic of Scripture that leads us, first, to turn our gaze toward Christ and search for him through the Biblical page, and then to place our own existence in dialogue with the revealed presence of Christ and find our daily life illuminated, filled with new light.

The four steps of *lectio divina* - *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio* - represent the progressive deepening of our understanding of the Biblical text. Our act of reading becomes an encounter with the living Lord, dialogue with him, and the exposure of our life to the light of Christ, who gives order to our existence. The process *lectio divina* sets in motion is a very human one: by listening we come to know, and by knowing we come to love. We begin by making the effort of 'leaving ourselves' in order to bridge the chronological and cultural distance that separates us from the text: this allows us to accept the text in its otherness, as we would in any relationship with an other. During the next step, *meditatio*, we deepen our understanding of the text, search for its central message, and let the face of Christ emerge from the Biblical page. In *oratio*, we apply the message that has come forth to our own life, considering our life in the light of the Biblical message. *Oratio* is a response to the Word in the form of prayer, and it is also the moment in which we accept responsibility for the Word we have heard. Prayer and life take place on the same level; ethics and faith are not separate but intrinsically connected. In *lectio divina*, the Bible's dialogical intention meets the dialogical dimension of the person, which is a fundamental aspect of our human identity. The effectiveness of the Word of God contained in the Bible is revealed on the level of being, through who we are, much more and much sooner than it is revealed through our actions.

This is the meaning of *contemplatio*, which refers not to mystical or ecstatic experiences but to a level of communication inexpressible in words: silence, tears, the presence of the lover to the beloved, discernment of the Lord's unutterable presence. *Contemplatio* also indicates the work accomplished in us by the Spirit who inhabits the Word: the Spirit creates in us patience, endurance, inner unification, discernment, a eucharistic attitude, and compassion for all of creation - in a word, love that overflows. This is essentially how *lectio divina* helps us make the transition between the Word and our life: it makes us people who know how to listen, and therefore people of faith. In *lectio divina* our approach to the Bible is not intellectual but sapiential, and it obeys the principle of blessed Francis of Siena: "Anointing, not erudition; consciousness, not science; love, not the printed page." It is an approach to reading that requires interiorization, so that the Word can embed itself and take root in the human heart; perseverance in renewing day after day our willingness to listen and in standing firm in our faith, which embraces not just a certain phase of our life but our entire existence; and the spiritual struggle of clinging to the Word we have heard as we would to a precious possession, without exchanging it for those alluring but illusory goods which are actually idols.

In *lectio divina*, our reading of the Bible introduces us into the evangelically fruitful tension that accompanies conversion. *Lectio* leads the reader-listener to consider his or her own life in the light of God's will, revealed in Scripture, so that he or she can live according to the will of God. Our reading of the Bible is reflected in our life not primarily in the sense that our *lectio divina* leads us to choose certain actions over others, but because it illuminates and keeps burning in us the light that alone is capable of transforming all of our actions into testimony and evangelization: "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16). Scripture asks that we put into practice what we have read if we truly want to understand it, and it is in a community environment, together with

others, that we are asked to do this. "Many things in holy Scripture that I wasn't able to understand by myself, I understood by placing myself in front of my brothers (...). I realized that understanding had been granted to me through them" (St. Gregory the Great). This is how the transition from Scripture to life, from text to testimony, takes place: Scripture, being inspired, also inspires and seeks to light the fire of the Spirit in the believer's heart (cf. Luke 24:32) so that the Spirit can reveal his force in him or her.

The reading of Scripture gradually leads to our giving testimony (*martyria*) to a Presence, and it finds its highest fulfillment in martyrdom, the gift of one's life for love. Rabbi Akiva experienced his own martyrdom as a fulfillment of the *Shema*: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your life" (Deuteronomy 6:5). As his torturers were stripping his flesh from his body, Rabbi Akiva recited the *Shema*, and when his disciples tried to interrupt him, he said, "All my life I have thought about this verse: 'You shall love God with all your life,' which means, you shall love him even if he takes your life from you, and I said, 'When will I be able to do that?' And now that I am able, should I not do it?" (Babylonian Talmud, Berakot 61b). The Word that has illuminated one's life transforms even death into life. This awareness can help us answer an objection we often encounter today in Christian environments, and that we can express as follows: if the Word of God is effective, if Christians are returning to the Word of God heard in Scripture, where can we see this effectiveness? Where can we find signs of this power? This objection reveals how difficult it is to take from Scripture, and not from ourselves or the secular environment in which we live, our criterion for judging effectiveness, which is the criterion of the cross. It is not by chance that Paul speaks of *ho logos ho tou staurou*, the "word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18): and yet this word, this effectiveness is only perceptible and intelligible from within a perspective of faith. Only faith, moreover, can allow us to recognize the present ecclesial season of martyrdom as the fruit of the effectiveness of the Word, listened to and served to the point of giving one's life for love - love of God and others, love even for one's enemies and torturers.

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