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### **Scripture, school of life**

The vocation of Antony, as it is described for us by Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*, is well known. One day the young Antony, who had been brought up in a Christian family of the church of Alexandria (or at least in the region of Alexandria), and who had therefore heard the Scriptures read since his childhood, enters the church and is particularly struck by the text of Scripture that he hears read: the story of the call of the rich young man: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me; you will have a treasure in heaven". (Matt. 19,21; Vit. Ant. 2)

Antony has undoubtedly heard this text many times before; but this day the message strikes him most forcibly, and he receives it as a personal call. He therefore answers the call, sells the family property - which is quite considerable - and distributes the profits of the sale to the poor of the village, keeping just enough to support his younger sister for whom he is responsible.

A little later, on entering the church once again, he hears another Gospel text which affects him as much as the first: "Take no thought for the morrow" (Matt. 6,34; Ant.3). This text too goes straight to his heart as a personal call. And so he entrusts his sister to a community of virgins, (such communities have been long in existence), rids himself of everything that remains to him and undertakes the ascetical life near his village, under the guidance of the ascetics of the region.

This story shows clearly the importance and the meaning that Scripture had among the Fathers of the Desert. It was first of all a **school of life**. And because it was a school of life, it was also a **school of prayer** for the men and women who desired to make of their life a continual prayer, as Scripture demanded of them.

The Fathers of the desert wished to carry out faithfully in their lives all the precepts of Scripture. And, in the Scriptures, the first concrete precept they found on the frequency of prayer was not that

they ought not to pray at this or that hour of the day or night, but that they ought to pray without ceasing.

Athanasius writes of Antony: (Vit. Ant. 3): "He worked with his hands, having heard that he who is idle, *let him not eat* (2 Thes. 3,10). And he spent what he made partly for bread, and partly on those in need. He prayed constantly, since he learned that it is necessary to pray unceasingly in private. For he paid such close attention to what was read that nothing from Scripture did he fail to take in -- rather he grasped everything, and in him the memory took the place of books@.

We should notice at once in this text of Athanasius, that continual prayer is accompanied by other activities, in particular work, and also the expression Ahe paid such close attention to what was read@.

Obviously, we cannot speak of Scripture as a school of prayer among the Fathers of the Desert without reference to the two admirable Conferences which Cassian devoted explicitly to prayer, both attributed to abba Isaac, the 9th and 10th.

The fundamental principle is given at once at the beginning of Conf. 9: "The whole aim of the monk and the perfection of the heart consists in an uninterrupted perseverance in prayer". And Isaac explains that all the rest of the monastic life, asceticism and the practice of the virtues has no meaning or reason unless it leads to this end.

### **What does "*lectio divina*" mean?**

Before going any further, I would like to make clear at once that when I speak of *lectio divina* among the Fathers of the Desert in this conference, I do not understand the expression *lectio divina* in the technical (and reduced) sense which has been given it in spiritual and monastic literature in these last decades.

The Latin word *lectio* in its first sense means a teaching, a lesson. In a second, derived sense, *lectio* can also signify a text or a group of texts transmitting this teaching. Thus we speak of the lessons (*lectiones*) from Scripture read during the liturgy. Finally, in a still more derived, and later sense, *lectio* can also mean reading.

This last sense is obviously the one in which this expression is understood today. In our days, in fact, *lectio divina* is spoken of as a specific observance; and we are told that it is a form of reading different from all others, and that above all we must not confuse true *lectio divina* with other forms of simply "spiritual reading". This is a completely modern vision, and as such, represents a concept foreign to the Fathers of the Desert, and to which I shall return presently.

If we consult the entire early Latin literature (which can be done easily in our day, either by means of good concordances or with the CDROMs of CETEDOC), we notice that each time we find the expression *lectio divina* among the Latin writers prior to the Middle Ages, this expression signifies Holy Scripture itself, and not a human activity on Holy Scripture. *Lectio divina* is synonymous with *sacra pagina*. Thus we are told that *lectio divina* teaches us such and such a thing ; that we should listen attentively to *lectio divina*, that the Divine Master, in *lectio divina*, reminds us of such and such a demand, etc.

Examples: Cyprian: "*Sit in manibus divina lectio*", (*De zelo et livore*, cap. 16)

Ambrose: "*ut divinae lectionis exemplo utamur*", (*De bono mortis*, cap.1. par.2)

Augustine: "*aliter invenerit in lectione divina*", (*Enarr. in psalmos*, ps.36, serm.3. par.1)

This is the sole meaning of the expression *lectio divina* during the period of the Fathers of the Desert. It is thus the sense in which I shall use it in this conference, except when I make allusion to the contemporary approach. I shall not speak of a particular observance having Scripture as its object, but of Scripture itself as School of life and therefore School of prayer of the first monks.

## Reading?

To speak of the "reading" of Scripture among the Fathers leads, moreover, to confusion. Reading properly so called, as we understand it today, must have been, in fact, quite rare. The monks of Pachomius, for example, who came for the most part from paganism, were obliged, on their arrival at the monastery, to learn to read if they could not already do so, so as to be able to learn the Scriptures. A text of the rule says that there should be no-one in the monastery who does not know by heart at least the New Testament and the Psalms. But once memorised, these texts become the object of a "*meletè*", a continual *meditatio* or *ruminatio* all the day long and for a good part of the night, in private as well as in the common prayer. This *ruminatio* of Scripture is not understood as vocal prayer, but rather as a constant contact with God through his Word. A constant attentiveness, which itself becomes a constant prayer.

A story from the apophthegmata shows clearly this relative importance of reading compared with the absolute importance of the contents of

## Scripture:

"At a time of great cold, Serapion meets in Alexandria a poor man who is completely naked. He says to himself: "This is Christ, and I am a murderer if he dies without my having tried to help him." So Serapion takes off all his clothes and gives them to the poor man, then he remains naked in the street with the only thing he has left, a Gospel under his arm... A passer-by, who knows him, asks him: "Abba Serapion, who has taken away your clothes?" And Serapion, showing his Gospel, replies: "This is the one who has taken away my clothes." Serapion then goes to another place and there sees someone who is being taken to prison, because he is unable to pay a debt. Serapion, seized with pity, gives him his Gospel, so that he can sell it and so pay his debt. When Serapion returns to his cell, no doubt shivering, his disciple asks him where his tunic is, and Serapion replies that he has sent it where it is more needed than on his body. To his disciple's second question : "And where is your Gospel?", Serapion replies: I have sold the one who continually told me: *Sell your goods, and give to the poor* (Lk. 12,33); I have given it to the poor that I might have greater confidence on the day of judgment" (Pat. Arm. 13, 8, R: III, 189).

As we saw at the beginning, Antony, a Christian from birth, was converted to the ascetical life by *lectio divina*, or the *sacra pagina*, proclaimed in the local ecclesial community, during the celebration of the liturgy.

Pachomius, who, on the contrary, came from a pagan family of Upper Egypt, was also converted by Scripture, but by Scripture interpreted and incarnated in the concrete life of a Christian community who lived the Gospel, that of Latopolis. You know the story: The young Pachomius was conscripted into the Roman army and sent on a ship that took him with the other recruits to Alexandria. One evening the ship stopped at Latopolis and as the conscripts were put in prison the Christians of the place brought food and drink to the prisoners. That was Pachomius' first encounter with Christianity.

For Antony, representative par excellence of the anchoritic life, as for Pachomius, representative of the cenobitic, Scripture is above all a Rule of life. It is even the only true Rule of the monk. Neither Antony nor Pachomius wrote a Rule in the sense in which it would be understood in the monastic tradition after them, although a certain number of practical rules of Pachomius and his successors have been brought together under the name of the "Rule of Pachomius".

## Scripture as the sole "Rule" of the monk

To a group of brothers who asked Antony for a "word" he replied: "You have heard the Scriptures? they will do very well for you". (Note the word: "heard" - *èkousate*) (Ant. 19).

Someone else asked Antony: "What must I do in order to please God?" The old man replied: "Pay attention to what I advise you: wherever you go, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the Scriptures." (Ant. 3).

Let us notice at once three things in this brief apophthegm. First of all, the monk who questions Antony is not seeking a theoretical or abstract teaching. His request, like that of the rich young man of the Gospel, is very concrete. "What must I do?" - "What must I do in order to please God?" (This is an attitude, moreover, that is found constantly in the apophthegmata). Antony's response is two-fold. One pleases God if one has God always before one's eyes, that is to say, if one lives constantly in the presence of God - which is the concept the Fathers of the Desert have of continual prayer; and this is possible if one allows oneself to be guided by the Scriptures. Antony is not speaking here of reading or meditating on the Scriptures, but of truly **doing** everything according to the testimony of the Scriptures.

One day, Theodore, the favourite disciple of Pachomius, asked the latter, with the fervour of a neophyte, how many days one ought to remain without eating during The Pasch, that is to say during Holy Week. (The rule of the Church and the general custom was to observe a complete fast during the Friday and Saturday of Easter; but there were some who went for three or four days without eating.) Pachomius advised him to keep to the Rule of the Church, which demanded a total fast during the two days only, in order, said he, to have the strength to accomplish without weakening the things that are commanded us in the Scriptures: unceasing prayer, vigils, reciting the law of God and manual labour.

What is above all important for the Fathers of the Desert, is not to read the Bible, but to live it. Obviously, in order to live it one must know it. And like all Christians, the monk learned the Scriptures in the first place by hearing them proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. He also learned by heart the important parts of Scripture in order to be able to ruminate them all day long. Finally, certain ones had access to manuscripts of the Scriptures and were able to read them privately. This private reading was merely one form among others, and not necessarily the most important, of allowing oneself to be constantly challenged by the word of God.

## **The hermeneutics of the desert**

The few narratives I have mentioned give us a glimpse of the lines of force of what might be called the hermeneutics of the Fathers of the Desert - hermeneutics which are certainly never expressed in the form of abstract principles, but which are hermeneutics nevertheless. The great masters of modern hermeneutics, who considers every interpretation as a dialogue between the text and the reader or the hearer, and for whom every interpretation should normally lead to a transformation or a conversion, invented nothing. They gave expression to a reality which the Fathers of the Desert lived, certainly without being able to formulate it, - or in any case without being concerned about formulating it.

In the desert, Scripture is constantly being interpreted. This interpretation is not expressed in the form of commentaries and homilies, but in actions and gestures, in a life of holiness transformed by the constant dialogue of the monk with the Scriptures. The texts do not cease to be ever more significant not only for those who read and hear them, but also for those who meet these monks who have incarnated these texts in their life. The man of God who has assimilated the Word of God has become a new "text", a new object of interpretation. Moreover, it is in this context that we should understand the fact that in the desert the word of the Ancient is considered to have the same power as the Word of Scripture.

I have mentioned above the apophthegm of Antony when he replied to the brothers: "You have heard the Scriptures? they will do very well for you. In fact the brothers were not satisfied with this reply and said to him: "Father, we would also like a word from you". Then Antony told them: "The Gospel says: if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also". They said: "We cannot do that." The old man said to them: "If you cannot offer the other one, at least allow him to strike you on one cheek." - "We cannot even do that" - "If you cannot even do that", said he, "do not pay back the evil you have received." And they said: "We cannot do this either". Then the old man said to his disciple: "Prepare a little broth of corn for them, for they are ill. If you cannot do this, and you will not do that, what can I do for you? You are in need of prayer."

### **Sons of the Church of Egypt and of Alexandria**

This manner of understanding Scripture as Rule of life was not, moreover, peculiar to monks. We must not forget that the Fathers of the Desert who are known to us through the Apophthegmata, the Pachomian literature, Palladius and Cassian, etc. are above all Egyptian monks of the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century. These monks are sons of the Church. They belong to a specific Church, that of Egypt, formed in the spiritual tradition of

Alexandria.

The myth according to which most of the first monks, beginning with Antony, were illiterate and ignorant, no longer stands up to scientific research. Many recent studies, particularly those of Samuel Rubenson on the Letters of Antony, have shown that Antony and the first monks of the Desert of Egypt had assimilated the spiritual teaching of the Church of Alexandria, which was still profoundly marked by the teaching of the great masters of the School of Alexandria, and in particular by the mystical inspiration given it by its most illustrious master, the great Origen.

The Church of Alexandria was born from the first generation of Christianity in the heart of a highly educated Jewish diaspora counting, according to Pliny, about a million members; this explains the fact that this Church of Alexandria and of Egypt had from the beginning a very marked Judeo-Christian orientation. It explains at the same time its openness to the scriptural and mystical tradition that had marked the Judeo-Christian Churches of the first generations of Christians..

The School of the Desert is, from many points of view, the replica in solitude of the School of Alexandria where we know that Origen had lived with his disciples a form of monastic life completely centred on the Word of God. According to a beautiful description of Jerome's, this life was a continual alternation between prayer and reading, reading and prayer, night and day. (Letter to Marcella 43,1; PL 22:478: *Hoc diebus egisse et noctibus, ut et lectio orationem exciperet, et oratio lectionem.*)

Nor was this peculiar to Egypt. At almost the same time Cyprian of Carthage was formulating a rule which would later be quoted by almost all the Latin Fathers: "Either pray assiduously or read assiduously; sometimes speak to God, at other times listen to God speaking to you" (Letter 1,15; P.L.4:221 B: *Sit tibi vel oratio assidua vel lectio: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum* - which became the classic formula: "when you pray, you speak to God, when you read, God speaks to you").

If all the Egyptian monks were not Evagrius, and if few among them must have read Origen in the text, the fact remains that they were formed to Christian spirituality by the teaching of pastors who remained strongly influenced by the orientation Origen had given to the Church of Alexandria through the School which he directed there for many years.

That explains the solid biblical spirituality of primitive



monasticism. One could object immediately that biblical quotations are, when all is said and done, few enough in the Apophthegmata, even though they are much more frequent in the Pachomian literature. The answer is that Scripture had so fashioned the manner of life of these ascetics, that it would be superfluous to quote passages from it. The *Apneumatophoros* monk was the one who, living according to the Scriptures, was filled with the same Spirit as had inspired the Scriptures. (They were far then from the modern custom which demands that no statement, no teaching be taken seriously unless it is embellished with a footnote indicating all the people who have said the same thing before us.)

The tradition of what is now called *lectio divina*, that is to say, the desire to allow oneself to be challenged and transformed by the fire of the Word of God, would not be understood without its dependency, beyond primitive monasticism, from the tradition of Christian asceticism of the first three centuries, and even from its roots in the tradition of Israel.

From the catechesis received in his local Church, the monk learned that he was created in the image of God, that that image was deformed by sin and that it must be reformed. For that he must let himself be transformed and reshaped to the image of Christ. By the action of the Holy Spirit and his life according to the Gospel, his resemblance to Christ is gradually restored and he is able to know God.

We have seen that the goal of the monk's life, as expressed by Cassian, is continual prayer, which he describes as a constant awareness of the presence of God, realised through purity of heart. It is not acquired through this observance or that, nor even through reading or meditating on Scripture, but through letting oneself be transformed by Scripture.

Contact with the Word of God – no matter whether this contact be through the liturgical reading of the Word, the teaching of a spiritual father, the private reading of a text or the simple rumination of a verse or some words learned by heart – this contact is the starting point for a dialogue with God. This dialogue is established and pursued in the measure in which the monk has attained a certain purity of heart, a simplicity of heart and intention, and also in the measure in which he has put into practice the means of arriving at this purity of heart and of maintaining it. This dialogue, in the course of which the Word unceasingly challenges the monk to conversion, sustains this continual attention to God, which the Fathers considered as continual prayer, and which is the goal of their life.



For the monks of the Desert the reading of the word of God is not simply a religious exercise of *lectio* which gradually prepares the spirit and the heart for *meditatio* then for *oratio*, in the hope that it may arrive even at *contemplatio* (... if possible before the half-hour or hour of *lectio* is over). For the monks of the desert contact with the Word is contact with the fire that burns, disturbs, calls violently to conversion. Contact with Scripture is not for them a method of prayer; it is a mystical encounter. And this encounter often makes them afraid, insofar as they are conscious of its demands.

### **Hermeneutic circle**

Scripture constantly takes on a new meaning, each time one reads it. Here again modern hermeneutics concur with the intuitions of the Fathers of the Desert: These would have identify with the statement of Augustine: "Yesterday you understood a little, today you understand more; tomorrow you will understand still more: the very light of God becomes stronger in you" (*In Joh. tract.* 14,5, CCL 36, p.144, lines 34-36).

For the monks of the desert, the words of Scripture (as also, indeed, those of the Ancients), transcended the limited dimension of the "event" in which these words were first encountered and in which their meaning was discerned. These "words" projected a "universe of meaning" into which they tried to enter. The call to sell everything, to give the proceeds to the poor, to follow the Gospel (Matt. 19:21), the exhortation never to let the sun go down on one's anger (Eph. 4:25), the commandment to love; all these texts formed the life of the fathers of the desert in a particular way and projected a "universe of meaning" into which they strove to enter, which they strove to make their own. Sanctity in the desert consisted in giving a concrete form to this universe of possibilities which sprang from the sacred texts, in interpreting them and making them a reality in daily life.

Abba Nesteros (in Cassian, Conf. 14), tells us that "we must have the zeal to learn by heart the sacred Scriptures in their order, and to go over and over them without ceasing in our memory. This continual meditation - says he - will procure for us a double fruit." First of all, it will preserve us from evil thoughts. Then, this continual recitation or meditation will lead us to a constantly new understanding. And Nesteros has this wonderful sentence: "In the measure in which our spirit is renewed by this study, the Scriptures also begin to take on a new face (*scripturarum facies incipiet innovari*). A more mysterious understanding is given us, whose beauty grows with our progress." (Again, we find this indissoluble link between putting the Scriptures into practice and the ability to understand them at a deeper level).

We could once more compare this vision with the modern approach of a Ricoeur, for example, who says that once a text has come out of the hand of its author it acquires an existence of its own, and assumes a new meaning each time it is read - each reading being an interpretation, which is a revelation of one of the almost infinite possibilities contained in the text.

According to the modern method of *lectio divina*, one should read slowly and stop at a verse long enough for it to nourish the heart or the spirit, if not the emotions, and pass to the following verse when the feelings have cooled or when the attention is lost. The first monks, for their part, stayed with a verse as long as they had not put it into practice.

Someone comes to abba Pambo asking him to teach him a psalm. Pambo begins to teach him psalm 38: but hardly has he pronounced the first verse: "I said: 'I will be watchful of my ways, for fear I should sin with my tongue?..." the brother does not wish to hear any more. He tells Pambo, "this verse is enough for me; please God I may have the strength to learn it and put it into practice". Nineteen years later he was still trying... (Arm 19, 23 Aa: IV 163).

Likewise, someone asked abba Abraham, who was an excellent scribe as well as a man of prayer, to copy psalm 33. He copied only verse 15: "Turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it", saying to the brother: "Put this into practice first, and then I will write the rest..." (Arm 10, 67: III, 41).

The Bible, for the Fathers, is not something that one knows with the intellect, or even with the heart, as we like to say these days, (often enough, however, confusing the biblical concept of heart with a notion of "heart" more recent and somewhat sentimental). For the Fathers, one knows the bible by assimilating it to the point of translating it into life. All other knowledge that does not lead to this is useless.

## **Understanding Scripture**

But all this is not to say that we must not approach Scripture with the intellect also. The monks are concerned to understand the literal sense of Scripture before applying it to themselves. In the Pachomian monasteries, for example, there were each week three catecheses in the course of which either the superior of the monastery or the superior of the house would interpret Scripture during the synaxis, after which the brethren would discuss among themselves what they had understood, in order to make sure that every one had been understood correctly.

The interpretation of a difficult text calls for an effort of the intellect; but this effort would be useless without divine light, which must be asked for in prayer. In this sense prayer ought to precede *lectio* as well as being its fruit. When two brother questioned Antony on the meaning of a difficult text of the Book of Leviticus, Antony asked them to wait for some time, while he went to pray, begging God to send Moses to him to teach him the meaning of this text. (Arm. 12,1B: II, 148). Before him, Origen did the same, asking his disciples to pray with him to obtain understanding of a particularly difficult sacred text, in order, said he, to find the "spiritual edification" contained in this text. (L. Doutreleau, *Origène. Homélie sur la Genèse. Trad. et notes* -- SC 7, Paris 1943, Hom. 2,3, p. 96). (Notice the expression "contained in the text". The spiritual meaning of Scripture is not something artificially added to it; but something contained in the text, which must be discovered.)

In the same way, a great monk, Isaac of Nineveh, wrote: "Do not approach then words of Scripture, full of mystery, without prayer... say to God: "Lord, make me perceive the strength that is to be found here". (Voir J. Wensink, *Mystic Treatise by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam, 1923), par. 329, ch. XLV, p. 220). What we seek in a text is not an abstract, immaterial meaning, it is a **power** capable of transforming the reader.

Modern theories on *lectio divina* generally insist on the fact that *lectio* is something completely different from study. The Fathers certainly would not have understood this distinction and this division into separate compartments. Their approach to Scripture was unified. Every effort to learn Scripture, to understand it, to put it into practice, was simply an effort to enter into dialogue with God and to allow oneself to be transformed by him in this dialogue which became a continual prayer. Neither they nor Origen, nor above all Jerome, for whom ignorance of the Scriptures was ignorance of Christ, (*In Esaiam*, Prol. CCL 73,2, CCL 78,66) would have understood a study of Scripture which was not a personal encounter with the living God.

For Jerome, prayer resides not primarily in the heart but in the intellect from where it goes into the heart. It is necessary to know God first in order to love him. He who truly knows cannot help loving. Hence the importance of studying deeply and understanding the Scriptures with the intellect.

Of Marcella, who more than all the other disciples of Jerome had studied the Scriptures in depth and read them assiduously, he said: "She understood that meditation does not consist in repeating the texts of Scripture... for she knew that she would only deserve to understand the Scriptures when she had translated the commandments

into life." (Ep. 127,4, CSEL 56, 148).

In his 14th Conference, Cassian, as a good spokesman for the spirituality of the deserts of Egypt where he lived for several years at the same time as Evagrius, distinguishes two forms of science, *praktikè* and *theoretikè*, this last being the contemplation of things divine, and the understanding of the most sacred meanings. This *theoretikè*, or contemplation of things divine, he also calls "the true science of the Scriptures", which he divides into two parts, the historical interpretation and the spiritual understanding. Both one and the other belong to contemplation.

Cassian adds: "if you wish to attain to the true science of the Scriptures, hasten first of all to acquire an unshakeable humility of heart. It is this that will lead you, not to the science that puffs up, but to that which illumines, by the consummation of charity". Thus, what decides whether the study of Scripture is a contemplative activity or not, is not the method of reading or interpretation used, but the attitude of the heart.

### **Pre-comprehension**

The hermeneutic of Ricoeur teaches us that when one reads an ancient author one enters not so much into relations with the thought of the author as into the very reality of which the author is speaking. That is why there is no possible understanding of a text without a pre-understanding which consists in a certain relation already existing between the reader and the reality of which the text is speaking. Now, one already finds a similar intuition in Cassian at the end of the tenth Conference. Isaac, after having explained the means of arriving at pure prayer adds: "Brought to life by this food (that of the Scriptures) on which he does not cease to nourish himself, he penetrates to the point of all the sentiments expressed in the psalms, which he recites henceforth not at all as having been composed by the prophet, but as if he himself were the author, and as a personal prayer... " And he adds: "This is, in fact, what the divine Scriptures reveal to us most clearly, and it is their heart and in some way their marrow that are shown to us, when our experience not only allows us to know, but makes us anticipate this very knowledge, and the sense of the words is made known to us, not by some explanation, but by the proof that we ourselves have made of them. (Conf. X, 11)..." Instructed by what we ourselves feel, the things that we learn by hearsay are not, properly speaking, for us, but we examine the reality in them, so to speak, in order to penetrate to their depths; in no way do they have the effect of having been entrusted to our memory, but we bring them to birth in the depth of our heart, as natural feelings which are part of our being; it is not the reading which makes us penetrate the

sense of the words, but the experience we have acquired." (ibid.)

There is no understanding and interpretation without a pre-understanding. From this point of view it is clear that the life the monks led in the desert, a life entirely of silence, solitude and asceticism, constituted a pre-understanding which to a large extent conditioned their understanding of Scripture. Silence and purity of heart were seen as pre-conditions for understanding and interpreting the Scriptures in their full sense.

One can only understand what one already lives, at least up to a point. This is why Saint Jerome points out an order in which to learn Scripture: first the Psalter, then the Proverbs of Solomon and Quohélet, then the New Testament. And it is only when the soul has been long prepared through a long relationship of loving intimacy with Christ that it can fruitfully approach the Song of Songs.

### **Word of the Ancients**

The Fathers of the Desert sometimes responded to a question put to them with a word from Scripture, but they also replied with other words, to which their hearers gave practically the same importance. They were convinced that the power of these words came from the great purity of life of the holy old man who uttered them, for he had himself been transformed by Scripture.

### **The modern notion of *lectio divina***

I would like, now, to give some reflections on the conception one has today of *lectio divina*, in the light of the teaching of the Fathers of the Desert which I have just presented.

What is today called *lectio divina* is presented as a *method* of reading Scripture and also the Fathers of the Church and the Fathers of monasticism. It consists in a slow and meditative reading of the text, a reading made more with the heart than with the mind, it is said, with no practical aim, but simply to allow oneself to be impregnated with the Word of God.

This method, insofar as it is a method, has its origins in the 12th century and is not unrelated to what has been called "monastic theology". In this epoch, the pre-scholastics had developed their method which passed from *lectio* to *quaestio*, then to *disputatio*. The monks' reaction was then to develop their own method: *lectio* leading to *meditatio* then to *oratio*... and a little later they added *contemplatio* which was then distinguished from *oratio*.

Even though the approach to Scripture which I have described as being that of the Fathers of the Desert was in reality an approach which they had in common with the people of God as a whole, the new approach or new "method" -- since it was now a matter of an exercise, of an important observance of monastic existence -- took refuge in the monasteries.

Much later, at the time of the *devotio moderna*, "spiritual reading" became popular, and care was taken to distinguish it clearly from monastic *lectio divina*. Following a general trend, the spiritual life became specialized, or divided into watertight compartments.

It would be foreign to the theme of the present conference to analyze this long evolution. I will, however, allow myself a few observations. The first is that one may wonder how theology would have developed if the monks had not rejected the method that was coming to birth. In fact, what has been called "monastic theology" had nothing specifically monastic about it up to the twelfth century. It was the way theology developed among the people of God, with, certainly, as much pluralism in the monasteries as outside them. This discerning and contemplative way of expressing theology up to then knew how to take up and transform (inculturate, we would say today), the contributions of diverse methods and diverse currents of thought. One could legitimately wonder how the theology of the following centuries would have evolved if the monks had not rejected the method that was coming to birth and had known how to assimilate it as they had assimilated so many others before. In any case, for better or worse, a way of doing theology called monastic was upheld in the monasteries, while scholastic theology developed in schools outside the monasteries. By a Thomas Aquinas, it is true, the new method was still used in a profoundly contemplative perspective. Among the commentators - and the commentators of the commentators - it became drier and drier.

It was the same situation with the study of Scripture. Up to this time the monks had played a predominant role in the interpretation and use of Scripture, even though their approach was not essentially different from that of the people of God as a whole. From the time when, falling without realizing it under the influence of the new thought, they develop their own method of reading, parallel to that of the scholastic, there exist in the Church two clearly distinct approaches to Scripture: one which concerns a reading with the heart (and which in certain epochs will forget to bring the intelligence along) and one of scientific orientation, which will become drier and drier.

On the other hand, we should realize that the monks, in devising their own method of *lectio*, were already dependent on the new, pre-scholastic mentality which had created the need for a method. The

first monks had no method. They had an attitude of reading.

Often in the course of the past centuries the monks forgot their own characteristic way of reading Scripture and the Fathers and of doing theology, and adopted everyone else's. It was therefore necessary for the monks of our time to return to a way of doing theology other than that of the scholastic text-books, and to return to a way of reading Scripture and the Fathers other than that of modern scientific exegesis. We owe a debt of great appreciation to Dom Jean Leclercq for having pointed contemporary monasticism in this direction. Moreover, we could say, with a smile, that the concepts of *monastic theology* and *lectio divina*, as we understand these two realities today, are the two most beautiful creations of Dom Jean Leclercq.

It was important, I repeat, that monasticism rediscover this way of reading Scripture and this way of doing theology. But it has to go further: it has to recognize that this way of reading Scripture and of doing theology is in no way specifically monastic. It is the entire people of God who must rediscover it, since it was the way in which, at one time, the entire people of God used to read Scripture and do theology.

We must, however, take another step. We must go beyond the separation of the life of the monk from that of other Christians. We must rediscover the primitive unity that has been lost on the way.

In fact, if it is true that we should rejoice at the place *lectio divina* has taken in the life of monks and also in that of many Christians outside the monastery for the past forty years or so, it is also true that the present attitude in regard to this reality is not without danger.

The danger is that, very often, although sometimes imperceptibly, *lectio* is transformed into an exercise - one exercise among others, even if it is considered the most important of all. The faithful monk makes a half-hour or an hour and even more of *lectio* each day, and moves on to his spiritual reading, his studies and his other activities. He adopts a gratuitous attitude of listening to God during this half-hour, and often gives himself up to other activities during the rest of the day with the same frenzy, the same spirit of competition, the same distraction, as if he had not chosen a life of continual prayer and constant seeking of the presence of God.

Not only is all this totally foreign to the spirit of the monks of the desert, but this attitude is in contradiction of the very nature of *lectio divina*. What is the essence of *lectio*, as described by its best exponents, is the interior attitude. Now, this attitude is not



something that can be put on for half an hour or one hour of the day. One has it all the time or not at all. It impregnates our whole day, or the exercise of it is a pointless game.

To allow oneself to be questioned by God, to allow oneself to be challenged, formed, throughout all the elements of the day, throughout work as throughout fraternal encounters, throughout the harsh asceticism of a serious intellectual work as throughout the celebration of the liturgy and the normal tensions of community life - all this is terribly demanding. To relegate this attitude of total openness to one privileged exercise which is supposed to impregnate by itself the rest of our day is perhaps a too facile way of running away from this demand.

For the Fathers of the Desert, reading, meditating, praying, analysing, interpreting, examining, translating Scripture - all that formed one inseparable whole. It would have been unthinkable for a Jerome to consider that his elaborate analysis of the Hebrew text of Scripture to discover all its nuances was an activity not meriting the name of *lectio divina*.

It is certainly fortunate that we have rediscovered the importance of reading the word of God with the heart, of reading it in such a way as to let it transform us. But I think it is an error to make an exercise of it rather than to impregnate with this attitude the thousand and one facets of our approach to Scripture.

Furthermore, to believe that the text of Scripture can meet me in my profound life, can challenge and transform me only when I come before the naked text without recourse to all the instruments which can let me meet it in its first meaning, runs a strong risk of leading to a fundamentalist attitude - not rare in our days - or again to a false mysticism, which is also frequent enough.

Since it is generally admitted in our days, that *lectio divina* can have as its object not only Scripture but also the Fathers of the Church and, for monks and nuns, in particular the Fathers of monasticism, I will allow myself a reflection on this also.

Monastic tradition, being a lived interpretation of the Word of God, has an importance similar to it, although secondary to it. (We have seen, moreover, how the Fathers of the Desert tended to give the same power to the Word or example of an Ancient transformed by the Spirit as to the Word of God or an example from the Bible. But this lived word which is the monastic tradition also needs to be continually interpreted and re-interpreted.

In our days the Fathers have been re-discovered in monastic communities. And we should praise this re-discovery. But their message, even more than that of the Scriptures, is shrouded in a given culture which is not, as is too often assumed, **the** monastic culture -- as if there were only one -- but rather the cultural context of such or such a particular epoch in which the ancient monks lived their monastic vocation. The modern reader must expose himself/herself without any critical mind set to the transforming force of the grace which they lived and which they convey; but he/she can only do this after having peeled off, with a very fine critical sensitivity, the cultural shroud under which this precious nourishment is hidden.

Just as there does not exist one Christian culture, parallel to all the profane cultures, but many local cultures that have been christianized, - and these in differing degrees; in the same way, there does not exist **one** monastic culture, but many diverse cultures transformed by their encounter with the monastic charism. The use of the Fathers as matter for *lectio divina* requires a serious work of exegesis and study to recapture the reality which they lived beyond the cultural shroud. Otherwise, one reads oneself into the texts one admires, and, obviously, the more one finds oneself there the more one admires them.

The monk of today will be challenged, called to conversion, transformed, by reading the Fathers of monasticism, solely on condition that he allows himself to be touched by them in all the aspects of his monastic experience. And that will only come about in the measure in which he unites himself to them in the whole of **their** experience: which presupposes a detailed analysis of their language and of their manner of speaking, of their thought, both philosophical and theological, of the cultural context in which they lived. It seems to me artificial and even perilous to distinguish this study from *lectio* properly so called, as if it were only a prelude...

The monk of today necessarily belongs to a definite culture, and to a local Church, therefore to a definite Christian culture. This is the culture which, in him, meets the monastic tradition and must let itself be challenged and transformed by it. I am afraid that, too often, in our approach to the Fathers, we push the young to put on like a garment the monastic culture of a past epoch, at the risk of transforming our monasteries into cultural refugee camps.

## Conclusion

The Fathers of the Desert remind us of the primordial importance of Scripture in the life of the Christian and the necessity of letting ourselves be constantly transformed in the crucible of the Word of

God.

Moreover, even such a rapid study as we have made of the way in which they approached Scripture, of its very nature makes us call into question certain aspects of the modern conception of *lectio divina*, or more precisely, calls us to go beyond them to arrive at a deeper understanding of the unity of their lived experience. The monk, more than anyone else, cannot allow himself to be divided. His very name, *monachos*, reminds him unceasingly of the unity of preoccupation, of aspiration and of attitude proper to the man or woman who has chosen to live one sole love with an undivided heart.

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**Note:** Several of the quotes from the ancient monastic authors, in this conferences, were borrowed from: Louis Leloir, *ALectio Divina and the Desert Fathers*, *Liturgy*, Vol. 23, n. 2, 1989, pp. 3-38. Shorter version of the same: *AL'Écriture et les Pères*, *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 47 (1971), pp. 183-199.