

Prayer / Lectio Divina

Class notes from: Professor **Rev. Chris HAYDEN** (Rome, Angelicum, 2010-2011)*

What is prayer? Believers who were brought up on the older Catechism are familiar with the idea that prayer is “the raising of the heart and mind to God.” While this definition is by no means incorrect, it has the potential to be misleading. “To God” is a very long way for the small and probably distracted human mind and heart to raise themselves. Insofar as we raise - or attempt to raise - our minds and hearts to God, we do so as a *response* to the God who has already reached down to us; the God who, in Jesus, has already bridged the infinite distance between the Creator and his creatures. First and foremost, therefore, prayer is a *response to the God who has spoken first*. Prayer naturally involves human initiative, but only as a response to God’s prior initiative. To insist on this is more than simply a question of getting the theory right. It means that when believers pray, they are doing nothing other than opening up to the God who is already in communication with them. Biblically speaking, God *is* communication: “In the beginning was the word” (Jn 1:1). It is the very nature to be in communication with his creation. He does not need to be “activated,” or pestered into concern for his creatures. Jesus told the parable of the importunate widow (Lk 18:1-8), in order to make the point that God is *not* like the judge in the story, who needed persuasion before responding to someone in need. Since Christian prayer is a continuation of a dialogue which God has already started, it follows that it need not be an anxious stream of words; a pursuit of the right phrase, the best formulation. The believer can be free of the compulsion to pile sentences one on top of the other, or to brow-beat God by force of repetition. Few enough words are needed, and the few that may be necessary are for the believer’s sake, not for God’s. Jesus himself was aware of the tendency to “over-pray,” to pray compulsively or even obsessively, and this concern is clear from his instruction to his disciples: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6:7).

Of course, there will be times of particular anxiety or distress when believers feel a desperate need to “storm heaven.” It may be that such prayer seems no different to the anxious babbling that Jesus discouraged in his followers. However, even a stream of words may flow from the depths of the believer’s heart, and be a deep expression of trust in the Lord. It is for

calmer moments that we may need a reminder that God does not require his faithful to shout at him in prayer. Humble trust, rather than anxious or compulsive repetition, is the key to communication with God.

Prayer, then, is the human response to the God who has already spoken. But God has done more than speak: from the beginning of the Bible, it is clear that God's word is not simply declarative, it is creative. God speaks not merely in order to pass things on, but in order to bring things to pass. In the opening verses of Genesis, we read several times: "God said ... and it was so." God's words are matched by his providence, his guidance of all events in history. Christian faith insists that for every passage in Scripture which speaks of God's love, there is a invisible network of providence at work, or as St. Paul put it: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom 8:28).

Christian faith is theist, rather than deist. It insists that God's providence is not some anonymous "force," which merely sets creation up and keeps it running. Providence is the outworking of God's love in creation and history, a love which is deeply personal, and which encounters believers in concrete and personal ways. Therefore we can say that, just as God has spoken his word before we begin to speak to him, in the same way, his love has reached us before we begin to reach out to him. God is the one who has "chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). Often, prayer can be a conscious - and perhaps agonized - reaching out to God, in an attempt to grasp his presence, to know the reality of God. But a fundamental conviction (indeed, a fundamental condition) of faith is that God is there ahead of us. He called us into existence us before we were aware of him; his providence guides us, even when we are not aware of it. Insofar, then, as prayer is a search for God, it is *a search for the God who has already found the searcher*. After his conversion, St. Augustine expressed this reality in the words: "You were with me; I was not with you." The writer of Psalm 139 had a similar sense of God's providence: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me... You search out my path and my lying down... Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely" (vv. 1, 3, 4).

Prayer is not reducible to words, however powerful or touching. While the words with which the believer prays may be important, they are ultimately of secondary importance: most important is the attitude behind the words. Jesus leaves no doubt about this: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the

will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Prayer and action are inseparable: the words, groans and aspirations which make up prayer need to translate into the warp and woof of daily living.

Prayer *can*, of course, be separated from life, but to the extent that it is, prayer is hollow and inauthentic. The prophets railed against those who thought that worship of God was a matter of formula and precept, while forgetting about the commitment of life which needed to accompany it. At the beginning of the book of Isaiah, the kind prayer which is not matched by life is condemned: “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen” (Is 1:15). The passage immediately states what is needed in order for prayer to be acceptable to God: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good” (Is 1:16). The measure of prayer, the criterion by which it is assessed, is life. Believers may express misgivings about the quality of their prayer (“I can’t pray,” “I feel nothing when I pray”), but the reliable measure of prayer is not the feelings it generates, but the extent to which the pray-er is growing in conformity to Christ. If the believer’s life is marked by a sincere effort to love others, an ongoing struggle to forgive, to endure patiently, then prayer, however it may feel, will not be too far wide of the mark.

Prayer, therefore, should be a reflection of Christian commitment. The God who has spoken first, who has already reached out, calls the believer “to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4). Prayer is thus *the believer’s commitment to the God who has loved first*. 1Jn 4:19 puts this very succinctly: “We love because he first loved us,” and again: “Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (v. 21). Here, we touch not only on the nature of prayer, but on the nature - indeed the essence - of Christian morality. Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, living a “good” Christian life is not about winning favour with God: it is nothing other than living a life of gratitude to the God who has *already* shown favour. God’s favour, given freely and prior to any moral effort or success on the part of the believer, is the foundation of all Christian moral living; it is *not* a prize which Christian morality tries to win. The fundamental theological reality is that God *only* loves, but he leaves to his creatures the choice of how to respond to his love. Christian prayer and living are the concrete, committed, grateful response to the love of God. This is a key point for prayer with the Bible. Large sections of Scripture recount God’s free choice of his people, and their varied and varying response to that choice. Before God, nothing in the lives of believers is, properly speaking, an

initiative. All praying and acting is done against the background of what God has already done. It follows that the believer is called to turn life into a “thank you” and a “yes” to the initiative and plan of God.

All that can be said about prayer and discipleship presumes *faith*. Obviously, the believer has no direct sense-experience of God or of his initiative. God is *transcendent*, beyond our finite capacity to reason and understand. Through the centuries, many saints and mystics have said that when the believer draws close to God, his infinite light is experienced as darkness, his *todo* as *nada*. The fact that God is so completely beyond the capacity or grasp of human intelligence means that the believer must approach him with *trust*. Human experience sometimes seems to point clearly towards a loving God, and at other times to point in the opposite direction. The world simultaneously *reveals* and *conceals* the presence of God, and a fundamental challenge for the praying believer is the challenge to trust in the providence of an apparently absent God, to trust that even the appearance of chaos does not negate God’s providence. While the believer may at times (generally with the benefit of hindsight), be able to discern the workings of God, in general the only “experience” of God’s activity is that which is given to trusting faith. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the Bible’s most insistent assurances of God’s plans for his people dates from a time when their trust in God had been shaken by bitter experience. Although God allowed his people to experience the trauma of exile, the prophet Jeremiah was confident that God had not rejected them, but was still intent on blessing them: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer 29:11).

A good deal of human attention and energy focuses on “plans” - hopes, dreams and intentions which are pursued with the best of faith. A key aspect of growth in Christian maturity is the believer’s realization that his or her plans - good though they may be – will not necessarily stand; God does not automatically underwrite human aspirations – not even the most noble. Accordingly, prayer increasingly becomes a ***trustful openness to, and willingness to enter into, God’s plan***. Such openness does not negate or call into question the need for the prayer of petition, but the fundamental attitude of Christian prayer is openness – we may also say *vulnerability* – to God’s action in the life of the believer. Trustful openness is a fundamental plank of any biblical spirituality. In the Scriptures, we read the story of God’s plan for his people, a story which unfolds gradually, through fidelity and betrayal, frustration and success.

God's plan is not thwarted by human weakness or misunderstanding; nor, paradoxically, is it particularly helped by human talent or brilliance. The only human ingredient upon which its successful implementation might almost be said to depend is trust.

In the attempt to clarify the nature of prayer, it can be just as important to state what prayer is *not*, to address some common misunderstandings and wrong expectations. An initial caution - one that applies most obviously to the prayer of petition or intercession - is that prayer is ***not an attempt to manipulate or change God***. While it is unlikely that anyone prays sincerely will think of prayer in this way, the fact is that prayer is often calculated - perhaps quite unconsciously - to set God on the straight and narrow. The combination of clear ideas of what is best, and God's power to implement these ideas, can prove irresistible. We are, of course, asked to bring specific requests and petitions to God in prayer: "By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:6). However, the fact is that prayer generally does not work in a direct or "automatic" way. This can be a cause of great suffering, or even of scandal, to those who struggle to keep faith in a loving God. While there is no simple answer to the problem of unanswered prayer, and there may be times when the silence or inaction of God seem frankly scandalous, Christian faith invites the believer to keep on praying - praying to the God whose hand cannot be forced, the God who cannot be manipulated.

In practice, perseverance in prayer can result in a real change, not in God, but in the person praying. Perseverance in the face of deferral or silence teaches the truth of the words of Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9). This realization does not come easily or quickly, but only after a sustained time of wrestling with prayer. The figure of Jacob in the Old Testament, wrestling at night with a being whom he did not recognize, is appropriately used as an image of the struggle to persevere in prayer to a silent God. Jacob, faithful to the struggle, was in the end blessed by his opponent (Gen 32:22-29). When believers remain faithful to prayer, the blessing received may not be the one that was initially sought; but experience shows that like Jacob, those who wrestle, who struggle to persevere, can be confident of God's blessing.

One of the commoner objections to spending time in prayer is that it is not the best possible use of time, but a flight from commitment and from the problems of life. Why spend time in prayer, when we could be helping others? Why indulge ourselves with the cosiness of the

chapel or the oratory, when we could be *doing* something? Why pray in a world filled with social problems, when our good deeds for others could be a most acceptable offering to God? The grain of truth in such objections is that prayer should indeed be matched by Christian action, and if it is not, then it risks being inauthentic. However, this does not take from the value of prayer in itself.

Far from being a *fuga mundi*, a flight from the world, authentic prayer sends the believer right back into the thick of things. The Bible is replete with examples of intense prayer, followed by intense activity, Jesus himself being the best example of all. Before beginning his public ministry, he made a 40-day retreat (Lk 4:1-13). He spent a night in prayer before choosing the twelve apostles (Lk 6:12-13). He took care to arrange a prayerful time with the Twelve as his final hours approached (Lk 22:7-23). The apostles themselves were called to spend time with Jesus, but this was a prelude to their being “sent out to proclaim the message” (Mk 3:14). Moses drew closer to God than any person ever had before him, but this was so that he might receive from God his mission of leading the chosen people out of slavery and into the Promised Land (Ex 3).

If God is reality, and prayer is contact with God, then authentic prayer cannot but plunge the believer into reality. Far from being an escape from reality, prayer leads – or should lead – the believer to greater clarity and commitment. Inertia and sinful attitudes can keep people from full and honest confrontation with reality, but they cannot hold out indefinitely against sincere prayer. Sooner or later, the believer must either stop praying, or become more real. Since prayer purifies believers (slowly, at times painfully) of unreality, it leaves them better equipped to deal in a balanced and realistic way with their own limitations and those of the world. It thus prepares believers for their mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world.

Prayer, then, is ***not a flight from reality***, even if it should be borne in mind that there is no better *rest* from the demands and stresses of living than spending time in prayer. It is above all through prayer that the believer is renewed for continued service and discipleship. The depressed, burnt-out prophet Elijah found respite through time spent alone with God, after which he had the strength and enthusiasm to complete his mission (1Kg 19). In prayer, the disciple both encounters reality in its depth, and finds a balm for the bruises which reality can inflict.

November 17th

Feelings are important; they are the raw material for discernment; a fundamental guide to the working of the Spirit within the believer. But feelings are also ambivalent and fickle. Life cannot be lived by whim, and less still can the future be planned on the basis of today's feelings. Believers relate to God as the human beings which he has created - feelings included, and to take God seriously does not entail the negation of any part of one's humanity. However, feelings are just as ambivalent in prayer as they are in any other aspect of life. For this reason, it is important to bear in mind that prayer is *not so much a matter of feelings, as a matter of commitment*. It can happen that when a person begins to pray seriously for the first time, their feelings are deeply touched. They may be filled with an awareness of the reality of God, and experience something of a "spiritual honeymoon." But the initial intensity eventually wanes, at which point the believer is called to pursue a long-term commitment based on fidelity rather than felt passion. Many believers, however, continue to equate the quality of their prayer with the strength or depth of their feelings. "I can't pray," and "I feel nothing when I pray," are common complaints, yet prayer is based on faith conviction rather than on feelings. It is true that the absence of any feeling can be a real test of strength and patience, and there is probably nothing more difficult than to be still when the only subjective awareness is of inner poverty. Here, as elsewhere, the believer can learn a valuable lesson: God is in control; his felt presence cannot be switched on at will, to pray authentically is to wait patiently. The believer who, under pressure from God's silence, resorts to praying less and less, may eventually come to abandon prayer altogether.

In praying with the Bible, there may be times (or texts) in which the word will seem to jump off the page to meet the believer: every verse and phrase will be filled with depths of personal meaning, as though written for nobody else. But in the ordinary run of things, there will not be a rush of insight every time the Bible is opened, and at such times, it is important to be aware that God works on the believer even when there is no subjective awareness of development or growth. The effectiveness of God's word does not depend on mood; the word is intrinsically effective: "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I

purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I have sent it” (Is 55:10-11). In prayer and the reading of Scripture, the task is not to pursue subjective results, but to pursue fidelity. The believer’s subjective, emotional state during prayer can be entrusted to the One who “gives the growth” (1Cor 3:7).

A constant challenge to believers is to make time for prayer. For many people, the sheer business of life can sometimes leave little space to do more than respond to demands as they arise. There may be periods when any kind of recollection is effectively impossible. Taking account of all such situations, the reality is that pressure of time is not generally the main obstacle to prayer. If we are to be perfectly frank, while time may be the *excuse*, the *reason* lies elsewhere. It is difficult to take away from other activities in order to pray, precisely because ***prayer is not so much an activity as a “passivity.”*** To pray is not so much to *do* as to *wait* - to wait in stillness and silence. And it is difficult to remain silent. Often, as soon as people enter into a state of external quiet and physical stillness, they are confronted with their inner noise and agitation. Our minds and imaginations are full, and in the absence of some external stimulus they can practically run riot. For this reason, it can take a mammoth effort of will simply to remain still; it can seem that nothing is more difficult to do than doing nothing! In such moments, God seems absent, and the temptation is to throw in the towel. Yet these are valuable moments: they can put believers in touch with the inner poverty that is the lot of all men and women, and teach us our utter dependence on God. The sense of radical incapacity to pray that can arise from the believer’s inner noise can teach us volumes about our dependency on various forms of scaffolding and escapism. Prayer calls us away from our escapism, into an attitude of radical dependence before God. Naturally, believers can be reluctant to accept the Master’s invitation: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mk 6:31). But the desert which those who take prayer seriously will soon find within themselves is precisely the place where the Word of God is to be planted.

We have stressed that prayer is a response to God’s prior initiative. *Lectio divina* underlines the nature of prayer as response: the Word which we pray is *given to us*. It is a Word *for* us, a Word *from* God. The fundamental character of receptivity of and response to God’s word is captured by the idea that prayer is ***listening***, it is ***attentiveness to God and his Word***. The Bible begins with God’s creative speaking, speech which creates all of reality, and subsequently, creates a people for God. God’s creative speech to his people is his initiative, it is utterly

gratuitous:

For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your god did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (Deut 4:32-35).

God reveals himself precisely as speech, as word, and forms a people who are constituted by *listening*, even prior to being constituted by *faith*. If it is said of God, “In the beginning was the word” (Jn 1:1), then it must be said of humans: “In the beginning was listening.” Christ himself is God’s Word, and as such is to be received by *listening*: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2). Placing the act of listening at the heart of prayer can change our sense of prayer’s geometry: whereas we generally think of prayer as something that *ascends* to God, listening to God’s word presupposes a downward movement, in which God’s word reaches men and women. The authentic pray-er is therefore the person who listens, who receives the word, just as Abraham (wordlessly!) received the word: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go...’ ... and Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (Gen 12:1, 4). True prayer depends on, and presumes, listening. The first moment of prayer is “Speak Lord, your servant is listening” (1Sam 3:9), rather than “Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking”! When God asked Solomon in a dream what he would like to receive from God, Solomon asked for a “listening heart” (*lev shomeah*), 1Kg 3:9. When Jesus himself was asked which of the commandments was the most important, he cited the *shema*, Dt 6:4ff. In this text from Deuteronomy, the first imperative is not love, but listening! Saint Paul insists that faith comes from listening (*fides ex auditu*), but we can also insist that love comes from listening (*caritas ex auditu*). It is God’s word that urges us to love, that sustains us in our call to love. When listening to God’s word is not central, prayer can easily become just another human activity, which receives its (mal)nourishment in dry formulas. It would be hard to overstate the challenge which these basic biblical truths about prayer pose to many popular ways

of praying. While it can be absolutely well-intentioned, compulsively repetitive vocal prayer is basically impoverished. Words are essential, but without listening, words are meaningless.

The emphasis on listening underlines the Trinitarian nature of prayer. From John's Gospel, it is clear that the dialogue between the persons of the Trinity (the *missio ad intra*) is a reciprocal listening: "All the I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you" (Jn 15:15); "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak" (Jn 16:13); "Father, I thank you that you have heard me" (Jn 11:41). For the believer, to listen to God's word is to participate in the dynamic, the inner life, of the Trinity.

Having examined what prayer is and is not, we can do the same for the Bible. *Dei Verbum*, as we have seen, can help clarify such terms as inspiration, word of God, and revelation, but it is useful also to be able to express concisely the content, or subject matter, of the Bible. Biblical scholarship has struggled to find a single, key idea which can do justice to the overall content of the Bible. While no scholar would suggest that a single idea could fully express the rich and varied content of the Bible, many have sought to articulate a reasonably compact theme that can guide reading of, and reflection on, the Bible.

Among the many suggestions which have been made for a central, guiding idea are that the Bible deals essentially with the kingdom of God, or that its overall subject matter is God's choice of a people for himself, or that its basic concern is with God's promises to humanity. The reason for such variety is, of course, that the Bible is not so much a book as a library between two covers, one made up of numerous books, written by different authors, in different situations, over a period of many centuries. This is precisely what makes the Bible both so complex and so rich. It also makes it difficult to find a single, central thread to guide the reading of the Bible. At the very broadest, we can say that the Bible contains a record of God's dealings with his people and reflection by his people on their relationship with him. Under this broad heading, we can place two principal ideas: the Bible is about the *history of salvation* and the *covenant* between God and his people.

While the concept of *salvation history* has been subjected to scholarly criticism, it retains its validity as a kind of shorthand for the historical nature of Biblical faith. The term "salvation history" was coined to convey the fact that the principal concern of the Bible is how God acts through history, through the ups and downs which his people experience: God's

concern is the welfare of his people; He frees them from captivity, gives them guidance for living in peace and harmony, and provides all the material blessings they need. When his people become forgetful of him, God is able to use the events of their lives to draw them back to him. The Bible is pervaded by the conviction that God is in control of all the events of history, and this is precisely why history can be described as “salvation history.” Even the most painful and distressing experiences which God’s people endure can work for their salvation. Nothing - not even the sinfulness of his people - is finally able to thwart God’s desire and ability to draw his people to himself.

In the Old Testament, the central saving act which God worked for his people was the exodus (the event from which the second book of the Bible takes its name). In the exodus, God *saved* his people, by leading them out from slavery in Egypt, and this was only the beginning of a long journey to freedom. God’s intention was that they should live in peace and freedom in the Promised Land, to which he would guide them. The conviction of God’s people, expressed throughout the Bible, was that they had been saved by God, and they looked to God above all as *the one who saves*. In the New Testament, this conviction reaches its highpoint: in Jesus, *the Saviour*, God has shown the depth of his love for humanity, and the strength of his desire that all people be freed from every form of captivity.

The original exodus event became a symbol or metaphor for the ways in which God continued to intervene to protect and deliver his people. It was the foundation of the people’s relationship with God and their obedience to him. The ten commandments (Ex 20, Deut 5) are introduced with the words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The exodus was God’s *initiative*, calling for a *response* on the part of his people, a response which was summarized in the Decalogue. The exodus continues to be a powerful metaphor: it offers the consolation that God can work through all of the events of history to lead people from captivity to freedom, which is to say that history is still “salvation history.” There is nothing in *contemporary* experience that lies beyond the merciful reach of God’s providence. In the exodus, we also find the ongoing challenge of fidelity to the God who calls and saves. An essential aspect of *lectio divina* is the effort to understand how the saving events recounted in Scripture are reflected in the lives of believers today; to pray the Scriptures is to detect the continuity between the salvation history we read there and our contemporary histories, both individual and communal.

A second key idea which can help to convey an overall understanding of the Bible is that of “*covenant*.” The Bible is the book of the covenant, or covenants: the word “testament” has the same meaning as the word “covenant.” In the broadest sense, “covenant” refers to the special *relationship* between God and his people. This relationship was God’s initiative but, like any relationship, was a two-sided affair. For his part, God had freely chosen his people, and rescued them from captivity. Furthermore, he promised to continue to bless them. For their part, the people were obliged to remain faithful to God, to worship him alone, and to live in the way that he had shown them. God’s commandments were not an arbitrary set of rules, but were his wise guidance for his people. If the people lived by these commandments, they would be “following the maker’s instructions,” and living as God intended them to live. They would be living within the covenant.

God could not and would not be unfaithful to his people. He would never break the covenant. However, the people had to make and renew a clear, deliberate choice of fidelity to their relationship with God. They had to reject the temptation to idolatry (putting anything else in place of God), and be on guard against growing lukewarm in their covenant commitment. A starting point for their efforts to live within the covenant was the realization that God had not chosen them because of any merit on their part, but simply because he loved them. There was therefore a special onus on the people not so much to keep a set of rules, as to live a life of gratitude to God for the love which he had shown: “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you - for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you” (Deut 7:7-8).

The theme of covenant, just like its sister-theme of salvation history, can speak loudly to believers today. It reminds us that the relationship between God and the believer is rooted in God’s sovereign, gratuitous choice. The human response to God is a response to love, and love is the best possible motivation for fidelity. Furthermore, the fact that God’s covenant was not with isolated individuals, but with a *people*, calls contemporary believers away from individualism, to solidarity with others. It reminds us that our relationship with God has a “horizontal” as well as a “vertical” dimension.

In the Bible, the covenant relationship between God and his people is sometimes expressed by means of very personal and tender images. God is the Bridegroom, pleading for fidelity on the part of his bride (Hos 2); He is the Shepherd, caring for his sheep (Is 40:11; Ps

23); He is the owner of a vineyard which he lovingly and carefully tends (Is 5:1-7). It is in the person of Jesus that God's care for his people is most perfectly expressed. Jesus inaugurates the long hoped-for "new covenant" (Jer 31:31-34), and fulfils the images found in the Old Testament. He is the Bridegroom, Mt 25:1-13; the Good Shepherd, Jn 15:1-11; the Vinedresser, Jn 10:11-18. Such images remind us that the God of Scripture, the God to whom we pray, is passionate about humanity and about each individual. This is the God who calls people into relationship with himself. To do *lectio divina* is to listen to this call.

Equipped with the twin ideas of salvation history and covenant, we can venture to express, in a nutshell, what the Bible is about: It is the record of the relationship ("covenant") between God and his people. It shows us how this relationship worked itself out in the lives of God's people, and how God remained faithful to them, guiding every aspect of their history in order to draw them closer to himself ("salvation history"). In the New Testament we see how, in the person of Jesus, salvation history reaches its high point, with the inauguration of the new covenant in Jesus' blood (Mk 14:24).

In our overview of the nature of prayer, we considered not only what prayer is, but also what it is not. From a pastoral point of view, it may be just as important to root out misconceptions regarding Scripture. A common sticking point is the relationship between the Bible and history. Clearly, the Bible is a historical book. Much of it consists of accounts – sometimes quite detailed – of events which have occurred in the past. But the Bible is ***not a historical book, pure and simple***, and it is only with a degree qualification that we can describe the Bible as a historical book. Modern readers tend to expect written history to be a detached, objective statement of events as they happened. However, the serious student of history will know that things are not quite that simple: there is no such thing as a totally detached account. It is impossible to write a history without contributing at least some of one's own perspective. This is the case with regard to modern history, and it is the case with regard to the history contained in the Bible. The Bible is indeed a historical book, but the history it contains has a particular "perspective": that of faith.

Let us illustrate this with a simple example. When Jesus died on Calvary, the people looking on saw a man die by crucifixion. The bare "historical fact" was that an individual, whom some people had considered to be the Christ (the Messiah), died on a cross that day. Many – indeed most – of the witnesses saw nothing more. Later on, when the Gospels came to be

written, the followers of Jesus believed that no one less than the Son of God had died on the cross that day, and that he had died in order to reconcile humanity with God. In other words, the followers of Jesus interpreted the “bare fact” of Jesus’ death in the light of their faith. One of the greatest of these early followers, St. Paul, put it plainly when he wrote: “Christ died, for our sins” (1Cor 15:3). Even an unbeliever could accept the first part of that statement, the bare fact that Christ – or a person thought to have been the Christ – had died on Calvary. But only a believer could accept the second part, that this individual had died “for our sins.” The fact that Christ died “for our sins” is most certainly a “historical event” in the sense that it is true, it happened; but it is not *simply* a historical event, in the sense that it is *more* than history. The faith statement that Christ died *for our sins* does not falsify historical reality; rather, it deepens our understanding of a historical event.

The Bible is full of “faith interpretations” of historical events. Some interpretations are subtle, some are not, but for the biblical writers, all events were marked by the presence and action of God. It simply was not the intention of the biblical writers to give the “bare facts.” They could not do other than view events through the filter of their faith. These considerations do not warrant skepticism in our approach to the Bible, but they remind us that when we read the Bible, we are reading a faith account of God’s actions, rather than something written by an uninvolved onlooker with a reporter’s notebook. To put this in other words, the Bible was written *by* believers, *for* believers, rather than by historians for historians.

These remarks can be an important caution against biblical *fundamentalism*, which often appears to believe that wherever we find a past tense in the Bible, we have a simple, literal, historical statement of fact. While this approach might appear to simplify the Bible enormously, in fact it raises more questions than it answers. In addition, fundamentalism suggests that God is limited to just one kind of literature (history writing), and that he cannot use other forms such as story, fable, etc. to communicate the truth. The reality is that Scripture – much like the events of our lives - not only *reveals* God, it also *conceals* him. Encountering God in the pages of the Bible calls for a more committed effort than simply opening a page and experiencing the full truth as easily as we can read.

Finally, the fact that the Bible contains a faith interpretation of the events which it recounts is a reminder and an encouragement to believers to seek a faith interpretation of the events of their own lives. The “bare bones” of our experience are obvious to us, but faith invites

us to interpret our experience in a particular way. Putting a faith “slant” on the events of our lives does not mean that our version of events becomes unreliable. On the contrary, it is through our faith that we come to know the deepest truth of events.

The Bible is not only inspired, it is also inspiring. Through the centuries, some of the greatest art and literature has taken its inspiration from the pages of Scripture. Less spectacularly, though just as importantly, individual believers take inspiration for their lives from passages which speak in a special way to them. While this is just as it should be, we will also do well to remember that the Bible is *more than a collection of inspirational writings*, or a resource book to be dipped into for readings to meet varying needs and moods. The Bible is bigger than any single believer, and we should be wary of approaching it with the idea that we have grasped it, or that we are doing no more than returning to old, familiar territory. Even the most well-thumbed passage has the capacity to *grasp* the reader in a new way, but this is more likely to happen if we try to guard against excessive familiarity.

Much of the Bible is quite obscure, and a natural reaction to this is to stick to the familiar. Readers tend to have a set of favourite passages – perhaps verses which they find particularly consoling and encouraging. This is, of course, a good thing, especially when we remain open to allowing passages to speak in a new way. In practice, however, most people’s favourite passages are texts which are notable for their warmth, and which speak most eloquently in times of emotional need. This highlights both the value of familiarity with such passages, and the limitation of confining oneself to favourite texts. It may be that some of the *least* spontaneously appealing texts in Scripture are among those which believers *most* need to hear. It is highly unlikely, for example, that anyone will have as a favourite passage Mt 5:28, where Jesus warns: “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Equally unlikely candidates for favourite-passage status might be such challenging passages as 1Jn 4:20, Jer 7:1-15, or Mt 5:21-26.

We are more readily drawn to consolation than to challenge, but we need both. While it is a blessing to be familiar with passages which build up what is weak, this should not be at the cost of ignorance of passages which may clean away what is sinful or irrelevant. As Jesus himself tells his disciples: “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” (Jn 15:3). The most tender and consoling passages may cleanse believers of fear or anxiety, but we also need exposure to texts which cleanse us in less comfortable ways.

For many believers, religion is something of a “fire service,” to be called upon in times of emergency. While God does not examine the spiritual track-record of someone who calls out to him in a moment of need, from a human point of view it may be difficult to find faith sufficient for a time of crisis if there has not been a regular exercise of faith. Rather like a muscle, faith can atrophy if it is not exercised. Something similar is the case with the Bible: it can be approached as though it were a kind of emergency literature, rather like the family medical encyclopedia, which remains on the shelf until someone feels an urgent need to consult it. But the word of God will have more power in the lives of those who turn to it regularly.

That said, the Bible is *not simply a collection of insights*, or a book of straightforward answers to life’s questions. Certainly, it contains great wisdom; it abounds with practical insights which can be applied to daily living. But the Bible does not spoon-feed the believer - it does not dish out pat answers to the deepest questions. While it may be a very wholesome thing to “consult” the Bible, to “see what it says” about a specific matter, this does not dispense with the need for radical trust and hope in God. As we have seen, a trustful openness to God is part of the nature of prayer. In God, believers find the answers to their deepest questions, but these answers come slowly, perhaps maturing over a lifetime; they are not given out, ready-printed on a page. To think of the Bible as life’s great “recipe book” would be to sell it short, and to underestimate our own standing as free and intelligent creatures called into a relationship of trust with our Creator.

There is a further reason why one should resist a reading of the Bible that is driven too much by a quest for solutions to problems and answers to questions. Our questions are just that: *our* questions. Important though they may be, they are not the only questions, and perhaps not even the best questions. To the extent that believers remain excessively focused on personal issues, they may be less able to see a bigger picture, and therefore less open to the God who insists: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways.”

The Bible, despite its strangeness and distance from our modern culture, should not be considered a “closed book.” It is by no means the preserve of scholars and experts in ancient languages. In just as real a sense, however, the Bible is *not entirely an “open book.”* A journey through Scripture might well be compared to a journey through unfamiliar territory, and the traveler will benefit considerably from the help of a guide. In the Acts 8:26-40, Philip the missionary meets an Ethiopian official, and hears him reading from his Bible. When Philip hears

the Ethiopian reading, he asks if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian's reply is telling: "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:30-31). The Scripture-guide *par excellence* is the Church, which is entrusted with the task of ensuring the correct interpretation and teaching of Scripture. That is not to say that the Church has some kind of authority over the Bible. As *Dei Verbum* makes clear, the Church understands itself as being in the service of the word of God, and it carries out this service by seeking to ensure that this word is correctly understood. Pastorally, it is desirable that those who wish to pray with the Scriptures have "Philips" to guide them. While the Church insists on Bible reading for all believers, there are pitfalls and errors which can easily be avoided when an element of accompaniment is provided. Such accompaniment can – indeed should – be seen as a fundamental duty of pastoral care.

November 24th - Introducing *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina, as we have seen, is an ancient practice, and the expression itself dates from the fourth century. There have been, and are, varying approaches to *lectio divina*, with different styles or shades of emphasis. We will present one specific, clear approach to *lectio divina*. As a starting point, we will take the following definition:

*Lectio Divina is a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation.*¹

Our historical survey has made it clear that this definition is far from novel. The four key elements here are *reading, meditation, prayer* and *contemplation* (*lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplation*). In teaching *lectio divina*, an advantage of keeping to the Latin terms may be that since each of the English words already carries a certain "baggage" of meaning, it may be helpful to use words which are more likely to be neutral, precisely because they are unfamiliar. We now examine these four elements in detail, and apply them to some passages from the Bible.

¹ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), IV, C, 2.

In this examination of the process of *lectio divina*, our aim is not to theorize excessively, but to *practice* on texts from the Bible. In what follows, however, we will spend some time reflecting on each stage of *lectio divina*, before applying it to particular biblical texts. *Lectio divina*, while providing us with a clear approach to the Scriptures, is not some kind of recipe or formula. When we pray the Scriptures with this method, we do not put on a straitjacket; rather, we give a focus and a direction to our reading of God's word. Importantly, the four steps of *lectio divina* are not some kind of technique, which leads automatically to certain results. Rather, the steps are four aspects of the one attitude that believers bring to the Word.

Lectio

It is self-evident that the first approach to any text is simply to read it. However, although readers generally take the act of reading for granted, there is much about it that is less than self-evident. If we pick up a specialist text, e.g. one dealing with engineering or economics, we will not, unless we have the necessary education, expect to understand it fully. If we read a general introduction to one of those subjects, we can realistically expect to understand more of what we read than in the first case. When we read, therefore, we automatically modify our approach and our expectations, according to the type of material we are reading. When reading the daily paper, we bring a different mindset to the letters page than to the day's leading article, and it would be a very poor investor who approached the shares listings with the same expectation that he or she brought to the weather forecast. In practice, however, many people read the Bible with a directness and even a naiveté that they would not bring to other reading material. This does not do justice to the Bible as the Word of God. It is not that one should think of God's word as being necessarily obscure or complicated, but by bringing all their powers of discernment and understanding to bear on it, believers simply do it justice as the utterly important material it is.

When we read, we do so in order to *understand*. Like a lot of other reading material, the Word of God often requires explanation before it can be understood. In the Bible itself there are texts which make this abundantly clear: the author of the Second Letter of Peter is concerned that the community to which he is writing not be lead astray by some of the more obscure points in Paul's letters: "There are some things in them," he writes, "hard to

understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2Pet 3:16). This New Testament writer was certainly not attempting to put people off reading the Scriptures (although we might note that he was writing before Paul’s letters were officially considered to be a part of the Bible). Instead, he was concerned that their reading be intelligent and well-informed. He was aware that those whose reading is poorly informed may not only fail to benefit from such reading, but risk falling into error.

Luke 24 (vv. 27 and context), contains a clear example of how Jesus himself explains the meaning of the Scriptures to his disciples. This familiar text is particularly important for those who wish to pray the Scriptures: it underlines the importance of communication with the Lord, if his word is to be understood fully. In this chapter of Luke’s Gospel, two disciples of Jesus are leaving Jerusalem, just after the passion and death of Jesus. They are crushed by the events of recent days; their hope has been dashed by the death of the Master, an event beyond which they are unable to see. The journey of these two disciples away from Jerusalem can symbolize the turning away of anyone whose life’s experience crushes their faith and leaves them unable to believe that a loving God holds all of reality in his hands. What changed the outlook of these two broken disciples was an encounter with the risen Lord himself. It was Jesus himself who showed the two disciples the meaning of passages in the Scriptures which were beyond their intelligence. He showed them the inevitability of suffering, and pointed out the passages in the Bible which had predicted that he himself would suffer and die. Very often, the “intelligence” or wisdom of the Word not only surpasses human understanding, but runs counter to it. It is precisely where “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1Cor 1:25) that believers most need the assistance of the Spirit of God in their efforts to understand and pray the Bible.

But it is not only on a “spiritual” level that human intelligence needs assistance. Since the Bible is the word of God in human words, we must also apply ourselves to the fullest possible reading of the Bible *as human literature*. The term “biblical criticism,” often used as a kind of shorthand for the whole scholarly approach to the Bible, may sound to the uninitiated like a rather negative approach to the Word of God, but we should recall that, in much the same what that art critics are passionate about art, biblical criticism is generally carried out by those who are passionate about the Bible. In biblical criticism, in fact, the object of criticism is not so much the Bible, as *the way in which we read the Bible*. Biblical

criticism questions much of what readers might be inclined to take for granted, and reminds us that the Scriptures demand respect and effort. While we can stress again that the Bible is not the exclusive preserve of scholars, but God's word to all, it is nevertheless true that the reading of Scripture can be greatly deepened by the support of a little background knowledge.

Let us anticipate an objection which might be raised in the context of a *lectio divina* or Bible study group: "I want to pray the Bible, and grow in my relationship with God. I want nourishment, not dry head-knowledge!" This is, to some extent, an understandable reaction, but it is based on a wrong expectation. It would make as much sense to complain: "I want to play the piano, to make beautiful music. I don't want to play boring scales!" The efforts which are made to grasp the structures and meaning of the Bible are not unlike practising the scales in order to play the piano. *Lectio*, reading, is the first step in praying the Bible, and one reads in order to understand. It follows that any effort made to deepen the understanding of what is read can be seen as an aspect of prayer. In the strictest sense, background study is not *lectio divina*: we do not practise *lectio divina* on a guide to the Bible, or on a biblical commentary. However, the reading of this kind of material can be taken up into *lectio divina*. Scripture study becomes prayer when its final aim is living in accordance with God's word, or helping others to do so.

Depending on the type of biblical text being read, an important part of careful *lectio* may be to guard against, or even to break down, any over-familiarity with the text. Much of what we read will reflect a mentality, a world-view and a culture which is distant from our own. We do well not to presume that we have understood a passage or a story simply because we can read it. Readers may need to be prepared to leave their own world, if we they to enter into the world of the Bible. Hospitality towards the word of God will include a concern to receive it as it is, with openness, rather than inadvertently stamping it with one's own prejudices or expectations.

In *lectio*, the initial stage of *lectio divina*, the fundamental concern is with the text *in itself*. The reader is not yet reflecting on the passage, or trying to apply it to concrete, contemporary life issues. At this first moment, the task is to become fully acquainted with the passage, as a preparation for the reflection which will follow at the *meditatio* stage. In *lectio*, in other words, the concern is to grasp the *meaning* of what is being read. This is not to say

that every passage in the Bible is limited to a single meaning only. The same passage may speak differently to different individuals, depending on their circumstances and needs. However, our reflection on the Scriptures needs to be guided by what the biblical authors intended when they wrote, i.e. the meaning of the passage in itself.²

While many biblical texts may have a much fuller meaning for readers today than they did for their writers, contemporary reflection on them needs to be anchored in and guided by their “original” meaning and context. Otherwise, there is a risk that the Bible may be used as a springboard for the meanderings of our imagination, or pressed into the service of various ideologies. Some background knowledge not only opens up the world of the Bible - it can help to keep prayerful reflection properly grounded in the Bible itself. This will become particularly clear when we reflect on a passage from the book of the Apocalypse.

Read **Genesis 12:1-4**.³ This short passage describes God’s call of Abraham, his promise of great blessings, and Abraham’s obedient response. Having read it, one could immediately begin to reflect on God’s call of each of his children, and on how trusting obedience brings great blessings. However, a more careful reading will reveal a striking depth of meaning in these few lines from the first book of the Bible. For a really full understanding of the call of Abraham, we need to go right back to the beginning of the book of Genesis, to the opening verses of the Bible. There we read that God created the whole of reality, and that his whole creation was good. The highpoint of creation was man and woman, made in God’s very image (Gen 1:27). Sadly, this story of original blessing comes to a rapid end. In the third chapter of Genesis, we read how man and woman are tempted into mistrust of God; into doubting his love and care for them (Gen 3:1-5). Their lack of trust leads to rebellion and disobedience, with disastrous consequences.

We may use to thinking of the story of Genesis 3 as “the fall,” the description of

² There are complex issues of hermeneutical philosophy surrounding the intention of the author and the meaning of the text. A fundamental insight is that a text can have a *surplus of meaning*, i.e. its meaning can be *greater* than that intended by the author, in his or her context and circumstances. For a thorough introduction to the hermeneutical issues, cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

³ For practical, introductory exercises in *lectio*, we will examine three passages in turn (Gen 12:1-4; Lk 15:11-32; Rev 13:1-18). We will examine the same passage again, after we have introduced *meditatio* and *oratio*.

how the first man and woman fell from their position of blessedness and harmony with God. This is quite correct, but in fact the fall only *begins* here. The next several chapters of Genesis detail the continuing fall of humanity, presenting a steadily worsening situation. From a simple act of disobedience, there is a rapid progression to fratricide (Gen 4:8) and even the threat of mass-murder (Gen 4:23-24). In chapter 6, God resolves to begin anew, wiping out everyone but the faithful Noah and his family.

After the flood, the descendants of Noah multiply and spread throughout the world. This is in obedience to the original command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28), which God renewed immediately following the flood (Gen 9:1). It now appears that a real recovery is underway within humanity, but this is not to last. People became uneasy at the prospect of being “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4), and instead of trusting in God, grasp at the false security of a city, and a tower which would reach to the heavens. God’s reaction to this act of disobedience is to bring about just what people had tried to avoid: they will now indeed be scattered throughout the earth, and instead of the false, self-sufficient security they had sought by banding together, they find themselves unable to communicate with each other.

What is God to do with this truculent humanity, incapable of sustained obedience? At this point, we witness what appears to be a change of tactics on God’s part. He seems to give up on the idea of converting humanity *en masse*, but opts to work with a single individual, through whose obedience he plans to bless everyone else. This individual is Abraham, a descendant of one of those who had been scattered across the face of the earth. Why Abraham? The Bible does not give a reason, and we are to understand that this is simply God’s free, sovereign choice. Abraham’s obedience is unquestioning: note the perfect correspondence in the passage, between v. 1, “the Lord said to Abraham,” and v. 4, “So Abraham went.”

At this point, the broad Biblical picture is as follows: humanity is “in the wrong place,” because of heedlessness to God’s loving commands. Genesis makes it clear that the deepest effect of disobedience to God is *dislocation*, which is experienced as banishment, or exile. Not for nothing is the first question addressed by God to humanity: “Where are you.”

(Gen 3:9).⁴ Even before the expulsion from the garden, Adam's location has been changed by his sin. Cain, likewise, will experience banishment, as will the inhabitants of Babel. Later on, in the history of Israel and Judah, exile will be seen as a result of the sinfulness of God's people. God's remedy for the existential **dislocation** which results from sin (symbolized by geographical dislocation) is to invite an individual, Abraham, to accept, voluntarily, dislocation from his familiar surroundings: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abraham's consent to voluntary exile is the first step in the overcoming of humanity's exile. His obedience will be perfected by Jesus, who not only consents to leave "the Father's house," but who takes on himself all the consequences of sin.

God's choice, along with Abraham's obedient response, thus gives rise to a new beginning, which will eventually lead to the blessing of all humanity (v. 3). Little wonder, then, that pious Jews considered themselves to be the "descendants of Abraham" (Jn 8:33). Throughout the Bible, Abraham is considered to be the hero of faith. In the New Testament, he is mentioned no less than 73 times. The pattern of God's call and Abraham's obedient response is often repeated, and it becomes the model for Christian discipleship. We see this pattern in Mary's "yes" to God's invitation to her to play a special role in his plans (Lk 1:38). In the call of the first disciples (Mk 1:16-18), there is a clear reflection of Abraham's reaction to God's call: "Jesus said to them, 'follow me,' ... and immediately they left their nets and followed him."

By now, it is clear that the call of Abraham in Gen 12:1-4 is much more than the call of an isolated individual to faith and trust in God. It is the story of how obedience can alter the course of history! This became clear through an examination of the biblical context of the passage, and with this background, meditation on the passage will be far richer than it could possibly be if one were to take the passage on its own, detached from its broader context.

The **parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32)** is widely regarded as the greatest of Jesus' parables. Sheer familiarity with the passage can, however, cause a certain immunity to its message. When listeners hear the opening words, "There was a man who had two sons," they may be tempted to think: "I've heard this before!" Listening (and this applies also to

⁴ Note that the very first question in the Bible is "Did God say...?" (Gen 3:1). The context allows us to translate this question as: "Did God *really* say...?" This question has aptly been described as the "theology of the serpent." (PierAngelo Sequeri, *Il timore di Dio*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1993).

reading) then becomes superficial, since there is no expectation of hearing anything new. The best way guard against this difficulty is to situate the parable squarely in its biblical context.

The parable is actually the last of three parables Jesus told in response to a complaint made about him by the scribes and Pharisees: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2. The same complaint is made in Lk 5:30 and 19:7). From a human point of view, this complaint was not unreasonable: the scribes and Pharisees were very devout believers, concerned to observe the law of God to the last detail. Since God was a God of infinite holiness, they believed that strict avoidance of all that was unholy was required of all those whom he had called. This included the complete avoidance of sinners (cf. Ps 1:1) – those who, by definition, were unholy. Little wonder that the scribes and Pharisees took offence at the behaviour of Jesus, who not only mixed with sinners, but claimed to be doing so in the name of God. Jesus’ behaviour (and his justification of it: “The Son of man came to seek out and to save the lost,” Lk 19:10) called into question the scribes’ and Pharisees’ conviction that they were in a special, exclusive relationship with God. They who served God so faithfully resented the idea that God did not confine his love to them, but extended it in equal measure to outcasts and sinners. It was to these upright, conscientious, religious people that Jesus addressed the parable of the prodigal son. It was not addressed – at least not in its original setting – to obvious sinners, even though this is how it tends to be read and heard by most people today.

To an extent, this Gospel passage is a victim of the title which is most commonly given to it: ‘the parable of the prodigal son.’ In fact there are three main characters in the story, not just one. They are all introduced in the opening words of the parable: “There was a man who had two sons.” The story of the prodigal son is but one part of the full story, and if we read the parable with only him in mind, we will read a touching story of an errant son, now contrite, returning to a loving, forgiving father. Meditating on this story, we might focus on our own need for repentance, or on the times when we have experienced God’s forgiveness. While this would already be a rich meditation, it would be impoverished, relative to the full richness of the parable.

The figure of the older brother in the parable, resentful of his father’s prodigal generosity towards his younger brother, will have resonated clearly, and uncomfortably, with Jesus’ original audience. Following, as it does, on the parables of the lost sheep and the lost

coin, the parable of the prodigal son suggests that the righteous elder brother is every bit as lost as his younger brother. In fact it may well be that the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are, taken together, the key to the full meaning of the parable of the prodigal son. While the younger son, like the lost sheep, was lost away from home, his older sibling was like the coin: lost at home, lost in his father's house. Jesus is therefore hinting (and not all that subtly) that some of the most scrupulously religious people of his day may be just as "lost" as the sinners whom they despise. Like the older son who remained at home, the Pharisees remained strictly within the covenant. Like the older son, who could not fathom his father's love for his sinful brother, they refused to accept the fact that God could be so generous with his love. While obvious sinners will have heard the parable gladly, as an invitation to turn to God and trust in his love, it contained a more challenging message for the scribes and Pharisees. In essence, the parable of the prodigal son told the scribes and Pharisees that they had things wrong: God is not an exclusive God, waiting to condemn sinners and those who live outside of the covenant. He is a loving Father, waiting for the sinner to return, and rejoicing in the sinner's repentance, whether or not the sinner is a member of his covenant people. In Jesus, God's promise to Israel through the prophet Zephaniah ("He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love" (Zeph 3:17), has been extended to everyone. The scribes and Pharisees, who could not accept God's generosity, ran the risk of a self-imposed exclusion from the celebration, just like the older brother in the parable.

An exclusive focus on the older brother would do no more justice to the parable than a similarly exclusive focus on his younger sibling. The two must be kept together, and both must be related to the person of the father, who loves his two children equally. Here, we have concentrated on the older brother, but only in order to show that this parable is not just about the prodigal son. Honest reflection on the fact that religious people stand just as much in need of repentance as do notorious sinners, and that they are likely to be closer in temperament to the dutiful older brother than to his wayward sibling, will enrich the meditation on this familiar parable.

The **book of Revelation** (or the Apocalypse) is the most dramatic – and the most dramatically misunderstood – book in the entire Bible. As a book, Revelation tends to evoke either of two quite opposite responses. One is to dismiss the whole book as bizarre nonsense;

the other is to read it as a literal prediction of events which will accompany the end of the world. The 13th chapter of Revelation is the most dramatic and misunderstood part of the book. Without some knowledge of the background to the book, this chapter is utterly unintelligible. On the other hand, with even a brief explanation, it can be seen to be an exceptionally inspiring text.

As one reads through Rev 13, it is difficult not to be struck by the grotesque intensity of the imagery. Who or what do these fearsome creatures represent? How could one possibly *pray* such a text? Perhaps the first thing to note is that there is nothing in the text that demands that we take the images *literally*. They are to be interpreted, rather than viewed as photographic reproductions of reality. The warning at the end of the chapter, “This calls for wisdom” (v. 18) could be applied not just to the riddle of the number 666, but to the whole chapter. A rush to label the beasts is foolish, and will lead to foolish conclusions. Wise interpretation, rooted in a careful, historically-informed reading of the text, will tread more slowly, and yield more wholesome insights. The first step in the interpretation of Rev 13 (and this applies to the book as a whole) is to understand that it is an example of a very specific type of literature, known as apocalyptic. Two features of apocalyptic are of particular importance for our *lectio* of this chapter. Firstly, the writers of apocalyptic were concerned with what they perceived to be a cosmic struggle between good and evil. The victory of good over evil was assured, but the struggle unfolded in spectacular and violent fashion. Second, this type of writing uses a great deal of symbolic imagery, most notably symbolic animals and numbers. Once again, such symbols call for interpretation, rather than a naïve, literal reading.

A further item of information with which we need to be armed as we approach Rev 13 is the readership or audience to which the book was addressed. Revelation was written for Christians either enduring, or undergoing the threat of, persecution for their Christian faith. That is to say, it was written for people who felt fundamentally at odds with, and threatened by, the world around them (or, to the extent that they were not aware of the contradictions between their faith and the world, the task of Revelation was to show them the threats which their environment posed to their faith). This book conveys a very intense and imminent sense of expectation in its portrayal of the struggle between believers and their enemies; the expectation is that God will act soon, that he will intervene decisively on behalf of his

faithful. In fact it was early Christianity's sense of eschatological expectation, its sense of the imminence of the *parousia*, that gave it the urgency without which it might have remained a tiny sect.

Turning to some of the details of Rev 13, we can note that there are three main players in the passage: there is the dragon (v.2; also 12:7ff.), which represents Satan; there is the first beast (vv. 1-10), who is given power by the dragon; and there is the second beast (vv. 11-18), who is the delegate of the first beast. Together, these three creatures represent a kind of unholy trinity, aping the divine Trinity and deceiving those who serve the true God. A key concern of the passage is that God's faithful are being coerced into worshipping an image of the first beast, who is identified at the end of the chapter as a human being whose number is 666.

December 2nd

It is very likely that a concern underlying the book of Revelation is the phenomenon of imperial cult (occasionally referred to as "emperor worship," but actually a much broader matter than the "worship" of any given emperor). Imperial cult was not a narrowly religious matter: it was a means of promoting stability and cohesion within the empire – in other words, it was just as much a matter of "politics" as a matter of "religion" (although we should bear in mind that the clear distinction between these two spheres of human culture did not exist in NT times; indeed, the distinction is a product of the Enlightenment). In the earliest decades of Christianity, Christians were not subject to any requirement to engage in imperial cult, as they were still considered to be a Jewish sect. Jews, given the strict monotheism for which they were noted, were exempt from the obligations of the imperial cult. However, within a few decades, Christians were viewed as fully distinct from Judaism, and therefore as subject to the obligations of imperial cult as were any other non-Jews.

If a writer – such as the writer of Revelation – wished to write to a group of Christians to warn them against yielding to pressure to worship the emperor, he would hardly risk exposing himself by writing his thoughts directly. It would be much safer to use a set, symbolic type of communication which he knew his audience would understand. It is likely that this is precisely what we have in Revelation 13. The author is expressing, in cryptic, encoded language, the view that imperial cult is something evil, from Satan (the dragon) himself, rather than a harmless expression of civic loyalty. The beast from the sea, whose image is to be worshipped, under pain of death, is the Roman emperor. The writer probably has in mind the emperor Nero, the letters of whose name add up to 666, in a simple code known as *gematria*, in which letters of the alphabet were equivalent to fixed numbers. Although the code was simple, could be deciphered only by those who already knew what letters a number stood for, since many different combinations of letters could add up to a given number. The second beast, from the earth, is the local representative of the emperor, who has the power to kill anyone who will not worship the image of the first beast (v. 15).

The latter is probably a reference to the physical paraphernalia associated with the imperial cult.

To many people, making the appropriate noises before a statue of the Roman emperor once a year may have seemed like a harmless game of “pretend.” But the writer of Revelation does not see it this way. Even if “the whole earth followed the beast” (v. 3), and it “deceives the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 14), the writer will take a stand. He is convinced that the worship of anyone other than God is inspired by Satan himself. The elevation of any human power to the status of God is so radically perverse that it can be brought about only by the great liar himself. Those who follow God, rather than the beast, will suffer. Rome is mighty, recovering even after a period of political instability (v. 3). She will not tolerate dissent, but deal with it very brutally. The might of God is of a different kind: it is the strength of the lamb, who has conquered evil by suffering its assaults without striking back. Throughout the book, the principal image for Christ is the lamb. The second beast manages to ape the gentleness of Christ: it can appear like the lamb, v. 11. But it speaks the words of the dragon, thus revealing itself to be a ravenous wolf in sheep’s clothing, the kind of deceitful figure that Jesus had warned of (Mt 7:15).

Revelation 13 sets out to strengthen believers who are experiencing the terrible paradox that the God of infinite power will not crush evil directly. He will not save his faithful from suffering, but will lead them safely through it. They are asked neither to compromise with false religion nor to resort to violent resistance against it (v. 10). They must also endure the economic hardship which will result from their loyalty to the faith (v. 17).

This passage does not in any way pull its punches, but acknowledges, in vv. 7 and 15, the inevitability of defeat and death for many who remain faithful. What will it take for the believers for whom Revelation is written to persevere in hope through persecution, defeat and death? Where will the strength for this attitude come from? Perseverance is possible only for those who are convinced that God is in control, and Revelation 13 leaves no doubt that he is. God’s control of events is conveyed by the writer’s use of the “divine passive”: note that in this chapter, the phrase “was allowed” (or “was given,” or a close equivalent, depending on the translation) occurs no less than six times (vv. 5[x2], 7[x2], 14, 15). The use of the passive form of the verb, with God as implied agent, is common in scripture, as a way of avoiding direct reference to God (e.g. Mt 5:4, “... they shall be comforted.” Implied in this construction is “by God” – it is God who will comfort). Revelation 13 intends the reader to understand that whatever the beasts do is *allowed*, whatever powers they have are *given*, by God himself. God is at work, actively at work, in the very chaos and suffering that is being perpetrated by the powers of evil. And so, the key to perseverance is the conviction that even the greatest evil is permitted by God as a part of his mysterious and infinitely wise plan. Nothing that the dragon or his agents do, no atrocity or havoc they may wreak, lies beyond God’s providence. His wisdom is able to weave a pattern of salvation from even the bloodiest of threads. This is why Rev is such a hopeful book: it candidly faces up to the greatest evil, and insists that the victory is God’s.

This brief examination of Revelation 13 makes it clear that, far from being a bizarre text,

written by an unhinged author, this chapter is full of Christian hope and confidence. There is perhaps no better advertisement in the Bible for the relevance and importance of solid – even academic – *lectio*. Rather than dismissing this chapter as hopelessly bizarre, or using it to indulge in religious fantasy, careful, historically-informed *lectio* leaves us in a position to meditate fruitfully on its message.

Meditatio

Sometimes, the *lectio* of a passage of Scripture can be immediately engaging, and it can be easy to see how it sets up a very fruitful *meditation*. This may well be the case with the passages we have been examining. However, even if the initial engagement with the biblical text is difficult, even if the background issues seem dry, tedious, inaccessible, solid *lectio* is essential. Later, we will examine the place of historical critical method and how it is related to *lectio divina*, but at this point, we can see the transition from *lectio* to *meditatio* as a transition from the consideration of the text as an object (an object with its own independence, aside from the subjectivity of the reader) to a more subjective consideration of the text (i.e. a consideration that engages the subjectivity of the reader). Granted, we should bear in mind that even in the most “scientific,” “detached” approach to the text, the reader’s subjectivity is present. There is no such thing as a 100% objective reading, or a radically presuppositionless reading. But the idea of approaching the text – at least initially – as an object is to ensure that it is not invaded by our subjectivity. The reverse must be the case: our subjectivity is to be taken over by the text, its world, its values. In order to this to happen, we must approach the text with a degree of respect and reserve, with a certain sense of “distance.” Ironically, then, the first step in our engagement with Scripture is *disengagement*: thoughtful, critical reading of the text demands that we “disengage” our subjectivity (preferences, prejudices, expectations, experiences, fears, etc.), and allow the text to speak on its own terms. While not every moment of *lectio* will be an explicit exercise in disengagement, nor entail a thought-out strategy of distancing, the concern to allow the text to speak with its own voice is the core characteristic of *lectio*.

Yes... a key task of critical study is to put distance between ourselves and the text, to break through our spontaneous, subjective reading of the text. Unfortunately, it can happen that having put a distance between themselves and the text, some readers fail, subsequently, to bridge this distance (this is the characteristic pitfall facing academic readers of the Bible). “Distancing” is a step in the process of appropriation of the text (or, better, a step in the process of *being appropriated by* the text); it is a station, not the destination. But where does the “journey” begin? Prior to a critical reading of the Biblical text, we read it *naively*. This is not a value-judgment, but a statement of fact: before becoming aware of the issues surrounding the text (e.g. that it was written in a different language; that translation involves endless issues of subjective judgment; that the text arose in a different culture; that aspects of this culture have been forgotten and need to be reconstructed; that the immediate concerns of the writer are now shrouded in the mists of history; that the text may have been influenced by other texts, and can be adequately understood only in the light of such texts; etc., etc.)... before becoming aware of such issues, we read the text much as we read a signpost: unreflectively and uncritically. In this initial, pre-critical reading, our “grasp” of the text is immediate and simple. We are not aware of any distance between ourselves and the text. Our

reading is *immediate*. This initial, spontaneous way of approaching a text has been described as *pre-critical naïvete*.¹ It is worth noting that this language does not carry a value judgment: it is descriptive of how reading is spontaneously – and most often – done.

So why not settle for a naïve, uncritical reading of the Biblical text? Why disturb the spontaneity? Simply because – as in most areas of life – naïvete needs to be outgrown in adulthood. If it is not, it tends to be more a hindrance than a touching expression of innocence. Readers (and here, we can think of various kinds of fundamentalism) who refuse to see the biblical text as different, who refuse to acknowledge any distance between their situation and that of the biblical text, run the risk of making a complete identification between their context and that of the biblical text, with the result that the contemporary worldview gets imposed, unthinkingly, on the Bible.² A critical reading is *not* (or should not be) a means of avoiding the demands of the biblical text; rather, such a reading helps to prevent contemporary readers from co-opting the biblical text to their own agendas (whether these be agendas to left or to right).³

Scholarly reading of the Bible is basically a way of *paying attention*: “Ideally this is where both *lectio divina* and scholarly reading begins – paying attention. The role of historical and critical ‘background’ material then becomes important in preventing the reader from jumping to conclusions or misconceiving what the text says through lack of appreciation of significant differences between ancient and modern life-experience, culture, social conventions, and so on.”⁴ But in *lectio divina*, the final aim is *transformation*: disciples seek to open themselves to the *transformative potential of the text*. The purpose of *lectio* (solid, studied, well-informed *lectio*) is that the disciple may submit to the transformative potential *of the text*, rather than the transformative potential of an unfettered imagination, or the transformative potential of any personal bias or agenda. It is precisely in transcending, or setting aside, our own experience and agendas that we allow the transformative potential of the text to emerge: “the transformative potential of reading depends on the willingness of the person to bracket, at least for the moment, his or her own experience in order to engage and participate in the adventure the text offers. All reading holds out the possibility of conversion; religious reading, *lectio divina* as a test case, intentionally pursues such a consequence.”⁵

Having made the transition from a pre-critical naïvete to a critical reading of the text, there is a further step to be taken. If the text is to speak to the reader, if it is to be capable of effecting transformation, then the distance which has been established through critical reading must once again be closed:

- “The distancing of the text from the reader... has, as its ultimate goal, not the alienation of the text from the reader but a second, and postcritical, naïvete. Unless the text, once criticized, can again be brought close, can again become transparent, the transformative encounter between reader and subject matter cannot take place. If the reader remains the critic, she or he is like the person who goes to a play but can never forget that the actors are acting, that the action is a play, and that the play’s world is a stage. Unless the reader can, in a postcritical moment, be caught up in the text, lost in the text, the text cannot function for

that person as transformative mediation of meaning. It may well be a source of information, but it cannot project a new world in which a greater fullness of being is possible for the one who comes to inhabit it...”⁶

Having studied the text, having experienced its otherness, its distance, its strangeness, the reader (the practitioner of *lectio divina*) must once again approach the text directly. What is in question here is not a return to the pre-critical naïvete with which one could read before a critical awakening, but a new, informed, “post-critical” naïvete. This post-critical return to the text corresponds very closely to the task of *meditatio*. In what follows, we illustrate the shift from *lectio* to *meditatio*, from a critical reading to post-critically naïve reading, by means of a series of metaphors:

- In *lectio*, or study, we seek to understand the text in its objectivity as a *place*. In *meditatio*, this place becomes a *space*, into which the reader can enter, in which he or she can move, in which “the innovative emerges.”⁷ Good *lectio* ensures that in this second moment, *meditatio*, it is indeed the text we move in, and not the corridors of fantasy.
- In *lectio*, the Bible is read and appreciated in much the same way as a musician will peruse a musical score. The performance, however, is not a mechanical rendering of the score: it is an *interpretation* of the score. The performance is faithful to the score, while not being rigidly determined by it. Likewise, *meditatio* is faithful to the biblical text, but it is about *interpretation*, rather than a rigid, blow-by-blow rendering.
- In our examination of Psalm 1, we asked how it might re-edit our personal scripts. The shift from *lectio* to *meditatio* can be construed as a move from the biblical script to our personal scripts, which we seek to alter, to “tweak,” to modify, to change, to heal, in the light of the biblical script and the values it proposes.⁸ Indeed, an attractive way of inviting people to *lectio divina* might be to present it as a way of learning life’s true script, in the knowledge that a script-less life is an impossibility. *Lectio divina* is about liberation from false scripts. An underlying assumption here is that a “scripture-less” life is also an impossibility: everyone bows to some master-text, to some authority or another. *Lectio divina* seeks to submit to the authority of Love, to be guided by “the way, the truth and the life.” (Jn 14:6)⁹

ASIDE: Just what *is* the alternative script that the Bible proposes, and how can we articulate it succinctly? *Lectio divina* is, in large part, about *learning to think biblically* – having our outlook formed by the contours of Scripture at their very broadest. In order to think biblically, one needs to learn those contours, and at a pastoral level, it will be very useful to present the *overall narrative framework* (or *script*) of the Bible. At its simplest, that narrative framework can be described as consisting of four parts (in effect, a play in four acts, the two central acts having many individual scenes). The four parts are *creation, fall, redemption* and *fulfilment*. I would suggest that everything from Genesis chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 22 can be related to that broad schema. Obviously not every page of the Bible is narrative or ostensibly historical, but even the largest non-historical section of the Bible, the Wisdom Writings, can be presented as the efforts of believers to be faithful to God in their particular situations; situations which are always marked by the tension between the fall and its effects, on the one hand, and the redeeming work of God, on the other.

Those who have pursued some theological and biblical studies need to be aware of excessive familiarity. Those four simple terms – creation, fall, redemption and fulfilment – carry an entire worldview: the biblical worldview. They tell us that in the biblical understanding, creation is good and the human person is the highpoint of that creation: created, willed, loved by God. They tell us that the *grace* of creation is unravelled by the *disgrace* of the fall, which in essence is disobedience, forgetfulness of God. They reassure us that that the fall is not the last word, but that, in parallel (and in tension) with the history of sin, there is the history of grace, the history of redemption. The last of these four terms, fulfilment, promises us that despite the fall and its consequences, God’s purpose of redemption will prevail, leading to the fulfilment of his designs.

In practice, creation and fulfilment, the first and last of those four “acts,” can be presented as specific moments. Creation occurred at a moment in the past, and fulfilment will occur at a moment in the future. Between those times, the believer lives with the effects of the fall and the effects of God’s work of redemption. A question that this perspective can bring to *meditatio* is: “How does this biblical text (book, passage, etc.) address this particular moment in my/our ongoing experience of both sin and grace, of both fall and redemption?” Or: “How does this biblical text relate to my/our present experience of discipleship?” When the broad, four-part narrative has been grasped, then both the particular text and the particular experience of discipleship can be related to it, and when such connections are made, they provide an impetus for *meditatio*.¹⁰

- The shift from *lectio* to *meditatio* is a shift from *reading the word* to *reading the world*. The world of the reader can be illuminated by the text only when the world of the text has been taken into account, when it has been understood at least to some extent. When *lectio* has been done with due care and commitment, the result is that “Reading the Scriptures is a springboard to reading the larger world that surrounds us.”¹¹
- The relationship between *lectio* and *meditatio* can be described, using the language of Ricoeur, as a “fusion of horizons,”¹² in which the horizon of the world inhabited by the reader and the horizon of the world portrayed or proposed by the text become one. “To really enter the world before the text... is to be changed, to ‘come back different,’ which is a way of saying that one does not come ‘back’ at all but moves forward into a newness of being. From the genuine encounter with the true in the beautiful one cannot go home again.”¹³
- A final metaphor for the relationship between study and reflection (and hence for the relationship between *lectio* and *meditatio*) is a cautionary one: critical, historical study forms the foundation for all subsequent engagement with the text.¹⁴ But “while the historical is foundational, it is precisely that: the foundation. It is not the best entrance. A person does not enter her or his home by digging up the foundations of the house! We enter through a doorway.”¹⁵ *Lectio* without *meditatio* could be merely an exercise in textual archaeology; *meditatio* without *lectio* would lack foundation.¹⁶

Now that we are taking the next step in the process of *lectio divina*, it will be useful to recall that *lectio divina* is not intended to be a kind of straitjacket, dictating the details of how we pray. We are presenting it in a step-by-step manner, but any given period of prayer with the Bible may not be quite so ordered. In practice, *meditatio*, reflection on a passage, may begin even as the passage is being studied. And at certain times, the first contact with a verse of

Scripture will lead one straight into prayer. Again, there may be occasions when, as soon as the Bible has been opened, the person praying may feel moved to sit quietly in contemplation. When there is an effortless, inner movement during a time of prayer with the Bible, it is probably best to follow it, rather than anxiously seeking to conform to a rigid, step-by-step pattern. In any case, the four “steps” of *lectio divina* contained in the definition we are following are not a “technique,” but four aspects of the one attitude that we must bring to the Word. While the “normal” route will be a progression – or a struggle to progress – through the steps of *lectio divina*, the fact remains that these steps are given to guide, rather than to bind.

Our *lectio* of the three passages we have considered has shown the enormous importance of *context* for the understanding of a biblical text. It is sometimes suggested that the meaning of biblical passages is so conditioned by their original context that they have little if any relevance for us today. In practice, however, this suggestion tends to be made regarding passages whose meaning for us today might be one with which we would rather not be confronted.¹⁷ A central conviction of our Christian faith is that the word of God still speaks to us, today, if we are open to hearing it. After we have tried to understand what it meant in its original context, the next stage in allowing the word to speak to us is to reflect on it, and this is the task of *meditatio*.

In addition to the metaphors we have seen, the transition from *lectio* to *meditatio* can be expressed in various ways: it is the movement from facts to truth; from information to insight; from knowledge to wisdom; from the biblical context to our context. Good *lectio* will certainly give us facts, information and knowledge, but on their own, all of these are quite useless if they do not gradually lead towards *transformation*. The word of God is the word of life, not merely the word of knowledge. If it is read without the intention of allowing it to transform, then the reader may be like the foolish man who built his house on sand. If it is read with a view to transformation and growth in discipleship, it will provide a solid foundation (Mt 7:24-27).

In *lectio*, we struggle to master the word, but we do this only so that the word might master us; we read it so that it might read us. The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that the word of God reads the reader: “It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). *Meditatio* is a *reading in the light of what has been read*: a reading of life, of one’s contemporary context. Practically speaking, in *meditatio*, we may look for points of contact between the plan of God as it unfolds in Scripture and our lives as they unfold. Conversely, *meditatio* can uncover points of non-contact, obstacles and resistances to the plan of God: the word which lights up the way also lights up the cobwebs; the word which consoles also convicts. In *lectio*, the biblical text is the *object* of our investigation: it is a word “out there,” at arm’s length. With *meditatio*, the reader begins to enter into the text, to become a protagonist, an actor, a subject. Having grasped the original situation of the word in *lectio*, we are ready to see how it speaks to *our* situation.

Whereas in *lectio*, we look on or listen in as God speaks to his people, in *meditatio*, the communication becomes fully personal: it is no longer, for example, a case of God speaking

to “him,” or “her,” or “them,” but God speaking to *me* and to *us*.¹⁸ When we meditate on Gospel passages, for example, we no longer listen to Jesus speaking to Mary or to the rich young man, but hear him speaking directly to us. The beatitudes (Mt 5:2-12) are no longer being spoken to a remote multitude, but are a promise and challenge to us, here and now. The exodus is no longer a distant event, shrouded in the mists of time, but God’s saving intervention in our lives, today. This aspect of *meditatio*, hearing God address us personally, anticipates the next stage in *lectio divina*, in which we will address God personally.

Where the Bible contains the history of salvation, then our meditation on it tries to discover how and where this history continues to unfold in our personal (and social, family, community) history. Where the Bible records the struggle of God’s people to be faithful to their covenant relationship with him, *meditatio* draws in our present-day struggles to be faithful to our Christian calling. Where the Bible recounts failure and forgiveness, *meditatio* encourages us, today, to persevere in our efforts at discipleship. In order to make such connections, we need to use a little imagination. This does not mean letting our imagination run wild, or indulging in fantasy. The *lectio* which we have done will guide us, and keep our imagination on track.

In practice, the time given to *meditatio* on a given passage may be spent reading it very slowly, chewing it over, repeating certain words or phrases. Repetition has a particularly important part to play in meditation on the word – recall the image from the monastic tradition, of *ruminatio*: we are invited to be *ruminants*!¹⁹ By calling to mind and “mulling over” an incident or a short text from Scripture, we reinforce within ourselves the thought and memory of the workings of God. It is not such a long step from this to a greater awareness of God’s workings in the details of our lives.

A further aspect of *meditatio* may be using other – related – texts to shed light on the passage with which we are praying. It can happen that while one is reflecting on a passage of Scripture, that a verse or passage from an entirely different context comes to mind. This may help to distil the message of the primary passage in question. As people grow in familiarity with the Bible, they come increasingly to realize that in spite of its great diversity, it can also be seen as a whole cloth: any given text may be illuminated by several other texts. While doing *meditatio*, one might also ask what values and attitudes, what judgments, what ways of looking at the world, are present in the text, bearing in mind that in order to “apply” a biblical text to a contemporary situation, one needs to enter into the world and values of the text.

As we continue on our itinerary through the four stages of *lectio divina* (*lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*), we may notice that each stage is more personal and intimate in nature than the one that precedes it. *Lectio*, of its nature, is the most “objective.” As we have seen, this stage does not call for personal involvement with the text we are reading. Indeed, it is possible, while doing *lectio divina*, to follow another person’s *lectio*, and then continue on to the other stages. However, it is no longer quite the same with *meditatio*. Nobody else can fully do our *meditatio* for us – it is something that requires personal effort. However, it is possible for a leader or guide at least to offer some help with *meditatio*; to offer suggestions as to how it might be approached. With the next stage, *oratio*, it is a

different story. Nobody else can pray for us; we either pray ourselves, or not at all; we simply cannot “piggyback” on someone else’s prayer. However, even here, someone can at least share their own prayers with us, and we might eventually make those prayers our own. The fourth stage, *contemplatio*, is different still. We cannot even do *contemplatio* for ourselves, let alone pick up on someone else’s efforts. This is because (as we saw when examining the writing of Guigo the Carthusian) *contemplatio* is God’s gift to us, his communication of himself to us now, without the mediation of Scripture.

December 15th.

We will now continue, with *meditatio*, the practical exercise we did on the texts from Genesis, Luke and Revelation. We will do the same (although more briefly) once we have considered *oratio* (for reasons which should be clear, there are no “practical exercises” in *contemplatio*). Note that what we present here is not so much the “doing” of *meditatio*, as the end results of one individual’s reflection on the three texts. Others may be able to make these end results their own, but strictly speaking, each person needs to do his or her own reflection, if the text is to speak in a personal way. What follows should be seen merely as a guide to personal meditation, and an illustration of how one might progress from the first stage of *lectio divina* to the second.

Genesis 12:1-4. The story of the call of Abraham is a story of God’s initiative. God is a God who *calls*: he has called creation into existence; he calls people into relationship with him. Each of us has been called, and is invited to make our life a response to this call. The rest of creation will never fail to live up to its potential: light will always and only be light; animals will eat, defend themselves, reproduce. But for the human person, the highpoint of creation, God’s call comes as a choice: we have the freedom to respond or to refuse.

The realization that God makes a claim on us does away with any false notions we may have of complete autonomy. We depend on God for our very existence, and so it’s hardly surprising that we should depend on him for continued well-being and happiness. Once he felt the call of God, Abraham allowed his whole life to be taken up with it. What about us? Generally speaking, we assign to God a particular part of our life: a slot, a time, an activity. While this may be fine in practice, we need also to remember that our whole life is dependant on God. It is in him that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). There is great peace to be gained from the conviction that the Creator of all, the Almighty, is interested in us, calls us. How much anxiety might we spare ourselves if we could internalise this faith conviction – if we could let it travel the long distance from our heads to our hearts?

As felt-knowledge (rather than as a matter of abstract fact) this comes slowly, over the course of a lifetime, through struggles to believe, to trust, to remain faithful. Our growth in trust is a long journey, like the journey of Abraham. In fact, the need for trust is built into the call itself. This is because God never overwhelms our intellect with total clarity. He does not sweep us along with a certainty which cannot be resisted; there is always room for doubt, and there is always room for trust. Doubt and trust are not opposites; they are not mutually exclusive. If there were no doubt, there would be no need for trust. As the one who took his

first steps with neither certainty nor security, Abraham is our model for trusting faith.

It is not easy for us to live by trust alone. One day, we offer God our trust; the next day, anxiety reasserts itself, and we snatch back our trust. One day, we have a wonderful sense of God's providence; the next, we hear an inner voice asking, just like the serpent asked Eve, "Did God *really* say this to you? Is he to be trusted?" We should not think that God is offended by our difficulties with trust: he is big enough to deal with them! We need to feel reassured that with God there are no "second chances" – there is no need for them, since God does not count! Every time we start again in sincerity, renewing our trust and our commitment, we are beginning anew.

In Abraham, we can see clearly the *effects of trust*. In response to God's call, he let go of his autonomy, of his own plans and projects. Through his radical trust in God, he became a figure of hope for all of humanity, one through whom countless others would be blessed. All those who try to live lives of trust in God send out ripples to the rest of humanity: to their spouses and families; to their friends, workmates and communities. When God truly makes a difference to our lives, then our lives truly make a difference. We may not work wonders; we may not feel any different, but the Lord himself can do a great deal with even a single person's "yes" to his will. We might say that Abraham's obedience made him a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. He stood apart from the rest of humanity, and helped stem the tide of wickedness and suffering that resulted from sin, and that was described in the narratives of the "fall." Whereas mistrust and disobedience had brought great suffering – indeed a curse (cf. Gen 3:14-17), Abraham's attitude began a whole series of blessings. In him, we see an anticipation of Jesus, who prayed to the Father, "For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth" (Jn 17:19). We should never underestimate the difference we can make to others, by taking a stand for and with God.

When we read the call of Abraham, we may be struck by the fact that God is the one who does all the work! It is he who speaks, who blesses, who promises, who shows the way, who makes great. Abraham simply takes God at his word. We might therefore be inclined to think of Abraham as a silent, passive type. He might be taken as a confirmation of the suspicion many people have regarding faith: that it is for the weak. It is interesting to contrast Abraham with some of the characters in the preceding chapter. There we read about the high achievers, the architects of a city and tower. In spite of their human ingenuity, their efforts came to naught, because they were not rooted in obedience to God. On the contrary, they

were working in opposition to God's plan for humanity, and so their efforts led to disunity and disruption.

The reversal of this disunity began in Abraham, the one in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). His inner strength achieved far more than all the strenuous efforts of the builders. He teaches us that faith and obedience *call* for strength, and are in turn a *source* of strength. In the lives of many individuals, the single greatest achievement is "letting go and letting God." The moment they entrust themselves to God becomes, for them, the equivalent of Abraham's response to God's call: the moment of the Great Reversal. When a person learns to do this (whether suddenly, or over a long period of time), they experience the liberating wisdom of Psalm 127:1 – "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain," and of St. Paul: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Luke 15:11-32. As we suggested in our *lectio* on the parable of the prodigal son, a fruitful approach to this parable might be to shift the focus of our attention from the prodigal son to his elder brother. While we can all identify readily with the obvious sinner, we may not feel quite so comfortable with having our self-righteousness exposed. We are conditioned – quite rightly – to think of sin as turning away from God, and repentance as returning to him. It's hardly surprising, then, if we see a clear reflection of ourselves in younger son. However, our religious upbringing may also have told us that the opposite to sin is careful observance and duty. Insofar as we identify with the older brother, it may be to sympathise with him: the one who has done his duty all these years does not appear to be getting the credit due to him. Reflection on the older brother in this story might invite us to ask some very fundamental questions: "What is my religion about?" "What motivates my religious practice and moral behaviour?" Implicit in the older brother's remarks to his father is the complaint: "Why should I bother to serve you so faithfully, when those who are less faithful suffer no disadvantage?" The older brother's attitude shows that he thought of his father's love as something that had to be *earned*. If this were in fact the case, it would be fundamentally unjust that his younger brother should experience the same love without having earned it. On the other hand, if even after a period of bohemian living, his brother was still loved by the father, why should the older brother, the dutiful one, strive to please his father?

What about us? Are we trying to please the Father? To keep him happy and appease his anger? Are our efforts to live a moral life intended to help us work our way into God's good books? To the extent that this may be so, our motivation is wrong. The only worthwhile motivation – and the most effective one – for living a good Christian life is *gratitude* for the love of God. If we could earn God's love, then it would not be love. If we are convinced of God's love, then we need no other motivation. For all too many Christians, the starting point for Christian morality is the concern to avoid punishment, or at best, to win God's favour. The moral life should instead be the grateful life, the lived response to God's love.⁵

Of course, the elder son's diligence is, in itself, commendable. He *did* serve his father better than his younger sibling. But somewhere along the line, a note of drudgery and resentment crept into his relationship with his father. In spite of all his dedicated service, he does not really *know* his father. We too can throw ourselves into the work of the Lord to the extent that we lose contact with the Lord of the work. We can be like Martha, complaining that we are doing all the work, while the invitation simply to be with the Lord is constantly open to us (cf. Lk 10:38-42). We may need to spend a long time with the words, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." In order to do this, we need to leave our busyness aside from time to time, and allow the Father to minister to us. It is in the Father's company that we can leave aside the question, "what is in it for me?" The Father himself is the answer.

In the parable, the elder brother's resentment is directed specifically against the father's unconditional, "easy" forgiveness of his wayward brother. The diligent son is like the prophet Jonah, who sulked when God forgave the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10-4:1). It is just this quality in the older brother that might prompt us to reflect on the presence of resentment in any area of our lives. If we find that we are acutely aware of the sins of

⁵ What is moralism? Fundamentally, it is the attempt to preach and/or live the moral demands of faith without reference to the *prior* love and grace of God. Moralism puts the cart before the horse: it puts commandments before exodus, freedom from sin before baptism. Moralism negates the reality of grace by seeing it as something earned, merited. "While the moralist is forced into obedience, motivated by fear of rejection, a Christian rushes into obedience, motivated by a desire to please and resemble the one who gave his life for us." Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism*, 180. Keller (*ibid.*, 177) refers to a character in a story by Flannery O'Connor, of whom it was said: "he knew that the best way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." Keller notes: "If you are avoiding sin and living morally so that God will have to bless and save you, then ironically, you may be looking to Jesus as a teacher, model and helper but you are avoiding him as Saviour."

others, then we ourselves may be in need of healing. St. Paul reminds us that love “is not irritable or resentful,” and that it “does not rejoice in wrongdoing” (1Cor 13:5-6). It was the elder brother’s resentment that excluded him from the celebration, and we might learn from him that resentment is incompatible with true rejoicing.

Religion turned sour can be far more crippling than no religion at all. A pagan can at least enjoy the good things of this life, whereas a Puritan cannot. If the world tends to think of religion as drudgery, this may be because it sees too many dutiful “older brothers.” When the philosopher Nietzsche concluded that God was dead, his main evidence was the expression on the faces of so many believers: if their God were alive, surely they would look a little happier! How we deal with resentment is not a purely personal matter: our credibility as believers is at stake.

A final line of reflection which the parable of the prodigal son might suggest for us touches on our experience of Church. How do we experience our membership of the Church? As we have seen, the elder brother was “lost” at home, just like the lost coin. For some believers, the Church is like a safe vantage point from which they look out (and down!) on a wicked world and its pleasures. For others, it is the home which they claim only reluctantly, and look at with a disapproval which closely mirrors that of the elder brother coming home from the field. Both righteousness and resentment can sour our sense of being at home in the Church. Either one can leave us “lost at home,” like the coin (Lk 15:8-10) and the elder brother.

Revelation 13. This most dramatic of biblical texts can remind us that the decision to be a faithful disciple is one that will inevitably involve us in some drama. While martyrdom is a real threat in some parts of the world, the majority of Christians today do not run any risk of literal, physical martyrdom, and we may never find ourselves in the situation of those for whom Revelation was written. However, Christian discipleship is no less radical an option today than it was for the earliest Christians. It is said that to be a Christian is to be recruited as well as redeemed: to choose Christ and his values is to reject much of what the world values. The effort to remain faithful to that choice involves an ongoing struggle with all that runs counter to it.

In our day-to-day living, we may not generally be aware of any great tension between our faith and the society in which we live. Yet there is an underlying, ongoing tension, and a

very radical one at that. Believers in Nero's time could not but be aware of this tension. They were being forced into compliance with the values of the pagan world, under pain of economic exclusion and even death. The choice for them was stark: apostasy or martyrdom.

For us, things are more subtle. The very absence of a radical choice may prevent us from ever choosing radically; our discipleship can remain a comfortably complacent affair. Rev 13 reminds us that Christian faith is a serious matter, calling at times for serious choices. Resistance is a part of our job-description as Christians. As the second letter to Timothy (3:12) puts it, "all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The "persecution" may no more dramatic than the ongoing struggle to be honest, generous, chaste or forgiving, but this struggle can wear us down just as effectively as any physical threat. The rewards which the easier options hold out may not be as overwhelmingly enticing as the ones which compromise with Nero's regime promised, but in the long term, they may be just as tempting. What a tidal wave does not wash away, a steady trickle may wear away. As believers, we need to guard against the gradual attrition of our faith by secular values and attitudes. The sustained intellectual pressure applied to faith can constitute something approaching a "martyrdom" for believers. Belief in contemporary culture is not comfortable, it must account for itself (cf. 1Pet 3:15). It must constantly seek to see beyond the objections, even as it is purified by them.

Rev 13 does not divide humanity into believers and unbelievers, or into religious and irreligious: the division which it makes is between true and false religion. Every human being will bow before something; it is impossible not to give our allegiance to some god or gods. Even when we are committed to God the Father, there may still be a certain practical polytheism operating in our hearts. Our reflection on Rev 13 may invite us to examine our hearts and see where our deepest attachments lie.

During our *lectio* on this chapter, we saw that it is a very hopeful text. On the one hand, it acknowledges that believers will suffer, many of them unto death. On the other hand, it insists that such suffering is allowed by God as part of his design for salvation. The writer was concerned not so much to take the pain out of opposition, as to take the anxiety out of it. In his view, the one thing which faithful Christians need not suffer is anxiety. There is no room for doubt about the final outcome of the present struggle, since God, in Christ, has already defeated all the powers of evil.

In principle, all Christians share this outlook, but in practice, we often remain prone to anxiety, doubt and apprehension. It is very hard for us to leave things in the hands of God, even if we truly believe that he has created heaven and earth and everything in them (Gen 1:1ff.). Certainly, we are not asked to be fatalistic, or accepting of everything that comes our way, but the Lord who tells us to pray for our needs with perseverance tells us at the same time “not to lose heart” (Lk 18:1). St. Paul was one believer who had come to full confidence in the victory of God. He did not arrive at this confidence easily or lightly, but through his experience of God’s presence in his own struggles. Paul had run the gamut of suffering and anxiety (read 2Corinthians 11:23-29), but by the time he came write the letter to the Romans, Paul could say, “ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39). In retrospect, Paul could see that all that the Lord permitted him to suffer was an apprenticeship in trust and hope.

What about ourselves - closer, perhaps, to the apostles in the storm? We can at least take comfort from the very human weakness of these novices, with their anxious question, “Teacher, do you not care?” (Mk 4:38). We might also reflect that the kind of trust which allays fear is something which we can *choose* to grow in. There can be a certain element of self-discipline involved in letting go of anxiety and taking hold of trust; it is a habit which we can actively cultivate. Every temptation to anxiety can be seen as an invitation to renew our trust, and to repeat, with the psalmist, “I have calmed and quieted my soul” (Ps 131:2). The real battle which the Christians of the book of Revelation faced was the inner struggle between hope and despair. They remind us that the greatest struggles in our own discipleship are played out, not in the world around us, but in the inner attitudes which shape our response to that world: “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers...” (Eph 6:12 ff.)

Oratio

In the progression between the different stages of *lectio divina*, the transfer from *meditatio* to *oratio*, from reflection to prayer, is the most spontaneous. Having read and understood the word of God, having reflected on it and seen how it speaks to us, it is only natural that we

should react to what we have encountered. When the penny drops, when we gain insight into how the word applies to our lives, we cannot but exclaim *eureka!* *Oratio* is nothing other than our reaction to the word. Of course, a very intense burst of insight is not the norm. Most encounters with the Bible will be much gentler, and the truth of the word will more often than not dawn slowly. But whether or not one feels that one has gained new insight from a given time of prayer with the word, one is called to a renewed response to the word. After God has spoken to us, it is our turn to speak to God.

Although *oratio* is prayer in the strictest sense, we need to be clear that all of our dealings with Scripture, from study onwards, are prayer in the broad sense. Defined in the broadest possible sense, prayer is *a relationship with God*; but we are now considering it more specifically as our way of addressing God; as the way in which we speak to him. As we do this, however, we should bear in mind that the whole process of *lectio divina*, from beginning to end, is prayer.

How people pray is as personal and unique as how an individual expresses him- or herself in any conversation. It follows that our description of *oratio* must be more tentative than was the case with *lectio* and *meditatio*. Nevertheless, there are some things that are – or should be – common to prayer, irrespective of the temperament or personality of the one praying, and in what follows we will try to outline some of these basic elements.

To say that the entirety of our discipleship and relationship with God is prayer, is to assert that everything we do is *implicitly* prayer. But in order for everything we do to be prayer, there must be times when we do nothing but pray. To the extent that we try to live our lives as a response to God's grace, to his *deeds*, we are praying implicitly. When, in *oratio*, we deliberately and consciously respond to God's *words*, we are praying *explicitly*. Our times of explicit prayer ("nothing but prayer") are essential for sustaining a life of implicit prayer ("everything is prayer").

In *lectio*, we look at the text from the outside, trying to understand it in an objective way. In *meditatio*, we continue our engagement with the text, but from the inside, no longer as observers but as protagonists. Now, in *oratio*, we give expression to whatever follows from our reading and reflection on the text. What happens to us when we enter deeply into a Scripture passage? In fact, one or more of many things. We may be struck by how far our lives are from the values and attitudes proposed by the text. In this case, a natural reaction

will be to repent, to seek forgiveness, to resolve to strengthen our commitment. We might also be struck by the sheer goodness of God: by his mercy, his love, his providence, his power. If this is uppermost in our hearts, then the most natural reaction will be to praise and thank God. We may wish, having been struck by the goodness of God, to lay our personal needs, or the needs of loved ones, or of the world, before him with great trust. Here, our reaction to God's word in Scripture will spontaneously take the form of petition or intercession. These three themes of repentance/resolve, thanksgiving/praise and intercession/petition, while not exhausting the possibilities for prayer, can be seen as a broad umbrella, covering the content of *oratio* (as a reflection on them, we might read or recite the Lord's Prayer, noting how the different elements of this prayer fall into one or other of these three broad divisions).

When our prayer is rooted in Scripture, the words used may closely reflect or echo the language of Scripture. Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) contains quotations from and echoes of at least 29 different passages from the Old Testament, most often from the Psalms. The Church's liturgical tradition takes up Mary's lead in praying responsorial Psalms, where God is praised and thanked by reflecting back to him his own words. In the same way, in *oratio*, it may be helpful to take a short verse or phrase from Scripture and repeat it (even while engaged in other activities). Phrases such as "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul" (Ps 94:19), "Hope in the Lord" (Ps 131:3), "Teacher, let me see" (Mk 10:51), "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2Cor 1:3), and countless others throughout the Bible, might also be used in this way. Just as in *meditatio*, where repetition of a verse can allow it to speak more deeply, so in *oratio*, repetition can help to deepen a biblical prayer.

We turn once again to the three biblical passages which we have been using to "practise" the stages of *lectio divina*. Again, we recall that our prayer needs to be our own, and this should be borne in mind as we read the suggestions for prayer which follow. For the sake of clarity, we will group these "suggestion" under the three headings of repentance/resolve, thanksgiving/praise and intercession/petition.

Genesis 12:1-4

Repentance/resolve. Lord, you call us, just as you called our forefather

Abraham. Our response to you can make a difference - not just to us, but to our families, our friends, our community and beyond. So often, Lord, we choose not to respond, but to cling to independence and autonomy rather than trusting obedience. We say, even if not in so many words, "The devil I know is better than the God I can't see." We opt for the anxiety of self-reliance, rather than the security which comes from complete trust. We busy ourselves with plans to build towers of our own, not taking time to discover the plan which you would have us follow. At times, we allow ourselves to be swallowed up by the doubt which is part and parcel of our human condition, rather than seeing it as an invitation to renew our trust in you. You appeal, Lord, to the freedom you have given us. But how jealously we guard our freedom, forgetting that the greatest exercise of human freedom is commitment to you. Help us, Lord; lead us from the isolation of independence to the warmth and security of a lived fellowship with you. May we make our own the words of the psalmist, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps 23:1).

Thanksgiving/praise. We thank and praise you Lord, for you, the creator of heaven and earth, take a deep, personal interest in each one of us. You never force or coerce us, but wisely and gently use events, people and circumstances to reveal yourself to us. Your providence embraces all of reality. Nothing lies beyond your wisdom and power. Even tragedy and sin do not frustrate your loving plans, but can plunge us into the very heart of your mercy. We give you thanks for those whose lives witness to the blessings that flow from trust in you, and for the courage of those who respond to you at great cost. These are the people who have kept faith alive and who continue to inspire us. They are the people whose lives make a difference, and whose example invites us to renew our confidence that "truly God is good to the upright" (Ps 73:1).

Intercession/petition. Father, many of your children do not know you, or know you as a vague idea rather than as a loving parent. Give your light to those who struggle to find direction and meaning in life. May they have a sense of your loving concern for them. Let them know that you have a plan for each of your children, and give them the faith and courage to open their lives to you. Others, Lord, have lost their way. They have started with great trust in you, but their lives have taken them far from

your light. May your call overtake them yet again, so that they may know once more the peace which comes from trust in you. Help each of us to respond to you with great generosity, Lord. For we know that to do this is merely to let ourselves be blessed by your own generosity. Bless us with peace and perseverance as we follow you, for we know and we trust that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (Ps 1:6).

Luke 15:11-32

Repentance/resolve. Father, you depend on us, your children, to reach out to the lost, to welcome our brothers and sisters who feel alienated or excluded, to show your smiling face to those who fear only retribution and revenge. We, the body of your Son, are the arms that are to embrace the returning prodigal, restoring dignity and bandaging wounds. Too often, Lord, we have hardened our face, letting it be known that we cannot sympathise with those whose wounds are self-inflicted. repent, Lord, of any notion that we are virtuous. We repent of excessive reliance on our own efforts, especially where this has been at the cost of knowing our utter dependence on your grace. We thought that we were serving you, but you were gently and unobtrusively serving us. We repent of our presumption and lack of gratitude, and resolve to serve you in the most broken and needy of your children. Deliver us, Lord, from resentment and pride, as we pray, “Who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults” (Ps 19:12).

Thanksgiving/praise. Almighty God, we praise you for the marvellous depths of your wisdom. The words of Jesus shine right through our lives, lighting up patches of darkness which we had not even begun to suspect. We bless and praise you Lord, for you do not depart from us, nor leave us alone in our sinfulness. You do not turn aside from our petulance and our resentment, but draw ever closer to us, planting within us your word, which is a torch that burns our sinfulness away, even as it lights it up. We thank you for the gentleness of your mercy. You continue to “come out to us,” to find us where we are, whether near or far off. We encounter you in so many ways: a book, a homily, a letter, a chance meeting. The details of our lives conspire to lead us into the celebration, if we only have eyes to see you at work in them. May we learn to sing with gratitude, “I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my

mouth” (Ps 34:1).

Intercession/petition. Lord, heal us of all bitterness, that we may not be a burden to our sisters and brothers. So many people bear within them an anger, which, silently and unobserved, eats away at their happiness like a deadly cancer. Protect us, Lord, when we meet such anger in others. In our weakness, we all too readily reflect it back to them. Give us instead the strength and gentleness to meet it with loving patience. We dare, Lord, with confidence in your great mercy, to name even the anger which at times we can feel with you. Remove this and all bitterness from our hearts, leaving space there for us to share, as you have shared, the pain and suffering of others. Teach us to pray, and to lead others to pray, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life...” (Ps 103:2-3).

Revelation 13

Repentance/resolve. God our Father, your love for us is total, and so you call us in a total way. Your invitation extends to every aspect of our lives, and invites us constantly to act in ways that are in keeping with our discipleship. Your call is radical, inviting us to choose radically. But we so often fail to take you seriously, opting instead for the false comfort of a half-response to your invitation. We leave room for response to other invitations, issued by other gods. We are your fair-weather friends, Lord, loving you by half. We need not fear persecution, but the fear of inconvenience and effort leaves us open to seduction by other gods. We choose novelty rather than fidelity. Numb to the reality of sin and to our call to resist it, we sleep through the battles being played out around us between good and evil. We forget that we have been recruited as well as redeemed. We resolve to work against our sluggishness, Lord, and to place all our hope in your victory over evil. May we take to heart the words of the psalmist, “You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand has supported me; your help has made me great” (Ps 18:35).

Thanksgiving/praise. Your word, Lord, assures us that you are in control – you have the whole world in your hands. For this we thank and praise you. Where we see suffering, injustice and every manner of evil, when we are confronted by our own

sinfulness and inadequacy, we can take heart. Nothing lies beyond your influence; there is nothing that you cannot turn to our good. We thank you for the marvellous hope our faith gives to us. Even evil itself is taken up into your mysterious and totally effective plan. The great pain and suffering present in the world confront us with our smallness and powerlessness, but your word comforts us, challenging us not to be overcome, but to overcome. Inner demons, too, may threaten to overwhelm us, but we need not fear them, for we have faith in your power and mercy. We praise your mighty power and thank you for the assurance of your constant help, as we say, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Ps 46:1-2).

Intercession/petition. God our Father, help us to appreciate how radical is the invitation to newness of life which you extend to each of us. May we know that our choice for you will often be a choice against false gods. Be with us, as we profane the gods of this world (cf. Is 30:22). Strengthen us in our resolve not to bow to pride, fear, power, pleasure, greed, comfort and ambition. We pray for all who find the struggle of fidelity difficult. Lift up those who have fallen. Lead back those who have turned away. Renew those who feel tempted. Help all your people to discern your mighty hand at work even in the saddest and most desperate events of life. Let us never be overcome, but help each of us to grow steadily in trust, so that in every event we might pray, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. My God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps 18:2).

Contemplatio

In looking at *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio*, we have examined the heart of *lectio divina*. When we read a biblical text with understanding, reflect its significance for our own lives, and then pray that we might live the message of the text, we have already done our utmost to ensure that the text will not return empty, but accomplish what God sent it to do (cf. Is 55:11). Some presentations of *lectio divina* end when they have looked at these three stages, and there is certainly a logic to such an approach. Generally speaking, the purpose of a description of *lectio divina* to lead people to *do*, to pray the Scriptures in this way. The three stages,

reading, reflection and prayer, are *our effort* to make the message of Scripture our own, to let it sink deep within us and touch our lives. When we have engaged with a passage from the Bible through these three stages, there is not much more that we can do: the rest is God's work.

However, for just this reason, there is also a sense in which the work is only beginning when *lectio, meditatio* and *oratio* have been done. The work of transformation is ultimately God's work. It is his grace which changes the believer, and the diligence with which the Bible is approached is simply the way to be open to the working of God. For this reason, we can speak of a fourth stage in the process of *lectio divina*: the stage of *contemplatio*. The English word "contemplation" carries quite a lot of baggage with it, and is often misunderstood. We tend to think of contemplation as something done by contemplatives, which would be good reasoning, but for the fact that common usage tends to restrict the term "contemplative" to men and women living a monastic life. But contemplation is not the exclusive preserve of monks and mystics. In the context of *lectio divina*, it is the logical next step after we have done our part to understand and pray the word of God.

Our intellect will take us only so far. In prayer, imagination and feelings may take us a little further. But after a certain point, we can do nothing other than let go and let God. When the well of reflection runs dry and we have said all that we can say, it is time to wait on the Lord! This is the beginning of contemplation. Our natural reaction, once we appear to have exhausted the possibilities for prayer with a passage or idea from the Bible, is to call it a day. It is not easy to sit in silence when there is nothing going on – or at least nothing that we can sense. But we need to give God a chance to work within us.

The paradox of contemplation is that while it is God's work, and as such calls for us to remain passive and receptive, there is perhaps nothing that calls for greater commitment and effort on our part than simply remaining still in God's presence. If contemplation is relatively rare, that is not because it is terribly high-flown, but because it is terribly ordinary. Some people who remain faithful to prayer over a long period of time may have remarkable experiences in contemplation, but for the most part, contemplation is nothing more – and nothing less – than remaining quietly and humbly in God's presence, allowing him to work in whatever way he chooses.

In practice, every time *lectio divina* is done, a period of silence should be an integral part of the exercise. As often as not, this will be a time during which the believer struggles to achieve some inner stillness. It will not necessarily – nor even usually – be a time of sweetness and light, but a time during which the believer seeks to being open, in faith, to what the Lord now wishes to say, and to do within him or her. For this reason, we do not “do” *contemplatio* on a given passage of Scripture: it is, rather, our effort to let God “do.”

How, given that it is God’s work, do we “do” *contemplatio*? It follows from what we have seen that our part is to let God do the work. In practice, this involves whatever we can do to be still in his presence. In practice also, *contemplatio* is more difficult than the other stages of *lectio divina*. As we noted earlier, it is not easy to remain still. The senses long for stimulation and the mind is full of noise. Some so-called “meditation techniques” used in prayer might more properly be called “contemplation techniques,” since they are designed to help calm the mind – though is important to note that whereas in secular meditation, the calming of the mind can be an end in itself, in the context of Christian prayer, we calm our mind in order to be receptive to God.

In Revelation 3:20, we read: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” In *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio*, the Lord knocks on the door of the believer’s heart and mind. The effort made to give our attention to the Lord in *contemplatio* is equivalent to the believer’s inviting him in. All engagement with the word of the Lord has as its aim our transformation by the Lord of the word. *Contemplatio*, to the extent that it involves effort on the believer’s part, is consent to this transformation.⁶

Jan 12

LECTIO DIVINA AND HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD

⁶ If it is the effect of contemplation to *change* our understanding and our vision, to have us *transformed* by the Word rather than *conformed* to the world, then it follows that the net effect of *lectio divina* should be a new way of living and acting. It is for this reason that Pope Benedict XVI can write: “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.” *Verbum Domini*, 87. Strictly speaking, we need not consider *actio* to be step in the process of *lectio divina*: it is, rather, the renewal of life which is the entire purpose of *lectio divina*. As a parallel, consider the fact that the Eucharist, as a liturgical action, is completed by the final dismissal, but the Eucharist, if it is genuine worship, *must* issue in the kind of life that is implied by the dismissal: “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

It is possible to speak of two “mythologies” at work in a great deal of recent and contemporary scholarship, whether in the humanities in general, or in biblical studies in particular. The older of the two mythologies is the modernist, triumphalist, utopian one. This is a product of the enlightenment; it believes, *inter alia*, that human intelligence can look forward to a definitive triumph over ignorance of all kinds. In biblical studies, this mythology has been represented by the kind of historical positivism encountered in exaggerated applications of historical biblical criticism. Biblical scholarship that is excessively or one-sidedly historical tends to approach the biblical text solely as the outcome of historical process and the repository of historical knowledge. It believes that with the persistent application of the right historical tools, the text can yield more and more of its meaning, even to the point of exhaustiveness. In effect, the historical paradigm has tended to create a myth of *triumph over the text*. The other mythology, the more recent of the two, is post-modernist, defeatist and ultimately nihilist. Having seen the failure of modernist utopian projects (whether political or intellectual), it has concluded that reason itself is a human construct, rather than something anchored in objective reality. This second mythology is skeptical of all truth-claims, and radically skeptical of any claim to transcendent truth. In biblical studies, it is represented by the extreme subjectivism and historical and cultural relativism of some literary approaches to the Bible. An outcome of this second mythology can be a despair of finding any real, durable, dependable meaning in the biblical text, a despair which gives birth to the myth of the *triumph of the text* (i.e. the notion that “text” is all there is; that no text is ultimately referred to, anchored in, a reality beyond itself).

Proponents of *lectio divina* need to be cognizant of these two mythologies, of the grains of truth found in them, and of the pitfalls associated with them. A realistic spiritual reading of the Bible (i.e., a reading that is both *realistic* and *spiritual*) must be equipped to avoid both historical over-confidence and historical skepticism. *Lectio divina* can – and must – transcend the dichotomy between modernist presumption and post-modernist despair. In the face of the twin errors captured by two mythologies (“we can know everything”; “we can know nothing”), *lectio divina* insists that we can indeed know, but that our knowing is limited: “now we see in a glass darkly” (1Cor 13:12).

What is Historical Critical Method?

Historical critical biblical scholarship has served the Church well, and it continues to do so.⁷ It is essential not only to the academic life of the Church, but as a support for the pastoral and spiritual use of the Bible. But just what is “historical critical method”?⁸ Fitzmyer describes two preliminary steps in the method, both taken from classical philology: first, the consideration of *introductory questions*: the **authorship** of a text (in the case of a letter, the text is said to be “authentic” if actually written by the person to whom it is attributed); its **unity or integrity**; the **date and place of composition**; the **content**, analyzed according to structure and style; the literary form (is the writing a parable, a historical narrative, poetry, fiction, etc.); the **occasion and purpose** of the writing (i.e. the author’s intention in writing, and the situation of those for whom it was written); the **background** to the text (what ideas or modes of expression have influenced the writer... e.g. Assyrian, Babylonian or Egyptian, in the case of an OT writer; Palestinian, Hellenistic or Mediterranean, in the case of a NT writer).

The second preliminary step is **textual criticism**, which seeks to reconstruct the original text, from the variants (mostly of insignificant difference, but occasionally important) which have arisen during the course of the transmission of the text.

Along with these preliminary questions, historical critical scholars often engage in **literary criticism**, which tends to broaden the study and help it to see beyond strictly historical matters. The biblical texts are works of literature, and need to be understood as such. Very often, the transmission of raw historical data is simply not their primary purpose. Literary criticism acknowledges the fact that the authors used different literary genres, along with various rhetorical elements, designed to increase the persuasive power of the text.

Source criticism seeks to determine the prehistory of a biblical text, by

⁷ “We need to acknowledge the benefits that historical-critical exegesis and other recently-developed methods of textual analysis have brought to the life of the Church. For the Catholic understanding of sacred Scripture, attention to such methods is indispensable, linked as it is to the realism of the incarnation.” Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), #32.

⁸ For a very useful overview and assessment of historical biblical criticism (one which we will draw upon here), cf. Joseph Fitzmyer, “Historical Criticism: Its Role in Biblical Interpretation and Church Life.” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 244-259.

investigating what sources the biblical author has used in the composition of the text. In the Pentateuch, for example, apparent “seams” between different narratives, and the repetition of accounts in a different style, gave rise to the source theory known as the “Documentary Hypothesis.” In the study of the Synoptic Gospels, the study of similarities and differences between Mark, Matthew and Luke gave rise to the theory of a distinct written source known as Q, drawn upon (and occasionally modified) by Mt and Lk, but not used by Mk.

A further refinement of historical criticism is **form criticism**, which was first applied to the OT, but is better known in its application to the Gospels. Form criticism seeks to determine the distinct literary form of a given text (e.g., in the study of the Gospels, form criticism might ask whether a given text is a parable, a pronouncement story, a miracle story, etc.). This approach to the text enables one to “switch mental gears in reading the passages”⁹; it also leads to greater awareness of the original context (*Sitz im Leben*) of a given textual element.

Redaction criticism examines how the writers of the biblical text used (modified, edited, redacted) the materials at their disposal. Sensitivity to how the Gospel writers used their sources can help us to appreciate better their particular concerns and sensitivities, and the situation of the audience for which they wrote.

What all of the “criticisms” mentioned here have in common is their concern to “determine the meaning of the text as it was intended by the human author.”¹⁰ Thus, even some of the more “literary” strands of historical criticism can be placed under the rubric of historical methodology, since they serve a historical aim.¹¹ But why is historical critical method so often the object of criticism and suspicion? Criticism of the method is often based not so much on anything within the method itself, as on exaggerated or exclusivist claims made for it. Furthermore, to a great extent historical

⁹ Fitzmyer, “Historical Criticism,” 251. Most readers do form criticism automatically – e.g. in reading the newspaper, we bring a different set of expectations to an editorial than we do to a leading article; we know the difference between an obituary and a book review; we do not expect the shares listings to be as dependable as the weather forecast (or should that be *vice versa*...!?).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ This cannot be said of all “literary” methodologies. As we shall see, some literary approaches to the biblical text disavow (and disallow) any historical reconstruction, and focus exclusively on the present effect (or alleged effect) of the text on the reader(s).

critical scholarship arose as a protest against misuse of the Bible. While it is “bigger” than its origins, it has been influenced by some historical presuppositions which are not inherent in the method itself.¹²

*The Historical Origins of Historical Critical Method*¹³

Historical critical study of the Bible is the offspring of the clash between two fundamental (and fundamentally opposed) ways of looking at reality: the Augustinian and the Enlightenment worldviews.¹⁴ The differences between these clashing worldviews can be illustrated as follows:

Augustinian Worldview	Enlightenment Worldview
human nature is corrupted by the Fall	human nature is innocent
salvation requires the direct intervention of God to rescue humanity	the (achievable) purpose of human existence is a good life here on earth
humanity stands under the sovereignty of God’s free choice and election	humanity is capable of directing its own fate
people must place their trust in the Church and in the scriptures	the truth is obtained by pursuing critical knowledge and obtaining freedom from superstition and from oppressive institutions

Jewish scholar Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was a pioneering figure in the application of Enlightenment ideas to biblical studies. Spinoza was acutely aware of the dangers of institutional religion, his family having fled to the Netherlands from Portugal to escape officially-sanctioned Christian persecution of Jews. Once safe from persecution, they

¹² Contemporary hermeneutical scholarship would insist that there is more to the meaning of a text than the author originally intended. We can extend the same thinking to historical critical method. As an approach to the Bible, it can contribute “more” than was intended by its “authors,” such as Spinoza and Erasmus.

¹³ Cf. Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1995), especially pp. 28-48.

¹⁴ See the brief but excellent overview in Harrisville and Sundberg, 28-31. On the significance of the Enlightenment for spirituality, cf. Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, s.v. “Enlightenment.” Broadly speaking, the term refers to a range of developments in religious, cultural, political and scientific thinking. The Enlightenment is generally considered to have begun about the middle of the seventeenth century.

reverted back to the Jewish faith from which they had been forced to convert to Christianity. Spinoza was acutely aware of the dangers of dogmatic excess, and had a strong interest in promoting a rational approach to religion and faith. It is highly significant that his most influential work, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, is both the earliest theoretical defense of liberal democracy *and* the earliest extended application of “modern,” critical analysis to the Bible. In Spinoza, concern for politics and concern for biblical interpretation are intertwined: he is well acquainted with the political fallout of an uncritical, dogmatic faith, and seeks to separate politics from dogma. In Spinoza’s view, true religion must be under the control of reason, rather than blind dogma, and since the Bible is the authoritative source for the Christian religion, its understanding must be shaped by reason, by rational enquiry, rather than by blind adherence to dogma.

Thus, the original motivation of historical-critical study of the Bible was the freeing of society and politics from the destructive force of blind, a-critical religious passion. The disastrous political effects of religion were all-too-plainly to be seen in the wake of the wars of religion in the first part of the seventeenth century (the “Thirty Years War,” 1618-1648), and the time was ripe for an approach to faith that might neutralize religiously-motivated political conflict. In essence, the original purpose of the new exegesis was not spiritual or dogmatic, but political. Spinoza’s approach to the Bible placed the emphasis squarely on historical understanding rather than on religious or doctrinal claims.

Spinoza’s exegetical approach has four fundamental elements:

- The Bible is approached like any other text. There is no *a priori* deference shown to its alleged religious authority.
- Spinoza rejects the dogmatic tradition of exegesis, in favour of an understanding of the Bible that is independent of the concerns of the Church.
- The “truth” of scripture is not reserved to those who approach the Bible with unquestioning faith: it is a truth accessible to unaided human reason.
- This same truth is not accessible to the uneducated masses, who have proven to be vulnerable to manipulation by the ecclesial and political elite. The true meaning of scripture is accessible only to the intellectual classes, who will then be in a position to use scripture to enlighten culture.

Ultimately, Spinoza's legacy, the legacy of the earliest historical critical scholarship of the Bible, has been the conviction that the meaning of scripture can be discerned without religious commitment – biblical scholars approach the Bible as they would approach any other writing. The principal consequence of this rationalized and secularized approach to the Bible has been the shift of focus from study of the religious message of the Bible to theologically peripheral matters such as context and authorship.¹⁵ There was a degree of “safety” in this more rational approach: since it appealed to universal intellectual principles rather than dogmatic or denominational prejudices, it was less likely to foster sectarianism. However, this safety came with a heavy price: a studied disinterest in the religious meaning of the biblical text.

Difficulties with, and Criticism of, Historical Critical Method

As we shall see, historical critical method retains its importance for the intellectual and pastoral life of the Church. It has, however, been subject to sustained criticism in recent decades – including criticism by its proponents and supporters, such as Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. We can distinguish three broad factors which have called the hegemony of historical critical scholarship into question:

- A fundamental difficulty with historical critical biblical scholarship has been its lack of interest in the religious or spiritual dimension of the biblical text, and the overall spiritual aridity of its results.¹⁶ In recent decades, there has been a growing demand for spiritually productive and relevant interpretation of the Bible. This demand has been fostered by approaches to the text which are more

¹⁵ The interest in the historical context of the Bible that was stimulated by political concerns was strengthened by the invention and diffusion of the printing press (Johannes Gutenberg developed his “press” around 1440, and it is estimated that by 1500, there were up to 20 million printed books in circulation). As printed books came to supersede handwritten manuscripts, questions regarding the differences between handwritten manuscripts became more significant and more pressing, in the concern to discover what lay behind these differences, and to provide printed editions of the original, unmodified, unaltered text. Cf. Frances M. Young, “Ways of Reading the Bible: Can We Relativize the Historico-Critical Method and Rediscover a Biblical Spirituality?” *Doctrine and Life* (Dublin) November/December 2009, 8. Note, however, that the interest in textual criticism predated the invention of the printing press –cf. Ivan Ilich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (London, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 107.

¹⁶ Cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality and Scripture,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 62-67.

- directly concerned with the interaction of text and reader than the more strictly historical approaches which had dominated for over a century and a half.
- Recent developments in philosophy have led to the virtual collapse of the Enlightenment notion of “objectivity.” It has become clear that no reader, no scholar, approaches any text from a position of detached, presuppositionless objectivity. In recent times, the proponents of historical critical method have been consistently urged to recognize this, and to be aware of their own theological, philosophical and political presuppositions.¹⁷
 - Developments in the area of hermeneutical philosophy have led to a shift away from preoccupation with the intention of the author, towards greater focus on the text itself. It has been an axiom of recent hermeneutical philosophy that a text means *more* than its author had in mind when he or she wrote it (this characteristic of texts is referred to as the “surplus of meaning”).¹⁸ The shift of philosophical interest from author to text itself subsequently changed to a shift from text to reader, given the growing realization that texts simply have no meaning until they are encountered, received, interpreted by readers.¹⁹ The focus on what the reader brings to the text has laid to rest the idea that the text bears an independent, utterly objective message, independent of the readers and their context.

Luke Timothy Johnson offers four critiques of historical-critical method as it is widely practiced.²⁰ First, he insists that it is not so much a “method,” as a paradigm. By this, Johnson means that historical critical scholarship has not so much been interested in

¹⁷ “Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted – as it deserves to be – to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can be endlessly deferred.” David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.” *Theology Today* 37 (1980), 38.

¹⁸ “Modern literary criticism has challenged the notion that a text means only what its author intends it to mean far more radically than medieval exegetes ever dreamed of doing.” Steinmetz, *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ “Meaning is no longer understood to reside inertly in the text but to arise in the interaction of the reader with the text.” Schneiders, “Spirituality and Scripture,” 66. Cf. also Young, “Ways of Reading the Bible,” 20-21.

²⁰ L.T. Johnson and W. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Studies: A Constructive Conversation*, 14-15.

gleaning as much historical information as possible from the biblical text, but has, in effect, tended to reduce the Bible to a historical source (one telling effect of this reduction of Bible to history is that it has, in many cases, led to the discipline of New Testament studies being renamed “Christian Origins”). A second criticism is that historical critical method is “bankrupt.” This bankruptcy has two aspects: one the one hand, historical scholarship has in fact produced no agreed-upon historical reconstruction of ancient Israel, or of the mission and person of Jesus, or of the origins of Christianity; on the other hand, such scholarship has proven unable to make a real contribution to the life of faith (in the latter case, the metaphor of bankruptcy is particularly appropriate, if one considers that the funding for Biblical studies departments is made available precisely because of the enormous relevance of the Bible to faith and culture – no other comparably small body of literature receives anything like the same funding for research). Johnson’s third criticism is that the historical critical paradigm has been “peculiarly hegemonic”²¹ – it has tended to present itself as the arbiter of sound interpretation, seeing other approaches to Scripture as second rate. Furthermore, historical study has tended to set the “original,” or “historical” meaning as a limiting control on all other interpretations. Finally, Johnson correctly notes that historical critical scholarship is not theologically neutral, even if it tends to advertise itself as being just that. The method itself, and its practitioners, inevitably bring presuppositions to the text.

Johnson’s view is that with regard to biblical interpretation, historical study should be servant rather than master.²² He cautions against the pursuit of a pristine, original moment, in which the biblical message was pure and unadulterated,²³ and against the historical-critical paradigm’s “internal myth,” which is told in terms of a struggle for academic freedom from church control and interference. Finally, Johnson urges a move away from a purely historical interest to a concern for how the biblical text can speak today: “If Scripture is ever again to be a living source for theology, those who

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²² Johnson makes “an important distinction between learning history in order to better understand the compositions of the Bible and dismantling the compositions of the Bible in pursuit of a (usually chimerical) historical reconstruction.” *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ “A commitment to the notion of an original and pure good news, a moment of revelation so uniquely untouched by human influence that it is self-evidently divine, is... not a principle of history. It is simply a theological commitment.” *Ibid.*, 20.

practice theology must become less preoccupied with the world that produced the Scripture and learn again to live in the world that Scripture produces.”²⁴

The Continuing Need for Historical Critical Biblical Scholarship

Benedict XVI is very clear that the Church needs “a synthesis between an exegesis that operates with historical reason and an exegesis that is guided by faith.”²⁵ He makes it clear that the application of historical critical method to the interpretation of the Bible is an essential corollary of the incarnational reality of the Word of God: “If we believe that Christ is real history, and not myth, then the testimony concerning him has to be historically accessible as well.”²⁶ Benedict is explicit in stating that *lectio divina* needs historical critical scholarship. Where historical reality and spiritual message are not both kept in view, “a profound gulf is opened up between scientific exegesis and *lectio divina*.”²⁷

The answer to the excesses of – or excessive claims made for – historical critical

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119. In addition to Johnson’s critique of historical critical method, cf. the important and influential article by Joseph Ratzinger, “Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis.” *Origins*, 17 (1988), cover page, + pp. 595-601. Benedict is the leading defender of historical critical scholarship, but this article shows how acutely aware he also is of its limitations. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he could criticize the multiplicity of scholarly theories surrounding biblical interpretation as “a veritable fence with blocked access to the Bible for all the uninitiated.” (p. 595). On the myth of total objectivity in scholarship, Ratzinger writes: “Pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction. It is not the uninvolved who comes to knowledge; rather, interest itself is a requirement for the possibility of coming to know.” On the importance and scope of the issues at stake, he writes: “At its core, the debate about modern exegesis is not a dispute among historians: It is rather a philosophical debate... The exegetical problem is identical in the main with the struggle for the foundations of our time... It cannot simply retreat back to the Middle Ages or to the fathers and place them in blind opposition to the spirit of the present age. But neither can it renounce the insights of the great believers of the past and pretend that the history of thought seriously began only with Kant.” (p. 599). Ratzinger may have overstated matters in remarking that “Modern exegesis... completely relegated God to the incomprehensible, the other worldly and the inexpressible in order to be able to treat the biblical text itself as an entirely worldly reality according to natural scientific methods.” Not all modern exegesis fell into this trap, but the concern is nevertheless clear. As a final note on the pitfalls of the sheer complexity of biblical scholarship, cf. the following comment from Jared Wicks SJ, “Biblical Criticism Criticized,” *Gregorianum* 72 (1991) 117-128 : “Critical exegesis spawns scholarly controversy. But the conflict of interpretations can so engage minds that the habitable world and followable ethic of the one Bible all but evaporate.” (p. 124).

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 172.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 171. Cf. *Verbum Domini*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35(c). Benedict notes further: “where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture, such a theology no longer has a foundation.” *Ibid.*

biblical scholarship is *not* to “revert to a new form of biblical literalism.”²⁸ It is, rather, to acknowledge that the Bible is a “historical” book, and in the very obvious sense that it is not a-historical, but arose from temporal and cultural contexts which need to be understood if the Bible’s message is itself to be understood. While historical understanding does not exhaust the meaning of the text, it is essential if that meaning is to be correctly understood. And *lectio divina* must be based on the meaning of the text, rather than on speculative or imaginative meanderings.²⁹ Proponents of *lectio divina*, its teachers, guides and instructors, should not be shy of insisting on the importance of solid, historical scholarship as essential background to a prayerful approach to the Bible. While there is a place for a personal, imaginative approach to the scriptures, this too must be guided and anchored by an appreciation for historical reality: “To reject such a historical approach risks the danger not only of succumbing to an uninformed literalist reading of Scripture, but also of catering to one of the major delusions of the modern age: a self-referential reading in which the only meaning of a text is what it says to me: I alone make the final determination of meaning and significance.”³⁰

Jan 19

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS, - or - READING THE TEXT ARIGHT: WHAT IS “CORRECT” INTERPRETATION?

How can we know what constitutes a “correct” reading of a Biblical text? On what grounds, for example, might we presume to correct someone in a *lectio divina* group,

²⁸ Karl Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic*, 16.

²⁹ “*Since all Christians, including especially preachers and theologians, must be subject to the control of the written canonical text and not to spiritual or ideological speculations unrelated to the text, historical biblical criticism... becomes an indispensable tool.*” *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16. Cf. the following remarks from Sandra Schneiders, quoted in Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 197: “Fundamentalism, fanaticism, and socially dysfunctional literalism are vivid examples of biblical ‘spirituality’ that bypasses critical scholarship. This does not mean that everyone... must become a professional biblical scholar. At the same time, no one who is serious about biblical spirituality should be excused from the study requisite for a well-grounded understanding of biblical texts in their own historical-cultural contexts and according to their literary genres and theological categories.” These observations should not be taken as the conservative-bashing of a committed liberal, as the following remarks from Frances Young (“Ways of Reading the Bible,” 10) indicate: “The particular kind of literal fundamentalism that is around today in conservative Christianity is the child of modernity. It is not traditional interpretation. It is concerned with the factuality of the events behind the text, and shares this with so-called liberal scholars. All alike agree that the original meaning is the only valid meaning. It is, we might say, an entirely archaeological approach.”

who insists that their reading of a text has an objective value because it is *their* reading? These are important questions for those who are involved pastorally with the Bible, because teachers, guides, facilitators, etc. have a duty of pastoral care towards those who engage in *lectio divina*. “Anything goes” is not a Christian philosophy, and there is such a thing as a “counterfeit faith” (2Tim 3:8). But where is the boundary between legitimate personal reception of a biblical text, and the fact that “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation”? (1Pet 1:20). When Philip asked the Ethiopian official if he understood what he was reading in the prophet Isaiah, the Ethiopian replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31. The Greek verb here translated “guides” is *hodēgēsei*, which at its most literal and etymological, means “guides me along the way”). Promoters and teachers of *lectio divina* need to be able to offer guidance, and part of the challenge in being a guide is recognizing the pitfalls that may be encountered along the way.

The Bible is such an influential text that virtually every interest group wants “a piece of the action.” Biblical texts can be (and are, routinely) pressed into the service of various ideologies, some of which are simply antithetical to the biblical worldview and to biblical faith. A first step in guarding against the “infiltration” of such ideologies is simple recognition, and the way to recognize whether an ideology, or philosophy, or any other intellectual construct, is consistent with the biblical faith and worldview is to know what that faith and worldview are. As we shall see, there is an overall, internal coherence in the Bible. While there is most certainly diversity, it is a diversity within a broad, canonical

unity.³¹

The Bible has a fundamental “plot line,” and once the reader becomes acquainted with this, he or she is better equipped to spot alien “plot lines,” ones which contradict the overall thrust of the Bible.

Nobody, it seems, has a monopoly on misinterpretation. Faulty exegesis is common,³² and frankly ideological misuse of the Bible is encountered on the “left” and on the “right” of the religio-political spectrum. An example of tendentious exegesis of the “right” would be the decontextualized use of texts from the book of Joshua as a justification of war, or the promotion of a contemporary “holy war” ideology. Taken in isolation from the narrative structure of the Bible as a whole, divine approval of Israel’s slaughter of the inhabitants of the land (cf. Josh 6:21) could be cited in support of military campaigns which have nothing in common with the biblical context. Furthermore, other biblical texts could be adduced to make the opposite point, e.g. Mt 5:9, 39. In the face of political or ideological “Bible roulette,” how can we be sure of

³¹ Some scholarly literature places a heavy emphasis on the *diversity* within the Bible. In practice, this emphasis is often seen to be a “divide and conquer” strategy, in which the coherent witness of the Bible is called into question, so that the text loses its authority as a witness to uncomfortable truths, and its ability to coherently propose truths which are inimical to the intellectual commitments of the interpreter. Cf. the following comments from Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Stance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 147: “*Diversity in text* assumes that there are many different voices inscribed in the text. It also encompasses a diversity of approach.” Note how this “radically inclusive” approach to the Bible actually *silences the witness* of two millennia of believers! In point of fact, once the text is reduced to a collection of diverse, even conflicting, truths, it no longer stands united for any given truth, and various elements of the text can be adduced to support “truths” of various kinds. A radical insistence on diversity within the Bible means, finally, that “no final and finite determination of text is possible.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *ibid.* If the text is entirely indeterminate, that it has nothing of its own to say, and can be made to say precisely what its interpreter wants it to say. Textual meaning thus becomes a matter of dictatorship, rather than democracy, since it will be determined not by vote, but by whoever happens to be the most articulate and most influential.

³² Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220), wrote: “False exegesis injures truth just as much as a corrupt text” (quoted in Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic*, 5). Cf. also God’s protest to Jonah, in Geoffrey Bull’s rhyme: “When it happened, you went all to pieces. / You shouted me down, with your crude exegesis.” Quoted in Paul Murray OP, *A Journey With Jonah. The Spirituality of Bewilderment* (Dublin: Columba, 2002), 52.

what the Bible *actually* says?³³ Those who would use the book of Joshua to support war (and those who use Joshua's violence to support the notion that the Bible should be rejected, as a text which gives licence to violence) would do well to consider other texts from the Bible, such as those which describe the death of Jesus. In these texts, which are climactic texts in the Bible's overall narrative, we see that –

The violence perpetrated by Joshua (*yeshua* ') has been transformed by the violence committed by the Romans against God incarnate, Jesus (*yeshua* '); and, as a result, the violent death of Jesus on the cross brings to an end the violence found throughout the Old Testament. The Christian can no longer be the initiator of violence or an advocate of the preemptive use of force.³⁴

Towards the other end of the cultural spectrum is the kind of faulty exegesis that would substitute a “theology of acceptance” for the Bible's “theology of redemption.”³⁵ A theology of acceptance (this term is shorthand for the attitude that refuses to condemn any behavior, because God is love, and love [allegedly] does not condemn [it is “too nice”!]) has deeper roots in contemporary philosophical pluralism than in the Bible. In the latter, God's love does not mean “anything goes.” Rather, it means that sinful behavior *goes*! God's love does not leave his beloved to their own devices; rather, it calls, challenges, and purifies. To reduce the incarnation to “some vague expression of divine love that results in the inclusion of all”³⁶ is to press it into the service of a non-biblical, or alien worldview. A reliable hermeneutic, one which is able to deal with the biblical evidence as a whole, recognizes that the grace of Christ is “costly grace,” rather than

³³ Note that the members of a *lectio divina* group will probably not be scrutinizing the biblical text for a justification for a military campaign, but they may well be influenced by the kind of contemporary thinking that robs the Bible of its ability to speak clearly and challengingly of matters of such as authority, and morality (whether sexual or social). Note also that the underlying point here is not a directly political one (the rightness or wrongness of a given military campaign), but a hermeneutical one (the rightness or wrongness of a given appeal to biblical texts). For a more pointed critique of a contemporary political reference to scripture, cf. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Stance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 3. Also Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994). A careful reading of these scholars reveals that left-leaning critics of the right are not, themselves, immune to error!

³⁴ Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 6.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“cheap grace.”³⁷ In the face of exaggerations to the left, a fully adequate hermeneutic will recognize that the Bible does not baptize everything, but calls believers to conversion. It recognizes that humanity is set at rights, not by a message of universal niceness, but through the death and resurrection of Christ, in whom alone is discipleship rooted.

Both the “left” and the “right” tend to sell the biblical message short. A liberal (“left”) hermeneutic, which recoils at the idea of reading the book of Joshua in the ultimate (and canonical) light of the Christ-event can offer no corrective to a conservative (“right”) hermeneutic that would use Joshua to legitimate imperialistic violence today. Conversely, a right-leaning, political “pick-and-mix” hermeneutic has no way of correcting a left-leaning, “pick-and-mix” approach to issues of personal or interpersonal morality. An adequate hermeneutic will be rooted in the biblical canon, rather than in splinters of the canon. Let us now investigate what such a hermeneutic might look like.

A way of interpreting the Bible (i.e. a “hermeneutic”) which appeals to the canon as a whole is described by Karl Donfried as a “Trinitarian hermeneutic.” Such a hermeneutic begins by recognizing “that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. His life and ministry, his suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection are not only a word about God, they are the Word of God incarnate, the Word made flesh, the *humanation* of God.”³⁸ As Hugh of Saint Victor put the matter centuries earlier: “All divine Scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfillment in Christ.”

³⁹ From a Christian, Trinitarian, canonical perspective, any single text considered in isolation from the person, mission and truth of Christ risks being turned into an idol. The truth of scripture is not found in isolated texts or contexts, but in the broad context of the canon: “The word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. To attain it involves a progression and a process of understanding guided by the inner

³⁷ Cf. Dietrich Bohhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, especially the opening chapter, a prophetic masterpiece entitled “Costly Grace.”

³⁸ Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 8.

³⁹ Quoted in Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, # 39.

movement of the whole corpus.”⁴⁰ Donfried spells out the implications of keeping Christ as the interpretive key to scripture:

The continued presence of the risen Jesus through the Spirit in the community that worships him leads to the affirmation of a Trinitarian theology of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the most adequate manner in which to understand the revelation of God in creation, in the history of Israel, in Jesus, and in the church. Because ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb 13:8), a Trinitarian hermeneutic must of necessity be a hermeneutic of consistency and coherence.⁴¹

These insights are of great pastoral importance, since they offer a clear rationale with which to oppose subjectivity in the interpretation of isolated biblical texts. These insights *do not* tie the reader of the Bible to a set of pre-determined “meanings” of the text. The meaning of the Bible is never exhausted – new meanings are always waiting to be discovered. Every new context in the life of the Church (and of every believer) invites a new and fresh appropriation of the biblical text, and in the course of such appropriation, the discovery of radically new insights into the text remains possible. But the Trinitarian, or canonical, hermeneutic we have been considering guards against the kind of subjectivism which leads to a splintering of the text, and ensures fidelity, continuity and coherence.

Having attempted to describe an adequate hermeneutic, let us look briefly at some questionable interpretations of Biblical passages, in order to critique them in the light of a Trinitarian hermeneutic. In a discussion of how exclusivist claims made for Christ can be reconciled with the universality of God’s grace, John Barclay observes: “I think myself that Paul partially deconstructs his own Christological exclusivism by his pervasive appeal to the grace of God.”⁴² If there is an apparent contradiction (or a degree of tension) between the centrality and necessity of Christ and the universality of God’s saving designs, it is certainly not to be resolved by setting up a contradiction between the person of Christ and the grace of God! The contradiction (if there is one!) is resolved by

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, # 38. Cf. Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 33: “Picking and choosing texts in an isolated and noncontextual manner without reference to the Christ event is precluded by a Trinitarian hermeneutic because it is the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus that give meaning to the whole.”

⁴¹ Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 8.

⁴² John Barclay. “‘Neither Jew nor Greek’: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul. In M.G. Brett, ed., *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 197-214 (Leiden: Brill, 1996). The text quoted above is quoted in Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts*, 9 (Louville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

insisting on the universality of Christ, as the revelation of God's grace.

Barclay goes on to set up an element of contradiction between divine grace and the church, stating that Paul uses the radical notion of divine grace to "destabilize the church at least as much as those outside it." Barclay cites 1Corinthians in support of his idea that Paul seeks to destabilize the church, yet it is plain that Paul's purpose in that letter is to *strengthen* the church, by "destabilizing" the arrogance and intra-church exclusiveness of Corinthian Christians. The same letter makes it clear that for Paul, the church is not simply an organizational means-to-an-end, but the body of Christ, and this contradicts any notion that Paul sees the church in purely instrumental terms. It may well be that Barclay is falling prey to wooly thinking rather than to any set ideology, but his reflections are open to criticism in the light of a Christ-centred, Trinitarian hermeneutic.

Even the person of Christ, as revealed in the New Testament, can be misunderstood and pressed into the service of contemporary cultural biases, unless His particular characteristics and sayings are understood in the light of the paschal mystery as a whole. Christ as the quintessential "nice man," who healed, cured, affirmed and was utterly "inclusive" is at risk of being appropriated as the poster-child for wooly, post-modern individualism. But the full biblical picture does not allow us to forget that the incarnation is not "merely" about "love."⁴³ The incarnation is a manifestation of *divine* love, a love which is utterly righteous, a love which is redemptive, a love which seeks to redeem men and women by calling us to repentance and offering us the possibility of living lives that are free from sin. Is Christ inclusive? Of course! But not in the way that contemporary culture is inclusive. Christ's inclusivism means that everyone, without exception, is included in the call to repentance, the call to walk in newness of life. Applied to the person and actions of Christ, an aware, canonical, Trinitarian hermeneutic will remind us that "When such fundamental themes as holiness, obedience, and the last judgment are trumped by appeal to diluted and insipid references to love and grace, then the fundamental structure of the life in Christ as articulated by Paul is eradicated."⁴⁴

We will conclude this discussion by briefly considering the "exclusive

⁴³ Cf. Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 84.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 85. Cf. D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 502 (also p. 546).

inclusivity”⁴⁵ shown by Paul, in his earliest letter (hence, the earliest surviving Christian text), 1Thessalonians. At the very beginning of this letter, Paul reminds his audience that they have been *chosen* by God (1:4). God’s free choice of Israel is the very foundation of the covenant (cf., e.g., Deut 6:7), and from a Jewish perspective, the notion of *chosen gentiles* is an impossible oxymoron. Yet Paul insists that this is, in fact, the case. Here, we see the radical inclusiveness of Paul’s gospel. However, God’s sovereign *choice* has the effect of obliging his chosen people to *choose* (cf. Deut 30:15ff.). The fact that the gentiles are now among the chosen imposes the same choice upon them. Their election is not a soft, wooly affair, something “inclusive” in the contemporary, “PC” sense of that word. Rather, the election of the Thessalonian gentile Christians to whom Paul writes has entailed the rejection of a former way of life, a way of life that had given them a certain sense of belonging. Rejection of their former way of life has led to these “chosen” gentiles becoming marginal; they now live on the edges of the society and culture to which, a short time earlier, they had fully and uncritically belonged. Their acceptance of the word proclaimed by Paul has brought both joy and suffering (“you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” 1:6). Having *rejected* key elements of their earlier life (“you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” 1:9), the Thessalonians are now, themselves, *rejected by* those with whom they no longer walk and worship (“... you suffered the same things from your countrymen as [the Judean Christians] did from the Jews.” 2:14). Having been *called*, having *rejected* their former way of life, having *been rejected by* those who still follow that way of life, the Thessalonians are also required to live a life of *concrete holiness* that is compatible with their call. The inclusiveness preached by Paul thus shows itself to be a rather exclusive inclusiveness. Not for him any “diluted and insipid references to love and grace.”

Karl Donfried identifies three patterns of false, or “alien” hermeneutics of the Bible.⁴⁶ While the nomenclature may be somewhat high-flown, these are patterns can be seen in much contemporary commentary on the Bible (and not only academic commentary, but also some of the more “actualized” commentary intended for pastoral use). It is important that proponents and teachers of *lectio divina* be acquainted with the

⁴⁵ A term used by Joseph Ratzinger, and quoted in Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 7.

⁴⁶ Donfried, *ibid.*, 154-163.

pastoral pitfalls presented by these patterns of alien hermeneutics. The first such pattern identified by Donfried is the “hermeneutics of ambiguity.” The fundamental characteristic of this approach to biblical texts is vagueness, “wooliness,” a lack of clear focus. Such a hermeneutic may talk freely about the sacred, while stressing that God is so mysterious as to be virtually unknowable and indescribable. This can be the beginnings of a process which has the effect of “relegating God to the incomprehensible,”⁴⁷ and which does so precisely in order to avoid being confronted by clear demands made by God in scripture. It often becomes apparent that the vagueness of this approach is not incidental, but is, ironically, a vagueness with a clear purpose: avoidance, relativization, mitigation of the demands of scripture. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s comments: “The Bible is a democratizing book. It is a collection of writings spanning the G*d experience of many centuries, a book in which a rich plurality of ‘citizen’ voices argue with each other, complement each other, and keep alive the vision of divine justice, care, and well-being.”⁴⁸ While there is hardly anything in these comments that one can disagree with on strictly doctrinal grounds, their vagueness is a *de facto* foundation for the author’s war on the idea of “unequivocal meaning” in the biblical text.⁴⁹

An uncritical focus on love is a further, common element of the hermeneutics of ambiguity, but as Donfried notes, “Love deprived of its Christocentric focus, evolves into a theology of acceptance and ambiguity in which critical questions are no longer asked and moral demands are no longer necessary for the life of discipleship.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis.” *Origins* 11 (1988), 600.

⁴⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies*, 3. The characters G*d are not, alas, a typo. The author uses this substitution for “God” not in order to respect orthodox Jewish sensitivities, but in order to “avoid the conservative malestream association that the writing of G-d provokes for Jewish feminists.” Note that in this quotation, “malestream” is not a misspelling either! It is the author’s way of referring to (male-dominated) *mainstream* scholarship.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 16, where the author laments the kind of interpretation which asks readers to “*submit* themselves to the unequivocal meaning of the text that is established by biblical scholars or religious authorities.” The deep irony here is that Schüssler Fiorenza’s own text consistently (if tacitly) appeals to readers to submit to her academic authority and to the unequivocal hermeneutical stance she adopts.

⁵⁰ Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 155. Donfried states further (p. 156): “Such an alien hermeneutic of ambiguity sanctions acceptance without reservation, whereas a theology based on a Trinitarian hermeneutic achieves a far more nuanced and comprehensive understanding both of love as well as its implications for the ethical life in Christ.”

The second questionable approach outlined by Donfried is what he calls a “hermeneutic of dissonance.” This approach stresses that a text which was relevant when it was written by, say, Paul, need not be relevant for the church today. A note of discord, or dissonance, is thus set up between scripture and the context of the present day. A standard tactic here is to rule out texts containing unpalatable moral requirements as “culturally conditioned,” and therefore not relevant to today’s church. One exegetical ruse cited by Donfried is where Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians which is qualified by the words “I say, not the Lord” (1Cor 7:12 – cf. v. 10) is reduced to a mere opinion, carrying no imperative weight. This (alleged) status is then transferred to Romans 1:26-28 and 1Cor 6:9-11, texts in which Paul speaks of homosexuality.⁵¹ But as Donfried notes, “any claim toward liberation and freedom, claims that lay behind the hermeneutic of dissonance and expediency, must be tested against the freedom to which Christ calls his followers in discipleship.”⁵² Furthermore, it is wrong *a priori* to drive a wedge between the experience of the first Christians and contemporary Christian experience: “What the biblical text said to its first readers should be related to what the text says to me, because I am a Christian heir to the people of Israel and the people of the early church, and not independent of them.”⁵³

The third alien hermeneutics Donfried considers is what he dubs the “hermeneutics of antinomianism.” In essence, this interpretive strategy rests on a separation of faith from the moral life. Taking as a starting point the correct assertion that the Bible does not offer a comprehensive set of ethical prescriptions, the hermeneutic of antinomianism draws the unwarranted conclusion that in general, the Bible simply does not contain moral prescriptions. The Bible does, indeed, inform and guide, but it does not oblige! It is not morally binding! What is at issue here the question of *normativity*: is the Bible normative for human thinking and acting, or is human thinking normative for the interpretation of the Bible? “A Trinitarian hermeneutic will have to raise the challenge whether the will of God as revealed in the Christ event corrects and informs our reason, powers of observation, and definitions of love *or* whether human perceptions correct and

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 157.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159 (Here, Donfried quotes Raymond Brown).

inform our understanding of Scripture?”⁵⁴ It is the biblical witness that norms correct conduct, rather than contemporary behavioural trends norming the interpretation of the Bible. If there is a problem with “relevance,” then a Trinitarian, canonical hermeneutic will insist that it is not the Bible that needs to be made relevant, or somehow brought into coherence with contemporary culture; rather, it is behavior that needs to be made coherent with the biblical witness, it is human irrelevancy that needs to be exposed and corrected by the word. A Trinitarian hermeneutic (i.e. an interpretive strategy whose point of departure is the person of Christ as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel, and the One who invites believers to “walk in newness of life” Rom 6:4) will not select and favour biblical texts which happen to be coherent with contemporary ideologies. Instead, a Trinitarian hermeneutic will call into question any ideology, or cultural trend or emphasis, which is inconsistent with the worldview and demands of scripture.

It is above all in the broad cultural and intellectual current known as post-modernism that questionable hermeneutics are encountered.⁵⁵ At the heart of post-modernism is disillusionment with the Enlightenment’s optimism regarding human reason and human progress.⁵⁶ Post-modern thinkers are skeptical not only of the idea of transcendent truth; they are skeptical of the idea of truth in itself. Any claim to a broad and normative interpretation of culture is instantly suspect. A feature of much post-modernist writing is the attempt to “deconstruct” texts which make truth claims, to spot inconsistencies in the text, to set the text against itself.⁵⁷ The deconstructionist approach insists that claims to truth are nothing other than a way of exercising power over readers and hearers. The task of the reader is to deconstruct the truth claim, in a way that reveals the underlying power-agenda of the writer or speaker. The deconstructive reading thus

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁵ Cf. Sheldrake’s article, “Postmodernity,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*.

⁵⁶ Post-modernism, with its radical mistrust, arises from a complex of historical and intellectual developments, including: the rise of depth psychology, which calls into question the objectivity of human perception and judgment; the theory of evolution, which sees human nature as the result of a process rather than as a single, determined absolute reality; developments in quantum physics, which are taken to suggest an unknowability at the very heart of matter; Auschwitz and Hiroshima, which have called into question the possibility of a just and ordered human society.

⁵⁷ “If any text contradicts itself when you twist it hard enough, the deconstructionist maintains, any claim to truth will also contradict itself.” Marcus Honeysett, *Meltdown: Making Sense of a Culture in Crisis* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 42.

entails the application of a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which is basically a hermeneutical assumption that the writer is not sincere, and must be “found out.” Once the rhetorical strategy of the writer has been exposed, readers can then interpret the text on the basis, not of the writer’s concern, but on the basis of their own experience and interests: “A text thus becomes an ideological tool, but one that is fatally flawed because the group cannot distinguish its own perspectives from the perspectives of the text.”⁵⁸

Why consider these arcane philosophical matters in a course on *lectio divina*? Because post-modernism and deconstructive reading are extremely influential. They are the air breathed by countless people who do not know anything about postmodernism or deconstruction. “That is what my experience tells me” is a common interpretive strategy, a strategy that appeals to experience and feeling as the primary arbiters of truth. This is, however, a recent strategy, one that has arisen from identifiable cultural trends. Here, we have sought to identify some of those trends. The meaning of the biblical text does not flex and bend infinitely, according to whoever is reading it, their personal experiences and feelings. The Bible does not simply confirm *me*, affirm *me*: it tells me how God sees me. It does not deal simply with *my* immediate concerns: it presents the grand, unfolding plan of God’s action in history. It is not a smorgasbord of contingent truths from which I pick according to taste and circumstance: it contains fundamental truths about reality and the human condition. Its difficult and unattractive texts are not to be dismissed as irrelevant: they are a challenge to my own irrelevancies.

By way of a more detailed example, we conclude by considering an example of a post-modernist, deconstructive reading of a Pauline concept: the concept of imitation. In 1Thess 1:6, Paul notes that the Thessalonians became imitators of him. In Phil 3:17 and 1Cor 4:16 and 11:1, he explicitly invites his audiences to imitate him. In Gal 4:12, while the language of imitation is not used, Paul urges his readers, “Become as I am.” Commenting on Phil 3:17, Elizabeth Castelli⁵⁹ notes: “The imitation of Paul will allow the Philippian community access to the heavenly realm, which is governed by Christ; the hierarchy, Christ-Paul-Christians, is invoked as a justification of the call to unity under

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse on Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 96.

Paul's aegis... [such imitation] reinscribes Paul's privileged position within the hierarchy as the mediating figure through whom the community might gain access to salvation." What Castelli does here is radically deconstruct Paul's appeal for imitation, which she then reassembles as a means of ensuring a position of privilege. In addition, Castelli deconstructs Paul's relationship with the Philippian community: rather than being devoted to the welfare of the community (a devotion which shines through even a cursory reading of Philippians), Paul uses the community as a means of bolstering his ego and his pretensions to power.

Castelli's reading is wrong – and not because it is radical or uncomfortable, but because it is just not in keeping with the evidence of the letter. Paul writes from a Roman prison, where he is confronted by the possibility of martyrdom. He writes to a community from which he is far removed geographically. Even if they were fawningly and obsequiously obedient to everything Paul wrote in the letter, he would be unaware of their attitude, apart from the possibility of a rare communication. There is simply no room for the notion that Paul's appeals to imitation are a means of seeking personal aggrandizement. In fact, part and parcel of Paul's appeal for imitation is that his audience accept that their faith in Christ will result in the kind of vulnerability that Paul is himself, at the time of writing, experiencing (cf. Phil 1:27-30; 2:15).

Ironically, Castelli's deconstructive reading, her radical critique of Paul's appeal for imitation, is based on a completely *uncritical* reading of Michel Foucault, an influential French philosopher, who is one of the leading proponents of deconstructionism. Her "conclusion," that Paul's concern is the solidification of his position of power, is based not on exegesis, but on a prior assumption that the only meaningful constant in human relationships is *power*. This is "vintage" postmodernism: where there is no truth, there is nothing to persuade but power. Postmodernism's obsession with power flows directly from its rejection of the notion of truth.

Joseph Marchal applies the same "hermeneutic of suspicion" to Paul's appeal for imitation in Phil 3:7. According to Marchal, Paul's very conformity to Christ (as described in Phil 3:4-14) is a "close association" which has the "secondary effect of continuing to draw Paul upward in a hierarchy of models presented throughout the letter,"

and the end result of this pursuit is “a hierarchical differentiation benefitting Paul.”⁶⁰ Here, the deconstructive hermeneutic of suspicion has the effect of making Paul’s text say exactly the opposite of what Paul intended: it turns Paul’s Christ-centredness into self-centredness.

Is there a grain of truth in the postmodernist’s suspicion of authority? Certainly. History shows that appeals to authority can and have been made by the ignoble and the unscrupulous; the rooting of one’s own authority in divine authority can be a sinister means of bolstering one’s own power.⁶¹ But in the case of the biblical writings, these reservations are demonstrably false. They can pose as credible analyses only by taking specific texts and motifs out of their contexts. That said, suspicion of authority – including the authority of the Bible – is a phenomenon that the proponents and guides of *lectio divina* may have occasion to address.

Jan 26

Overview of *Verbum Domini*
(Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI, 2010)

Verbum Domini is a lengthy document, and in what follows, we will simply advert to significant points. This will not be a comprehensive study.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Marchal. *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 143.

⁶¹ “To appeal to one’s own exemplary subjection to a conveniently absent authority in order to legitimate the subjection of others is a strategy as ancient as it is suspect.” Stephen D. Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 110. Moore is, himself, an inveterate proponent of the hermeneutic of suspicion, for whom religious discourse is about “reaching into the psyche... to fashion acceptable thoughts and attitudes yielding acceptable behavior.” *Ibid.*, 108.

The document begins (# 6) on the most fundamental note possible, by noting the *Trinitarian* foundation of Scripture: “God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father eternally utters his Word in the Holy Spirit... In the light of the revelation made by God’s Word, the enigma of the human condition is definitively clarified.” (This insistence on the fundamental reality of Trinity at the heart of the word can be heard as an encouragement to keep the Trinity at the heart of interpretation... i.e. to pursue a “Trinitarian hermeneutic”).

The term “Word of God” has various meanings (# 7): it is (i) the person of Jesus, (ii) the *liber naturae*, (iii) the word spoken through salvation history (“he has spoken through the prophets”), (iv) the word preached by the Apostles in obedience to the Lord’s command, and finally (v) the Word is Scripture itself, the Old and New Testaments.

Interestingly, the document makes explicit reference to “private revelations,” in order to clarify that their role is not to complete Biblical revelation, but “to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.” (# 14). This is a rather telling acknowledgment of the kind of “anxious enthusiasm” to which some of the more devout believers can be especially vulnerable.

Regarding inspiration, ## 16 and 19 make it clear that inspiration is/was present not just when the scriptures were being written, but must be considered as part of the context in which the Bible is interpreted: “the theme of inspiration is clearly decisive for an adequate approach to the Scriptures and their correct interpretation, which for its part is to be done in the same Spirit in whom the sacred texts were written” (# 19).

23 stresses that the Word of God addresses *life*, and does so concretely: “it is decisive, from the pastoral standpoint, to present the word of God in its capacity to enter into dialogue with the everyday problems which people face... we need to make every effort to share the word of God as an openness to our problems, a response to our questions, a broadening of our values and the fulfillment of our aspirations.”

25-26 underline the centrality of *faith*: Paul preaches the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5, 16:26); sin is essentially disobedience to the word.

The document stresses the role of Mary (*Virgo Audiens*, # 99) as a model for the correct approach to the word of God... cf. ## 27-28, 87. Mary is the model of “obedient faith.” Scholars are encouraged to study “the relationship between *Mariology and the theology of the word*.” Mary’s *Magnificat* is a “portrait of her soul... woven from threads of Holy Scripture.” “Devout and loving attention to the figure of Mary as the model and archetype of the Church’s faith is of capital importance for bringing about in our day a concrete paradigm shift in the Church’s relation with the word, both in prayerful listening and in generous commitment to mission and proclamation.” Mary is presented as “the supreme synthesis and fulfillment” of the process of *lectio divina*, # 87.

The document is careful to stress that “*the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the church*.” (# 29). This point does not seek to impose a rule, so much as to respect the fact that the Scriptures came into being in the context of the believing community, and their real nature can be understood only when this context is respected. Approaches to scripture that prescind from the life of faith may “suggest interesting elements...” but they “inevitably prove merely preliminary.”

Cautions aside, historical critical scholarship remains a necessity: “For the Catholic understanding of sacred Scripture, attention to such methods is indispensable, linked as it is to the realism of the Incarnation.” (# 32). The document (# 47) calls for particular attention to chapter 12 of *Dei Verbum*, which insists, on the one hand, on the importance of literary and historical study, and on the other, on the importance of attention to unity of Scripture (the canon), Tradition, and the analogy of faith. These three principles from *Dei Verbum* are repeated in # 34 of *Verbum Domini*. Even as it exhorts scholars to critical study, the document stresses that the purpose of such study is that the Word might speak and be heard: cf. the comment in # 36: “the secularized hermeneutic of sacred Scripture is the product of reason’s attempt structurally to exclude any possibility that God might enter into our lives and speak to us in human words.”

In stressing the need to keep both historical and contemporary (discipleship) meaning of Scripture in view, *Verbum Domini* appears to attach greater weight to concern regarding a “secularized hermeneutic” (cf. the title of # 35: “The danger of dualism and a secularized hermeneutic”). If the work of exegesis confines itself to the historical level alone, “Scripture ends up being *a text belonging only to the past.*” (# 35). The outcome is that “a profound gulf is opened up between scientific exegesis and *lectio divina* (*ibid.*)... “It must also be said that this dichotomy can create confusion and a lack of stability in the intellectual formation of candidates for ecclesial ministries” (*ibid.*).

38-41 deal with the importance of a “canonical” approach to interpretation. # 38 is entitled “The need to transcend the ‘letter’.” # 38 speaks of “a process of understanding guided by the inner movement of the whole corpus.” # 39 once again stresses the insistence in *Dei Verbum* 12, that the internal unity of the Bible is “a decisive criterion for a correct hermeneutic of faith.” # 40 cautions against any form of Marcionism, i.e. any tendency “to set the Old Testament in opposition to the New.” That said, # 41 also resists the tendency to value the OT solely in terms of its relationship to the NT: “We must not forget that the Old Testament retains its own inherent value as revelation, as our Lord himself reaffirmed (cf. *Mk* 12:29-31).”

Holiness as *the* interpretation of Scripture: “The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation.” (# 48) “Holiness in the Church constitutes an interpretation of Scripture which cannot be overlooked” (# 49).

#123: “The sacramentality of the word can... be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of consecrated bread and wine.” Pastorally, this analogy should be approached with the right balance: For various reasons, believers may be excluded from full participation in the Eucharist (cf., at the most extreme, the penalty of excommunication), but there is nothing in Tradition which would exclude believers from the word.

57 deals with the Lectionary, and stresses that tensions between different readings on a given day be “approached in the light of canonical interpretation.” Theologically, this is sound, but as a homiletic principle, is it is questionable. It is not the task of the homily to force a thematic unity between readings which, while consistent when understood in the light of the canon as a whole, may otherwise be very diverse.

59 states that the homily “is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives.” Priests are exhorted “to approach the word with a docile and prayerful heart so that it may deeply penetrate [their] thoughts and feelings and bring about a new outlook...” (# 80).

For seminarians (# 82), scripture must be “the soul of their theological formation.” Their vocation is to be nurtured by *lectio divina*, by “nourishing the heart with the thoughts of God.” The document urges that seminarians be helped “to see *the relationship between biblical studies and scriptural prayer*,” and to foster a “*reciprocity between study and prayer* in their lives.”

83: The consecrated life is to be “a living ‘exegesis’ of God’s word.”

86-87 stress the importance of *lectio divina* (cf. also ## 35, 82, 83), using the “standard” fourfold approach of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. The document adds that “the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*action*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.” A caution expressed is that “one must *avoid the risk of an individualistic approach*, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word expressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community” (# 86).

93: “All of us recognize how much the light of Christ needs to illumine every area of human life: the family, schools, culture, work, leisure and the other aspects of social life.

It is not a matter of preaching a word of consolation, but rather a word which disrupts, which calls to conversion..." (Cf. Martin Luther's statement that the Word of God is our enemy – *adversarius noster*).

Shared/Group *lectio divina*

While *lectio divina* provides a sound approach to personal prayer, it is also ideal for shared or group prayer. Even having a text read aloud by another person in a group can help other participants to hear it in a new way. A shared commitment to studying a text and understanding its background and meaning can make the effort involved more beneficial... and more enjoyable. Alternatively, one individual in a group might undertake to study a particular passage or book, and share their findings with the group, as a springboard for shared *meditatio* and *oratio*.

When it comes to *meditatio*, the benefits of sharing are very obvious, and it can be quite amazing to hear how the word speaks so differently to different people. A period of common prayer or *oratio* can build up all who take part, and time allowed for silent *contemplatio* can keep everyone alert to the presence of the Lord, who assures his followers of his special action among people who come together to pray: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).

In planning group *lectio divina*, the most important decision is what biblical texts to use. Should one focus on the Sunday Lectionary? If so, should one try to consider each of the readings, along with the Gospel? Or should one begin with a specific biblical book, and read through it, piece by piece, over a more or less extended period of time? The answers to such questions will depend to some extent on the capacity of the group leader, and obviously a leader with a biblical background will be able to vary approaches. If a lectionary approach is taken, it may be worthwhile to consider taking a "whole-book" approach at some stage, in order to open up for participants the richness that can flow from a more detailed consideration of a biblical work in its entirety.

In practice, a group session of *lectio divina* could unfold as follows:

- Begin with a prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit, who has inspired the Scriptures, and who continues to work through them. In subsequent

sessions, once the group has found its feet, the opening prayer could be followed by a period of sharing on how people have tried to apply or live out in their daily lives the scripture which was the focus of the previous session;

- Read the chosen passage aloud, two or three times if it is not long (different readers!). The members of the group should know in advance what passage is being taken;
- Share any findings or insights that have been gained from study and reflection on the context of the reading;
- Share *meditatio*: what the text says to each member of the group in his or her life at present;
- Share a time of *oratio*: intercession, petition and praise (note that specific prayers of repentance are generally not appropriate in a group setting);
- Have a period of silence, for *contemplatio*.
- End the session with a set prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, the *shema*, Deut 6:4-7, a short Psalm.⁶²

Preparing a "*lectio divina* sheet" ... an example

Let us look at next Sunday's second reading – Sunday 4, Year A. 1Cor 1:26-31. In the Sunday Missal, this is the most used of all Paul's letters. It is the Second reading on Sundays 2-8 and 34 of year A, Sundays 2-6 of year B, and Sundays 2-8 of year C. It is thus found in concentrated amounts near the beginning of each of the liturgical years, just after Advent and Christmas. This is propitious! A new year

⁶² The total length of time may vary according to the needs and circumstances of the group, but in general an hour will be the minimum length of time necessary, and it is probably best not to exceed this by much. From a practical point of view, it is best not to leave sessions open-ended, but to have a fixed finishing time.

has just begun, and 1Cor bursts with practical advice for Christian living.

A good way to prepare a sheet for a *lectio divina* session is to construct it around the three questions which we looked at during the course: (i) What does the text say in itself? (ii) What does the text say to me/us? (iii) What does the text lead me/us to say? If we were looking at 1Cor for the first time, it would be helpful, when dealing with the first of these questions, to provide some background material on the letter, even if only very briefly, or in bullet form. After this initial step, still under the “rubric” of the first question, we would use this background material to illuminate what the passage under consideration is saying. Having done this, we are then in a position to consider the second and third questions. In attempting to provide an answer to the question, “What does the text say to me/us?” the best one can do is offer a few brief, tentative points, to stimulate reflection. Likewise, when suggesting an answer to the question, “What does the text lead me/us to say?” one might offer some broad themes for prayer, connected in some way to the issues discovered when looking at the first two questions. Alternatively, one might write some specific prayers – mindful, of course, that these cannot replace the personal/group praying of the members of the *lectio divina* group.

Read 1Cor 1:26-31

LECTIO: What does the text say in itself?

Unlike Romans, 1Cor is far from being a theological treatise. In this letter, Paul addresses a series of practical matters affecting the community in Corinth. Although he address quite a wide variety of issues, the letter is given a broad unity by its overall concern for the unity of the church (cf., e.g. 1:10; 3:1-3; 5:4-5; 6:1, 5-7; 8:9, 13; 11:33-34; 12:14). The impression of the letter’s overall unity is strengthened by the fact that virtually the entire content of the letter is framed by reference to the cross, in 1:10-2:9, and the resurrection, in chapter 15. The unity of the Christian community is rooted in Christ, in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection.⁶³

⁶³ It’s not politics, not planning, not discussion, not debate, not human insight or wisdom, but the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ that is the heart of the Church, the life-blood of all Christian community... all opinions to the contrary notwithstanding!

The structure of the letter is very simple, and even a casual reader could draw up a “contents page” of the various topics Paul deals with. In the first main section of the letter, the principal concern is division within the church, and its causes and solutions. The division was not caused by doctrinal disputes, but by notions of prestige, glory and wisdom that reflected the surrounding Greek culture. These notions gave rise to arrogance, rivalry and ambition, and Paul counters them by referring to the wisdom of the cross.

In the second section of the letter, Paul addresses marriage and celibacy; questions of worship, including the proper Christian view of aspects of idol worship, the relationship between men and women at worship, the Eucharist as a gathering of equals, and the significance of various spiritual gifts. The last main issue addressed is the resurrection.

The fundamental error which Paul seeks to correct in this letter is self-assertion, insisting on one’s own wisdom and one’s own rights, in a way that threatens the unity of the church. The letter reminds us that whatever differences there may be between the situation Paul addresses and our contemporary church context, human nature has remained the same! *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose!*

Now to the text of the reading itself. In human terms, the cross is madness! Paul stresses this fact in 1Cor 1:18-25, the passage immediately preceding the present reading. Yet, the cross is the very wisdom of God. For this reason, those who make too much of human wisdom while overlooking the wisdom of the cross actually go astray.

- a) The Corinthian church, it seems, was not made up predominantly of distinguished and influential people. Paul reminds his readers of this fact: “How many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word?” Paul sees that undue stress on self-opinionated wisdom is the way to disunity in the church. We have been saved, not by intelligence, efficiency or careful planning, but by the folly of the cross. God’s wisdom overturns human wisdom. Paul is anxious to dampen the excesses of the Corinthian “talking shop,” the endless discussions and arguments that generate more heat than light. Accordingly, Paul stresses that the human race has “nothing

- to boast about to God,” and he seeks to instill in the Corinthian faithful an attitude of service rather than self-assertion.⁶⁴
- b) The context of the present passage insists that we have been saved through the folly of the cross (cf. 1Cor 1:18). This message needs to be heard today, when there may be a temptation to re-create the Church in some idealized human image, on a model of efficiency. Just what *is* the place of the cross? How do we distinguish between a wrongful utopianism and a genuine desire to get things right? The cross should inform our discernment of such issues... the Church is based on the cross, not on successful and efficient management.
- c) Given that Paul uses the word “wisdom” (*sophia*) or “wise[person]” (*sophos*) no less than 18 times between 1:17 and 2:13 (three times in the present passage)⁶⁵, it could look to a casual reader that Paul was somehow obsessed with wisdom. In fact, it is the Corinthians who are obsessed with wisdom, and Paul is seeking to correct this obsession. As a good pastor, Paul is alert to what most interests and preoccupies his (former) congregation. “What are our obsessions?” can be a good starting point for pastoral engagement. Paul’s overall concern is to make the point that true, saving wisdom is found only in God.

MEDITATIO: What does the text say to me/us?

⁶⁴ Historically, Christianity was seen in certain quarters as a kind of “religion for losers.” Paul would not have entirely disagreed with this assessment! In his apologetic work *Contra Celsum* [3.44], Origen, quoting Celsus, writes: “[The Christians’] injunctions are like this. ‘Let no one wise, no one educated, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.’ By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.” What for the educated, cosmopolitan Celsus proved Christianity false (its appeal to the weak and insignificant of this world), for Paul proved it true (its appeal to divine rather than human wisdom for its origins, strength and continuation). How can the church today live by and convey the belief that God’s providence is more important than human efficiency, without either rationalizing sloppiness, or appearing to do so?

⁶⁵ In 1Cor as a whole, *sophia* is found 17 times; *sophos* 11.

- a) What might be amount of space occupied in my/our life by the kind of contentious self-assertion that Paul is trying to combat in the letter, and in this reading?
- b) Reflect on the balance between “getting things right,” and being tolerant of human weakness and failing when we encounter them in ourselves and in others.
- c) Where do I/we go for wisdom? What forms and informs our attitudes? Does any of our wisdom need to be reshaped, or even flatly contradicted, by the wisdom of God’s word? ⁶⁶

ORATIO: What does the text lead me/us to say?

- a) Psalm 50(51), the *Miserere*, might help us humbly and frankly to pray through our self-assertiveness.
- b) The parable of the weeds among the wheat (Mt 13:24-39), might help us to pray about the need for patience rather than perfectionism, and encourage us to strive to live as authentic disciples, but without the kind of unenlightened zeal that can be damaging. We are Christians, saved by Christ, not Pelagians, saved by our own efforts or our own wisdom.
- c) We approach many “sources of wisdom,” many oracles. We must approach Christ... cf. John 5:39-40.

FINIS... DEO GRATIAS ET GLORIA!

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LECTIO DIVINA
[Course no. **SP 1158, Angelicum – Rome, Italy**]

⁶⁶ A line of reflection springing from Paul’s concerns here might be the place (more accurately, the neglect) of wisdom in contemporary culture. We now have a spectrum ranging from knowledge, through information, to facts, which in turn are arrangements of data, bytes, noughts and zeros; but the concept of wisdom is not an element of contemporary intellectual currency. Wisdom deals with questions of meaning, with *why* and *where to*, whereas knowledge, as generally considered, deals with *what* and *how*. The expression “knowledge economy” reveals a parlous and impoverishing instrumentalising of knowledge: truth is not what makes us free (Jn 8:32), but what can make us rich.

- With reference to Psalm 1, illustrate the potential of the contribution that *lectio divina* can make to Christian discipleship.
- Discuss the importance of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* as a support and rationale for the practice of *lectio divina*.
- Discuss the significance of Origen (185-284) and Augustine (354-430) in the development of an approach to Scripture.
- Discuss the significance of European urban renewal from the 11th to 13th centuries, and the rise of Scholasticism, for the changing approach to Scripture.
- Describe the content and significance of the *Scala Claustralium* (Guigo II, d. 1188) for the practice of *lectio divina*.
- Describe the changing fortunes of Scripture in the life of the Church during the reformation and post-reformation periods.
- Define *lectio divina* as a process or approach to Scripture involving four identifiable steps or stages. Elaborate on the relationship between the steps.
- If *lectio* entails (or is at least rooted in) a critical (rather than a naïve) reading of the biblical text, *meditatio* can be said to entail a further shift, to a post-critically naïve reading. Discuss, with reference to some illustrative metaphors.
- Discuss the importance and potential pitfalls of historical-critical biblical scholarship for the practice of *lectio divina*.
- Discuss the challenges presented to the pastoral use of Scripture by the Postmodern context.

* Permission to post these notes on the webpage of the Order of Preachers was given in person by Prof. Hayden during his course which was offered at the *Angelicum* in Rome during the Fall-Winter term 2010-2011.