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Lectio Divina

Translated from French
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3. Lectio and mental prayer

a) Why “lectio and mental prayer”?

In a certain sense lectio and mental prayer are the two most important ways of prayer. They prolong, respectively, the two tables of Mass, that of the Word and that of the Eucharist. Lectio firstly nourishes the active part of our being, principally the intellect and the will; and mental prayer primarily nourishes the heart or spirit (the summit of the soul). A reflection on the bond between these two activities cannot be left aside here. And this reflection will help us to distinguish the specificity of each activity and so to more fully benefit from them.

There actually is some ambiguity in this area. Sometimes these two activities are mixed and this often makes both of them dull. The Word of God is at times inserted in mental prayer in a way that is not coherent with the spirit of mental prayer. But who would dare point out this incoherency? Could one really speak negatively of the Word of God? Of course not. At other times, mental prayer is inserted in the process of listening to God’s Word. Neither of these “deviations” are dangerous. But by maintaining a kind of haziness in each specific way, they both become dull: the word becomes meditation, reflection, analysis or simply petition, while mental prayer becomes either meditation or fixedness “in faith” but without assuring the supernatural contact with God¹⁷¹.

In the following table we can see a summary of the different attitudes one can have during lectio divina and mental prayer. Each table shows extreme attitude that can jeopardize the supernatural efficiency of each way of prayer.

Lectio divina

Rationalism	Correct	Fideism
reflection, analysis, meditation, appropriation of the text	Supernatural action in the soul	Prayer (faith) without listening; or a fundamentalist application
1	2	3

Mental prayer

Rationalism	Correct	Fideism
Reading, reflection	Supernatural action in the spirit	An attitude labelled “in faith” but without supernatural contact
4	5	6

The words “rationalism” and fideism” actually express two attitudes of the human being in relation to God: either the intellect (or the will) occupies the dominating position and tries to have the initiative in action, and this is rationalism – “with my intelligence I will resolve every problem”. Or, inversely, the intellect (or will) abdicates and abandons its activity (which is to respond to God’s

¹⁷¹ These questions concerning will be dealt with more deeply in another book.

initiative) and lets God do all the work; this is a kind of absenteeism under the disguise of good, a kind of abandonment to Providence in which we leave everything to God and take no responsibility for ourselves (like quietism).

The “correct” attitude, as shown in the tables, is that of collaboration and cooperation between man and God. But God comes first, he has the initiative, while man is second, and freely responds to his initiative. God’s action supposes man’s response. And they go forward hand in hand.

In fact the central point of this paragraph on the bond between lectio and mental prayer lies in this ambiguity. The tables show, in their own way, the different relations our active (the soul) and passive (spirit) parts can have with God. Four wrong attitudes are possible. And, nevertheless, all of these attitudes are labelled “prayer”.

b) lectio and mental prayer, the pillars of prayer, have their source in the Mass and are majestic roads leading to sanctification

There is a deep bond between lectio and mental prayer. They are the two fundamental pillars of spiritual life, just as the Word of God and the Eucharist are of the Mass. Let us not forget that the Mass is the condensation of all Christian prayer, its summit and its source.

The Mass contains essentially two tables, that of the Word and that of Eucharist. One is destined mainly to our conscious being, the soul, and the other mainly to the spirit, the depths, the roots of our being. Both are necessary, and the rapports directing the bond between lectio and mental prayer are the same as those directing the tie between the table of the Word and the Table of the Eucharist. One cannot build one’s life exclusively on mental prayer or on the Body and the Blood of the Lord. One needs to listen to His Word and put it into practice.

Only towards the “end” of spiritual life (full union), when life becomes simpler, may one live what Therese of the Child Jesus said: “keeping Jesus’ word is keeping him in our hearts”, or according to this statement of the Lord: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person” (Jn 6:56). Living in Him is a mystical content typical of mental prayer. But in this case, mental prayer is mainly supernatural.

c) Relationship between lectio and mental prayer

i. The inner relationship between lectio and mental prayer

Lectio the door to mental prayer

In any case, the ambiguity indicated above, inherited from the *devotio moderna*, continues to subsist. When doing mental prayer, one then ends up with a simple exercise of meditation and thus reduces the horizon of mental prayer, depriving it of its supernatural sap, without which it is nothing. Even the great writers of the twentieth century have not eradicated this ambiguity. The mystical dynamic of the first half of the past century¹⁷² did not deal with lectio. This movement tried to underline “particular help of the grace of God”, “the supernatural (contemplative) mental prayer”, “the infused contemplation”; but no one spoke about the lectio divina itself as a necessary and specific activity, independent from mental prayer but intimately connected and inseparable from it.

We need to recognise the inner relationship between lectio and mental prayer. Indeed, as we will see, this relationship really does exist and it is decisive to the point that one can say that *lectio is the*

¹⁷² Fr. Arintero, O.P., Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., Fr. Jerome de la Mère de Dieu, O.C.D., Fr. Marie-Eugène, O.C.D., Fr. Louis Guillet, O.C.D., Fr. Gabriel de Sainte Marie Madeleine, O.C.D., etc.

door of mental prayer. Let us consider this first in the Gospel and then in the writings of Teresa of Jesus, who is the “doctor of mental prayer”.

In the Gospel

Two Gospel verses illustrate the bond between lectio and mental prayer, between keeping the Word of God and experiencing His supernatural action: “It is not anyone who says to me: ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21); “Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and dwell in him” (Jn 14:23).

Let us note also that there is a risk, precisely of building one’s prayer life on empty contents, on a pseudo faith, on obscurity. This would be like saying: “Lord, Lord” while pretending to pray. Hesychasm¹⁷³ is also a form of prayer, a way of recollecting, and it is based on the repetition: “Lord, Lord” (The Prayer of Jesus). But is it enough to do mental prayer? The bond between lectio and mental prayer is a very tight one and it is vital, leading from cause to effect. Certain schools insist a great deal on the attitude of “obscure faith” during mental prayer, but they say nothing about the mediation of the Word of God. One may then simply remain at the state of obscurity, but this is not necessarily faith, or in any case not a living faith that truly receives God.

Before concluding, let us look at one more text: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). The Lord is at the door of my heart and he is knocking. He wants to enter, in a mystical way, through mental prayer, so that He may live and work in my depths. But there is a condition: He offers his Word to me and he wants it to take flesh in me. If I listen to him, if I put his Word into practice, if I open the door with my will, by choosing to put his Word into practice, then He will come and enter. In order to open the door of mental prayer, it is necessary to listen to God.

We can place the verses quoted above on a table:

Lectio divina	Mental prayer
“he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”	“will enter into the kingdom of Heaven” ¹⁷⁴
“he who keeps my words”	“we shall come to him and dwell in him” ¹⁷⁵
“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door”	“I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me” ¹⁷⁶

Mental prayer's door is to come out of ourselves by choosing to put into practice the Word of God. Mental prayer is the place where the Lord works in me directly. But it is necessary for Him to be able to enter into me. I must come out of myself in order to meet Him, to give myself to Him, to offer myself to Him, so that I may be at the reach of His action. Now, lectio is the surest way for me to go out of myself.

This question is vital and fundamental for Christian life. In fact the question of the relationship between lectio and mental prayer is linked to the question of the tie between morality and spirituality, virtues and spiritual life. Is it possible to be a spiritual person and to live a lax moral life?

¹⁷³ This is a spiritual movement of the East mainly amongst monks. It aimed to interiorise the life of God in us through the repetition of the “prayer of Jesus” (“Jesus, Son of God, Saviour, have mercy on the sinner I am”) or of a Bible verse.

¹⁷⁴ Mt 7:21.

¹⁷⁵ Jn 14:23.

¹⁷⁶ Rev 3,20

Obviously this is impossible. Morality rules and directs human action and behaviour. Lectio, which is of the same order, puts the human person into immediate contact with God who speaks to him. And lectio implies doing concrete acts, that allow the word of God to life in us.

In the writings of Saint Teresa of Jesus

The Way to Perfection is Saint Teresa of Jesus' main pedagogical work¹⁷⁷. In this sense the structure of the book, its method and its aim are for us of the greatest interest. Thanks to this work we will come to a better understanding of the bond between lectio and mental prayer. Of course, Teresa of Jesus never speaks about lectio¹⁷⁸ but she suggests the equivalent: the gift of self through the practice of the virtues and especially through three of them, i.e. humility, charity and detachment.

In fact, she decides to write this book at the request of her Sisters in the first reformed Carmel, Saint Joseph in Avila. Given her experience and her knowledge, her Sisters ask her to speak to them about mental prayer (*oracion*). And *The Way of Perfection* is her response. She therefore speaks about contemplation, which is the goal to be reached, the heart of mental prayer. But throughout almost the first half of the work she apparently talks about something quite different¹⁷⁹. This work therefore has two parts, the first one concerning the gift of self through the practice of the virtues, and the second on mental prayer¹⁸⁰. Why is there this transition? In fact she does this consciously. She wants us to understand that, since mental prayer is essentially a gift from God, a supernatural action of God in us, we need to prepare ourselves to receive it. Now, the first part of the book describes how the gift of self will operate this preparation, precisely through the practice of the three virtues. For it is a fact – and the entire work is directed by this law – that the more we give ourselves to God, the more He gives himself to us; the more we offer ourselves to Him, and the wider the door is opened for God who wants to give himself to us.

Saint Teresa explains this with the similitude of the game of chess, the action of “checkmate”. In order to capture the Lord, to obtain his grace (supernatural/infused contemplation), one needs to “force” him. And so we need to be very determined in giving ourselves to him. By practicing the three virtues in an almost heroic way, it is as if we were obliging him to give himself. And he gives in. Teresa sums this idea up in a condensed sentence: “You have asked me to tell you about the first steps in prayer; (...) you may be sure that anyone who cannot set out the pieces in a game of chess [by the practice of the three virtues: humility, fraternal love and detachment] will never be able to play well, and, if he does not know how to give check [through the total gift of self], he will not be able to bring about a checkmate [receive the Lord in supernatural contemplation]”¹⁸¹.

This shows us to which extent *lectio divina* – replaced in *The Way of perfection* by the determination of the gift of self and the practice of the three virtues – is the door to *mental prayer*. On one hand we give ourselves to God each day – through *lectio* and the determinations/virtues – and, on the other hand, God gives himself to us during *mental prayer*. Lectio is the door to mental prayer precisely because it calls for the gift of self: “when you have obtained [these virtues], you will also obtain the manna [contemplation]”¹⁸². Saint John of the Cross says this in his own way: “The

¹⁷⁷ *The Interior Castle* is her main doctrinal work.

¹⁷⁸ We will evoke with this question further on.

¹⁷⁹ “The aim of all my advice to you in this book is that we should surrender ourselves wholly to the Creator, place our will in His hands (...)” (*The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 55, 3). “I repeat that if you have this in view you must not build upon foundations of prayer and contemplation alone, for, unless you strive after the virtues and practise them, you will never grow to be more than dwarfs.” (*Interior Castle* VII,4,9)

¹⁸⁰ “We are preparing ourselves for the time, which will come very soon, when we shall find ourselves at the end of our journey and shall be drinking of living water from the fountain (...)” (*The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 55, 3).

¹⁸¹ *The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 24, 1. And also: “Unless we make a total surrender of our will to the Lord, and put ourselves in His hands so that He may do in all things what is best for us in accordance with His will, He will never allow us to drink of (the living water). This is the perfect contemplation of which you asked me to write to you” (*The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 55, 3).

¹⁸² *The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 15, 2.

soul that desires God to surrender himself to her entirely must surrender herself entirely to him without keeping anything for herself” (*Maxim* 179).

ii. Reciprocal stimulation of lectio and mental prayer

The practice of lectio and that of mental prayer fertilise one another. In fact, from an anthropological point of view, the two main areas of the human being that are directly nourished by each of these activities are respectively the soul (the conscious part) and the spirit (the super-conscious part); these two areas communicate with one another through a common substratum or support: the unity of the human person. Just as a tree has two parts, the human being also has two areas of activity: the soul, that is comparable to the visible part of the tree, and the spirit which, is like its deep and passive roots (the spirit is nourished directly by God himself in mental prayer). But this is one single indivisible tree, and life flows through it from one area into the other. And the tree is nourished through both parts, in different ways (water and sun); but one cannot survive without the other. However, each area has its specificity and its tissue. Mental prayer strengthens the will and frees it from many things that enslaved it. And lectio, through the daily gift of self that it calls for, opens the door for God in mental prayer so that he may give himself. Without lectio mental prayer would become the sterile waiting of a heart that in reality remains far from God.

Lectio is useful for mental prayer; The dangers of prayer life without lectio

Concerning our question about the bond between mental prayer and lectio, we can note the reactions of Saint John of the Cross. He points out the risk of having good thoughts while doing mental prayer and believing that they are of divine origin, “thinking that they have attained to a high degree of prayer and are receiving communications from God”¹⁸³. But in believing this “many persons are greatly deceived”! He gives them the following advice: “Let these persons learn to be intent upon nothing, except on grounding the *will* in humble love, working diligently, suffering and thus imitating the Son of God in His life and mortifications, for it is by this road that a man will come to all spiritual good, rather than by much inward reasoning” (*ibid.*, no. 9).

And toward the end of the same chapter Saint John gives the same kind of advice to those who practice mental prayer. We must “only be interested in directing [our] will, with fortitude, toward God, and [in carrying] out his law and holy counsels with perfection – for such is the wisdom of the saints – content with knowing the mysteries and truths in simplicity and verity with which the Church proposes them” (no. 12).

These indications of Saint John show us what is essential, and this coincides with lectio when it is correctly understood. Lectio is a search for God’s will so that it may be accomplished through his grace; it is not a quest for illumination or knowledge. The role of prayer (correctly practiced, of course) is to strengthen the *will*, which operates the virtues, as he puts it¹⁸⁴; the Holy Spirit moves the will to love but also to humility and reverence (no. 11). So, mental prayer has the double function of forming and informing the will (shaping it in the image of God). It influences lectio by helping, in a different way, the will to be docile to God’s will; it greatly enkindles the will (no. 12).

“The soul that desires God to surrender himself to her entirely must surrender herself entirely to him without keeping anything for herself” (*Maxim* 179).

Saint Thomas Aquinas, while talking about the usefulness of Scripture, indicates one particular use: “by removing the obstacles to contemplation, namely the errors which in the contemplation of divine things frequently beset those who are ignorant of the scriptures. Thus we read in the Conferences of the Fathers (Coll. x, 3) that the Abbot Serapion through simplicity fell into the error

¹⁸³ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 29, 8.

¹⁸⁴ “the operations or motions of those virtues” (no. 11).

of the Anthropomorphites, who thought that God had a human shape. Hence Gregory says (Moral. vi) that ‘some through seeking in contemplation more than they are able to grasp, fall away into perverse doctrines, and by failing to be the humble disciples of truth become the masters of error.’ Hence it is written (Eccles. 2:3): ‘I thought in my heart to withdraw my flesh from wine, that I might turn my mind to wisdom and might avoid folly.’”¹⁸⁵

Mental prayer is useful for lectio

Through lectio we seek the will of God each day. The practice therefore engenders an exercise of the virtues. In fact, by asking us to do something specific each day, the Lord himself exercises us. Now, the repetition of an exercise in a particular area creates a habit, or a virtue. Saint Teresa of Jesus will therefore take special care to invite and form those who do mental prayer to the exercise of the virtues as a solid base for their prayer life. But she often notes the benefits received in mental prayer that help to exercise these virtues better and to grow in their practice. Several times she indicates the liberating and beneficial influence of mental prayer. The Lord works in mental prayer and, in a hidden manner which is not less efficient, He makes the will docile and frees it from the slavery of sin, decorates it with the virtues, and gives it the fortitude and the agility necessary to walk in his footsteps. One intense visit of the Lord in mental prayer enriches the soul with all the virtues (cf. *The Way of perfection, Escorial* no. 71, 1). Of course this is not frequent, but when it happens the impact is very great. In short, the graces received through mental prayer work in the human being and help him to make great progress in the practice of lectio.

Let us consider this more closely. When speaking about one of the first degrees of supernatural prayer, the *prayer of quiet*, Saint Teresa evokes the effects of God’s grace which operates in a new way, and she compares it to the action of God in the preceding non supernatural degrees of prayer:

“This water of great blessings and favours that the Lord gives here *makes the virtues grow* incomparably more than in the previous degree of prayer, because the soul is now ascending above its misery and receiving a little knowledge of the delights of glory. I believe that this water *helps the virtues grow better* and also draws the soul much closer to *the true Virtue*, which is God, *the source of all the virtues*. His Majesty is beginning to communicate Himself to this soul, and He wants it to experience how He is doing this. When the soul comes to this point she loses *its craving for earthly things – and this is not surprising.*” (*The Life*, 14, 5).

And when she speaks about the prayer of union (the third manner of watering), she says:

“In sum, the virtues are now stronger than in the previous prayer of quiet. The soul cannot ignore them because it seems to have changed and does not know how this happened. She begins to perform great deeds by means of the fragrance the flowers (virtues) give, for the Lord wants them to bloom so that she may see that she possesses virtue although she is clearly aware that she could not have acquired them – nor is she able to do so – in many years, and also that the heavenly gardener gave them to her in that instant (of prayer).” (*The Life*, 17, 3).

Moreover, God enters in our depths with His light through mental prayer. He reveals our obscure areas in a way that is stronger and different from that of lectio. He shows us the hidden motifs of our actions. In this sense, mental prayer enlightens and completes lectio. This is actually one of the major effects of mental prayer, the one that makes us discover a new and hidden dimension of the truth, of our truth. Knowing oneself, one’s misery and nothingness, as well as knowing the mercy of God, which is tied to this, are the two inseparable poles of this deepening that mental prayer procures for lectio.

¹⁸⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIa-IIae q. 188, a. 5, on the contrary.

d) When lectio is followed by mental prayer

AS we said above, given that lectio is a supernatural operation, the light we receive sometimes recollects us to such an extent that, toward the end of lectio (which lasts approximately one hour), we feel the need to remain silently in God.

This is indeed a very good attitude. But the manner of prayer is quite different from here on: this is mental prayer. It is a more silent manner in which the Lord communicates Himself to us in the secret of our hearts, like at Mass after Communion. We feel the need to keep silent and to let the Lord touch us in our depths. This is good and commendable; but it is not lectio anymore. We should therefore be conscious of the difference and deliberately consecrate time to mental prayer.

The aim of this remark is simply to help us avoid confusing the two forms, because the Lord acts differently in each one. And both are just as necessary as the two tables of the Word and of the Eucharist at Mass. So, toward the end of lectio, if we have decided to spend time in mental prayer, let us do so. But we will no longer be doing lectio. In fact, it is easier to do mental prayer after lectio, for we are then already under the influence of the Light that our spirits have received and that unites us more strongly with the Lord.

e) Lectio and the Carmel

We would like to say a word here about the Carmel. This will be mainly of interest to those who belong to this spiritual family or practice mental prayer. The Carmel, especially after the Reform introduced by Saint Teresa of Jesus, accentuated mental prayer. But Saint Teresa herself, despite her ardent desire, did not easily have access to Scripture.

A bit of history

“The historians all recognise that Teresa of Avila was never able to read the Sacred Text in a partial or complete Bible, neither in Latin (which she did not know) nor even in Castilian. She could therefore only have access to the Holy Scriptures through her “prayer books(...)”¹⁸⁶. It seems that the Castilian translation of the Bible was taken out of circulation because of a certain excess. “The Index of Toledo (1551), then that of Valdes (1559) and finally that of Quiroga prohibited the publication and reading of the Bible in the vernacular”¹⁸⁷. This may be the reason why the Lord appeared to her and told her that he would be her living book: “When they prohibited the reading of many books in the vernacular, I felt that interdiction very much because reading some of them was an enjoyment for me, and I could no longer do so since only Latin editions were allowed. The Lord then said to me: ‘Don’t be sad, for I will give you a living book.’ I could not understand why this was said to me, since I had not yet experienced any visions. Afterward, just a few days later, I understood very clearly, because I received so much to think about and such recollection in the presence of what I saw, and the Lord showed so much love for me by teaching me in many ways, that I had little or almost no need for books. His Majesty had become a true book in which I saw the truths. Blessed be such a book that leaves what must be read and done so deeply imprinted that you cannot forget!” (*The Life* 26.5). The Lord appeared to her in 1559 (Index of Valdes).

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Renault, “Thérèse d'Avila, aux sources d'eau vive, Lecture du Nouveau Testament” (Paris: 1978), p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Emmanuel Renault, *ibid.*, p. 7.

when other spiritual books were withdrawn. We can conclude with the words of Fr. Jesus Castellano: “Aun teniendo que reconocer que el contacto de la Santa con la Palabra de Dios ha sido fragmentario, velado a veces por el latín y empobrecido por la falta de una visión global del mensaje bíblico, hay que reconocer el peso determinante que tiene en su formación espiritual y su magisterio.”¹⁸⁸

Generally speaking, during the period of the “devotio moderna”, spirituality found a form of prayer that replaced lectio divina. Mental prayer became a pious exercise independent from “spiritual reading”, i.e. which was no longer nourished mainly by the Bible; this lasted well into the 20th century and up to the beginning of the “return to Sacred Scripture”.¹⁸⁹

We also know that Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesús did not have access to all of the Scriptures in her Carmel in Lisieux. This was a common in the Carmels of women until the 1950s.

This explains why Saint Teresa of Jesus does not talk about the Scriptures in her writings or, more precisely, why she does not introduce them into her teaching on prayer. This silence leaves us unsatisfied. Today it is impossible to read her works without introducing this correction: What would she have taught if she had had access to the Bible? *The Way to Perfection* would certainly have been modified, in the sense that the element permitting to “checkmate” the Lord¹⁹⁰ would have been formulated differently since listening to the Lord, through Scripture, allows us to give ourselves to him by conforming our will to His. So, it is easy to find the three points of Saint Teresa of Jesus (humility, fraternal love and detachment that drive us to the gift of self) and much more.

Conversely, Scripture is very present in the works of Saint John of the Cross. He does not, of course, indicate a precise method for meditating it. But taking his inspiration from Guigo I the Carthusian and the patristic heritage of the entire medieval period, he says: “Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation”¹⁹¹. His writings manifest steady reading of Scripture as well as a deep understanding of it, which can only be fruits of that practice. It can however be deduced from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* book II chapters 19 to 22¹⁹². Fr. Louis Guillet, o.c.d., in his posthumous work, presented a beautiful interpretation of these four chapters; he considered in a new and deep way Saint John’s reading of the Bible¹⁹³. In fact the works of Jean Vilnet¹⁹⁴ and other authors left us unsatisfied.

When browsing through the first official treatise of the masculine Reform on prayer¹⁹⁵, we find that the author, Juan de Jesus-Maria (Aravalles) attributes an ordinary place to reading as did the monastic tradition. In this sense he did not innovate. He follows the same movement: 1. Preparation - 2. Reading - 3. Meditation - 4. contemplation - 5. Thanksgiving - 6. Petition - 7. Epilogue. But

¹⁸⁸ Jesus Castellano, “Espiritualidad Teresiana”, in “Introducción a la lectura de santa Teresa” (Madrid: 1978), pp. 126-7

¹⁸⁹ “Ma all’epoca della ‘devotio moderna’, la spiritualità trova una forma di preghiera nuova che si sostituisce alla lectio divina” (G.M. Picasso, in: “La preghiera...”, p. 755-69): “l’orazione mentale” diviene un esercizio di pietà indipendente da una “lettura spirituale”, che non si alimenta più principalmente nella Bibbia, sino a che nasce, nel sec. XX, un “ritorno alla Sacra Scrittura” (P. Visentin, in: “La preghiera ...”, p. 909-14).” (Jean LECLERCQ, art. “Lectio divina”, in: “Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione”, vol. 5 [Rome: 1973 sq.]

¹⁹⁰ We explained this expression above.

¹⁹¹ Saint John of the Cross, *Maxim 209 / Dichos 162*.

¹⁹² We would also like to indicate a chapter that is often forgotten which actually deals with the problem: *The Ascent* II, chapter 26.

¹⁹³ Louis Guillet, *Seigneur, augmente en nous la foi* (Saint-Foy, Quebec, 1994) pp. 89-154.

¹⁹⁴ Jean Vilnet, *Bible et mystique chez Saint Jean de la Croix* (Paris, 1949).

¹⁹⁵ Juan de Jesus-Maria (Aravalles), o.c.d., *Traité de l’oraison*, translated from Spanish by a Carmelite nun (Marseille, 1939).

nothing is said of the scriptural text! Is it really evident that the text to be read and meditated is that of the Scriptures? Juan de Jesus-Maria does not indicate this. Certainly, Saint Teresa of Jesus applied a similar method in the inner organization to be used in prayer. Actually a very rich and popular movement of spiritual life had developed in Spain and methods of prayer had crystallized¹⁹⁶. In her writings Saint Teresa of Jesus did not deal with the question of which books should be meditated¹⁹⁷. Nor can she speak about Scripture itself, for the reasons we have already mentioned. Nevertheless, the place Juan de Jesus-Maria attributes to contemplation in the whole process of prayer is very important and manifests the good beginnings of the Discalced Carmelites, even if the way of treating the question is classical. Let us also note that, in his work, he refers neither to Saint Teresa of Jesus nor to Saint John of the Cross, in any case not explicitly.

All in all, the absence of a treatise, at the time of the Reform of the Carmel, about Scripture as a means of sanctification can today be estimate a lacuna¹⁹⁸. Today each Christian can have a Bible (with introductions and notes), there is a tendency to meditate the readings of the Mass¹⁹⁹, and it is impossible to leave Scripture aside. But it is necessary to explain its rapport with prayer. Today we are the beneficiaries of a great grace and we should take advantage of it, and hope that the Bible will have its proper place in the Carmel.

To conclude this point, we may say that in the Carmelite Order no resolve has been made concerning a particular manner of meditating Scripture independently from mental prayer. Mental prayer does have its place in the daily schedule, while the reading of Scripture is left up to each religious. The Carmelite nuns may do this during their hour of spiritual reading or after Complines. A precise teaching on the meditation of the Word, equivalent to lectio as we have presented is, is not given; this is so because reading was included in the prayer times. The attachment Saint John of the Cross had for Scripture remains as an indication more than as a “norm” for life or as a “method”²⁰⁰.

f) Lectio and other spiritualities

The Carmelite form of mental prayer is not the only one. There are other schools in the Church that teach prayer, for example hesychasm or the “prayer of Jesus”. We also find other spiritualities outside the Church that present a form of meditation similar to mental prayer. And it is important to note that the prayer of the heart cannot be separated from the work of transformation in the rest of

¹⁹⁶ Francisco de Osuna, Bernardino de Laredo, Alonso de Madrid, Pedro de Alcantara, Luis de Grenada, Juan de Avila, and Bernabe de Palma were among the most famous and prolific authors.

¹⁹⁷ In Chapter 26 of *The Way to Perfection* she talks about the possibility of reading a book in Castilian. She says: “a good book”, and that is all. But she also states that she prefers the words of the Gospel: “I have always been fond of the words of the Gospels - uttered by the very lips of the Lord - and have found more recollection in them than in the most carefully planned books” (*The Way of Perfection, Escorial manuscript* 21, 4). She says nothing about this.

¹⁹⁸ In a Carmelite post concilairy document we find the following statement concerning the bond between lectio and mental prayer: “A certain time shall also be devoted to ‘lectio divina’.” Our Rule states, with perspicacity, that there is an intimate rapport between the meditation of the Lord’s Law and the continuous vigilance in prayer, and it asks us to preserve this good in our lives. Now, our Founders in a certain way expressed this precept of the Rule in their lives, esteeming it very highly (Saint Teresa of Jesus, *The Life* 35, 5; C 21, 4; *Conceptos*, prol. And c. 1; Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, prol.; *The Living Flame of Love*, prol.) and considering it as the supreme criterion of the truth of personal salvation (*The Lif* 25, 13). Saint Teresa was indeed persuaded of “all the harm that comes to the world from its not knowing the truths of Scripture in clarity and truth” (*The Life* 40, 1). Vatican II encourages us especially to observe this rule in our lives: “let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying.” (*Dei Verbum* 25; *ibid.* 2, 2, 8).

An interesting effort was made in this sense by Fr. Sam Anthony Morello, o.c.d., in an article published in Summer 1991 in an American journal: “Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer”; see also Fr. Filippo Bettati, o.c.d., and Fr. Armando Rosso, o.c.d., *Lectio divina al Carmelo* (Milano, 1999).

¹⁹⁹ In the French-speaking regions of the world the daily Missal, the liturgical calendars and monthly publications of the texts of the Mass have become very popular.

²⁰⁰ For more details, we will deal with the place of Scripture during prayer in another book.

our being. One cannot not nourish the heart and leave the intellect and the active will as they are. This is a restatement of what has been said above. But mental prayer alone is not sufficient. A moral structure is necessary. But what better moral structure could there be than to be in daily contact with the Word of God, Christ, who illumines our intellect and converts our will so that we may follow Him?

4. Lectio and the Psalms

One might think that in the process of lectio, as we have presented it, we neglect the psalms. In fact, the psalms are not situated outside of lectio. They are God's Word, and moreover each day a psalm is proposed to us. As we have indicated, the psalm may be taken as a third reading, and the Lord will then give us his light through three texts. We accentuated the two others, the first reading and the Gospel, because they elucidate (and especially the Gospel) to a much stronger degree what the Lord wishes to say to us. The Psalm, since it is a part of the Old Testament, often supposes a longer experience of lectio for the discernment of a word. But it would be erroneous to say that the psalms are excluded or forgotten in this process.

Those who meditate the psalms each day during the divine office are familiar with their deeper reading. It will therefore be easier for them to integrate the psalm of each day in lectio. Indeed the Book of psalms is the supreme prayer book of the Church. However, often the images the psalms contain repel us and so invite us to read the commentaries the Church Fathers made on them²⁰¹. These commentaries will make us familiar with the New Testament reading of the psalms. This is a way of discovering all the depth of the Old Testament, as well as the wisdom contained in the psalms, and it will be easier to savour and integrate them into lectio.

5. Lectio and other forms of prayer

Among the other forms of prayer found in Scripture and in Church Tradition, there are some that are *permanent: blessings (and adoration), petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise.*

- *Because God blesses the human heart, it can in return bless him who is the source of every blessing.*

- *Forgiveness, the quest for the Kingdom, and every true need are objects of the prayer of petition.*

- *Prayer of intercession consists in asking on behalf of another. It knows no boundaries and extends to one's enemies.*

- *Every joy and suffering, every event and need can become the matter for thanksgiving which, sharing in that of Christ, should fill one's whole life: "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18).*

- *Prayer of praise is entirely disinterested and rises to God, lauds him, and gives him glory for his own sake, quite beyond what he has done, but simply because HE IS.*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2645-2649)

²⁰¹ As an introduction one may read *Saint Augustin. Prier les Psaumes* (Paris: 1982) or A. Hamman, *Les Psaumes commentés par les Pères* (Paris: 1983) collection "Les Pères dans la Foi".

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