

A Letter From Father Enzo, Prior of Bose, to Brother John¹

Dearest John,

In the course of the liturgy you celebrate daily with your brothers and sisters in community or at least every Sunday in church, you hear Scripture readings and listen to a homily, a gift which explains and concretizes the texts which were read. In this way you stand before the Word of God, living and active and echoing within you. You stand before the very presence of the Lord, before Christ the Sower who is sowing the seed of his Word in you.

In the liturgy, the table is set with two kinds of food: Word and Eucharist are given to you for your journey, for your exodus from this world to the Father. They will nourish you and prevent you from getting weak as a member of God's people. Here you are given a taste of the pilgrim's bread and a taste for the One who feeds you, consoles you, keeps you strong and protects you from illness.

But since the liturgy is the central experience of the christian life, you will also want to renew it privately during the course of each day, in the solitude of your room. Or perhaps you will want to share this renewal with your brothers and sisters in community, those companions and guides God has given you.

You can be sure that you will not be able to understand and assimilate the Scriptures by relying on yourself alone and on your own scanty resources. There are certain conditions for a fruitful reading of Scripture, in which the Word of God brings about in you what you cannot bring about in yourself. These are just the preliminaries which allow your reading to be permeated with the spirit of faith in Christ, to be filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and to lead you to a contemplative vision of God the Father.

By reading in the Spirit, I mean praying the Bible, lectio divina.

1. LECTIO DIVINA IN THE EXPERIENCE OF ISRAEL AND OF THE CHURCH

In the First Covenant, ancient Israel prayed the Word and used the Word to pray. You can see these communal practices described in chapter 8 of Nehemiah. This method of explaining and praying the Word is the forerunner of lectio. It became the classic jewish model of prayer and

¹ BIANCHI, E., *Praying the Word, An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, 11th edition, Cistercian Pub, Massachusetts, 1992, pp. 84-99.

Christianity inherited it (cf. 2 Tm 3:14-16). The New Testament doesn't describe this method so much as make reference to it in several passages.

Generations of Christians continued praying this way, rarely falling into any form of non-biblical piety or using any prayer that did not recognize the absolute primacy of the Word in the Church's life of prayer. All the Church Fathers, in both East and West, practised this method of lectio divina and encouraged the faithful to do the same in their homes. As a result, they have left us their wonderful commentaries on Scripture, the fruit of their lectio.

And how can we skip over the monastic tradition? The monks made lectio divina the center of their lives both in the desert and in their communities. They called it the ascesis of the monk and his daily bread, for they knew that 'human beings cannot live by bread alone but by every word which comes from the mouth of God' (Dt 8:3 and Mt 4:4). At a certain point, they found it necessary to set this method down in writing to help the novices, who wanted to learn to take the Word into themselves through the Spirit who not only sanctifies but even divinizes them.

Origen proposed theia anágnosis to the Jewish rabbinic school. Saint Jerome punctuated his reading of Scripture with prayer. John Cassian gave an example of meditation. The Carthusian Guigo II called lectio divina the monks' 'Stairway to Paradise'. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux extolled Scripture as honey on the heart's palate. William of Saint Thierry, in his Golden Epistle and many other works, outlined the method of lectio divina and tried to encourage all Christians to pursue it as the golden way to dialogue and to the ineffable colloquy with God.

This method nourished the faith of whole generations right through the 1300s, and even then Saint Francis of Assisi practised it regularly. But in the High Middle Ages, the scholastic method began to turn lectio divina into lectures on Scripture by introducing the quaestio and the disputatio. During the centuries when lectio as prayer was eclipsed, the way was opened to the more psychological and introspective methods of the devotio moderna and the ignatian forms of meditation. Lectio divina was preserved as a method only in monasteries and among the Servants of Mary. But it was there, waiting to reappear when the Second Vatican Council recommended it in Dei Verbum 25: 'There is a need for all Christians to keep in constant contact with Scripture, using lectio divina . . . , the method of careful meditation, and let all remember that the reading of Scripture should be accompanied by prayer'.

Surely it was the Holy Spirit who willed that this way of listening to the Word and praying over it should not be lost over the centuries.

2. CHOOSING A PLACE FOR LECTIO DIVINA

When you want to immerse yourself in this prayerful reading, alone, where you can pray to your Father in secret (Mt 6:5-b) and maybe even reach contemplation.

Your own private room can be a place where you taste the presence of God and maintain your awareness of God. This place is also, in fact, the arena for your heart's struggle.

It is the desert where Jesus prayed and was tempted (Mk 1:1, 35; Mt 4:1-11). It is the place where God draws you close to speak to your heart and to fill you with divine gifts, transforming the arid chasms of your heart into lush valleys and doorways of hope (Hos 2:15). Then, in this solitary place you will find your spiritual youth renewed, you will find your own song to sing to your Lord, your Bridegroom. You will sense how much you belong to him alone and how you can live in peace with all persons and all creation (cf. Hos 2:18-25).

Your own room can be a sanctuary where God puts you to the test by the Word and humbles you. But as he does so, he educates, consoles, and nourishes you. You will surely feel the presence of the adversary, who will tempt you to turn away from being alone, who will make you feel the loneliness, who will distract you with nagging thoughts, who will try to lead you astray with myriad practical concerns. Don't lose heart. Don't give up. Instead, take on this demon in hand-to-hand combat, for the Lord is never far away and God will not just stand there to see how well you're fighting but will actually struggle for you and in you. If it is helpful, make use of an icon, a cross, a lighted candle, or a prayer stool. Never hesitate to use these things, but don't fall for fads and passing trends. Use them to remind you that you are not just studying the Bible or just reading words. You are praying: you are standing before God, ready to listen to God, ready to converse with God.

If the temptation to quit comes over you, resist it, even if it means sitting in silence and feeling nothing. Resist the temptation to give up if you want to meet God in personal prayer, because it takes time to become used to solitude and silence, and to detach from the whirlwind of things on your mind and the company of your friends.

3. A TIME OF SILENCE FOR GOD TO SPEAK

For your lectio divina try to choose a time of day and a place which will provide you with some external silence. This is the necessary condition for interior silence.

The Master is here and he is calling you (Jn 11 :28), and to hear his voice you must silence other voices. To listen to the Word you must

lower the volume of other words. There are some times of the day which are more likely to provide silence than others: the middle of the night, early in the morning, in the evening. You must consider your own daily work schedule, but whatever time you choose, make the choice once and stay faithful to it. You are not taking your prayer seriously if you go out to meet the Lord whenever there's an idle moment between tasks. Prayer isn't a filler for your empty moments. The Lord cannot be pigeon-holed. And don't even think of saying: 'I don't have time!' This excuse makes you an idolater. You have twenty-four hours at your disposal each and every day. If you get enslaved by your schedule, then that schedule is the god you worship!

Learn to make times of silence for yourself and let lectio create a rhythm in your day and in your life. You know that we are called to pray always, without growing weary (Lk 18:18; 1 Tm 5:17), but you also know that when we do this at specific times explicitly and visibly, the awareness of God will begin to sustain our whole day. Are you in love with God? Are you reaching out towards God? Well then, do not balk at consecrating to God a little of your time every day, «just as you set time aside daily for your wife or your husband, your relatives or your friends.

And don't forget to make the time you set aside for lectio adequate for this task. Don't try for a quick fix. You need time to calm down, to come to peace. A few minutes are not enough. For good lectio, according to the Fathers, you need at least an hour.

We hear so many words every day; we read so many! We have to be careful not to drown the Word with our own words. There is no end to talk in the world. It's everywhere. How can the Word speak in all this din? Doing lectio divina at a regular time every day gives you the opportunity to evaluate the world's words in the light of God's Word. The world speaks to us constantly, and both the quantity and quality of the world's words can scramble the sound of God's voice until it bears no fruit in us from day to day (cf. Mk 4:13-20). What sense does it make to read everything we can get our hands on, to feed ourselves on all the world's issues, to stuff ourselves with things that leave the heart divided and unfocused and then to pretend that we are living by the Word which comes from the mouth of God? We have to exercise some prudence and make some choices between words and the Word, or else we will end up as nothing but dilettantes, hearers who become paralyzed when our path leads us up against any real challenge.

4. A LARGE, GOOD HEART

God calls you to the silent solitude in which the two of you can converse in prayer. God wants to speak to your heart. The Bible speaks

of the heart as the center of the human person, the deepest and most authentic part of us, and as the seat of our faculty of understanding. And so, the principal organ used in lectio divina is the heart, because it is the nucleus in which each human person exists as a unique, unrepeatable mystery. Yet you have read of an uncircumcised heart (Dt 30:6; Rom 2:29), a heart of stone (Ez 11:19), a divided heart (Ps 119:13 and Jer 32:29), and a blind heart (Lam 3:65). All these expressions indicate a heart that is far from God, that has not been touched by faith. A believer's heart can become weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the concerns of this life (Lk 21:34). It can become sick, hardened and so blocked up that it can no longer recognize or understand the Lord's words and actions (Mk 6:52 and 8:17). It can become unstable, inconstant, and tend to lose or forget the Word (2 Pt 3:16; Lk 8:13). A heart can begin to draw its nourishment from what is merely human, from the latest ideologies or even from its own pride, which is the worst sin. So when you are getting ready to spend time listening to God, take your heart in your hands and raise it up toward God, so that God may make it a heart of flesh: whole, steady and cleansed. Only when your heart becomes like that of a little child can it receive God's gifts (Mk 10:15).

Only when the Lord has made your heart new can it be open and ready to listen. The Lord has promised to give a new heart to anyone who asks (Ez 18:31), to soften and mold our hearts until they fit the Word. But before we will raise them up, we must be convinced in the first place that these hearts of ours are hardened (Ps 119:36). Every day God cries out to us: 'If only you would listen to my voice! Harden not your hearts!' (Ps 95:8; Heb 3:7). The hardened heart claims that it is God's Word which is hard. Even believers do this: 'This is a hard word; who can accept it?' (Jn 6:60). Ask God to give you a big heart, a heart that can hear (*leb shomea*), as Solomon the wise once did (1 K 3:5).

When you sit down to do lectio divina, remember the parable in which the Lord is pictured as a sower in the act of sowing the Word. You are one of the four types of soil: either rocky, or a footpath open to everything that passes, or a patch of thorns, or good, rich soil. The Word must find this good, rich soil in you; then 'when you have heard the Word with a good, whole heart, (*en kardía kalé kai agathé*), you will keep it and produce fruit by faithful perseverance' (Lk 8:15).

When someone whose heart has been purified, focused and made whole celebrates lectio divina, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will come and make their dwelling place with that single-hearted person (Jn 14:23 and 15:4).

The human heart was made for the Word and the Word for the heart. The lyrics of Psalm 119:111 describe this marriage, in which God's Word becomes your own and your heart sings out the joy of belonging to God.

5. CALL UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Take the Bible in your hands and hold it in front of you with the same reverence you would give to the Body of Christ. Make an epiclesis, an invocation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit directs the Word's activity. The Spirit caused the Word to speak and write through the prophets and those who composed the wisdom literature, through Jesus, the apostles, and the evangelists. The Spirit gave the Word to the Church so that eventually it could find its way, whole and entire, to you.

The Word spoken by the power of the Holy Spirit is comprehensible only by the Spirit's guidance (*Dei Verbum* 12). Arrange everything in your life to open the way for the Spirit to come to you-Veni Creator Spiritus: Come, *Holy Spirit!*-in its full force, its dynamis, and to remove the veil from your eyes so that you may see the Lord (Ps 119:18; 2 Cor 3:12-16). The Spirit gives life! Only the letter kills! This is the same Spirit that came to Mary, overshadowing her with power and generating in her the Logos, the Word made flesh (Lk 1:34). This is the Spirit that came upon the apostles, bringing them to the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13). This Spirit will do the same for you: it will generate the Word in you and lead you to the fullness of truth. What we sometimes call 'spiritual reading' *lectio divina*-means reading in the *Holy Spirit* and with the *Holy Spirit* those things that were dictated by the Holy Spirit.

Wait for the Spirit's coming, even though it seems to tarry (Hab 2:3). Find secure hope in Jesus' words: 'If you, who are bad, know how to give your children good things, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Lk 11: 13).

You will hear his powerful Word within you: 'Ephphatha: Be opened!' (Mk 7:34). Then you will feel no longer alone, but in good company as you stand before the biblical text, like the Ethiopian who was reading Isaiah but did not understand it until Philip arrived and by the text brought into his silent heart the voice of the Holy Spirit he had received on Pentecost (Acts 8:26-38), or like the disciples themselves, who needed the Risen Lord to open their minds to the understanding of the Scriptures (Lk 24:45).

Without an epiclesis, *lectio divina* remains just a human effort, an intellectual activity. We could say that in it we 'learn knowledge' but not 'divine Wisdom'. Reading on one's own like this, without

discerning the Body of Christ in the Scriptures, is reading condemnation to ourselves (cf. 1 Cor 11.29).

So pray however you can, in whatever way the Lord enables you; or use these words for your prayer.

Our God, Father of light, you sent your Word, the Wisdom which comes from your mouth, into the world, that she might have dominion over all the peoples of the earth (Si 24:6-8). You willed that she make her dwelling place in Israel and that she make known your will through Moses, the prophets, and the psalmists (Lk 24:44), and speak to your people about the Messiah-Jesus-who was to come. Finally, you willed that he who is your only Son, that same Word and Wisdom eternally with you, become flesh and, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:35), pitch his tent among us (Jn 1: 1-14) Send upon me the Holy Spirit, that I may have a heart capable of listening (I K 3:5). May your Spirit stand before me in these holy Scriptures and generate the Word in me.

May your Spirit take away the veil from my eyes (2 Cor 3:12-16), lead me to the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13) and give me understanding and faithfulness.

I ask all this through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who is blessed forever and ever. Amen!

Above all, you can use Psalm 119 as an aid in this preparatory prayer, for it speaks about listening to the Word. This psalm has special meaning for lectio divina. It speaks between the dialogue of the Lover and the Beloved, the believer and the Lord!

6. READ!

Now open the Bible and read the text. Never open it at random. The Word of God deserves to be eaten whole, not nibbled at casually. Follow the cycle of readings in the lectionary with an open mind, accepting whatever passage the Church offers you. Or else read a book of the Bible from beginning to end, in a sequential reading, a lectio cursiva.

Following either the lectionary or the sequence of a biblical book is essential if a faithful, daily reading of texts is to have continuity. This will also help you avoid falling into a subjectivism which chooses only the passages which you like or which merely fill your emotional needs. This is an iron principle to which you must remain faithful.

You may choose a book or one of the readings from the daily lectionary because the Church recommends it for a particular liturgical season. Do not jump around from text to text: one passage, one episode, a few small verses are more than enough! And if you do your lectio

based on the Sunday readings, remember that the first reading (the First Testament) and the third reading (the Gospel) are parallels and you will benefit from praying over both together. The lectionary for feasts is a great gift, put together by people who are very spiritually astute. The daily lectionary is unfortunately more fragmented. If this causes you difficulty, it will be better for you to do a sequential reading of a single biblical book.

Read the text more than once. Read it many times and even out loud. If you have some knowledge of the original languages, Hebrew or Greek, read that version. Otherwise be content with a good translation.

Always try to use the Septuagint and Vulgate versions, if your educational level is up to it. These are favored translations, which the Church has venerated over the centuries.

If the passage you wish to pray over is so familiar to you that it repeats itself in your memory automatically or too fast, don't be afraid to resort to methods which will slow you down and help you to get beneath the surface connections. Write the text out. Make several copies! A friend of mine, a monk who is also an exegete of international repute, once told me in confidence that when he does lectio divina, he recopies the text again and again to see what differences may exist between what is in his memory and what is actually written. Don't read only with your eyes, but by careful attention try to print the text on your heart.

Also read the parallel passages indicated by the marginal notes. These are a great help, especially if you are using the Jerusalem Bible. Broaden the passage, stretch it by placing other passages which deal with the same message alongside the reading of the day. Remember, the Word interprets itself. 'Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture'. This is the great rabbinic and patristic criterion for lectio divina.

Let your reading become listening (audire), and let your listening become obeying (oboedire). Slow down! It is necessary to relax (vacare) with the readings, because they are made to be listened to. Then the Word will make itself heard! In the beginning was the Word, not the Book, as in Islam! God speaks in lectio. Our reading is our means of listening to God. 'Hear, O Israel!' - this is God's constant call. It resounds in the text and echoes from the text out towards you.

7. MEDITATE!

What does it mean, to meditate? This is not always easy to say. Certainly, it means to deepen the message you have read and to find out what God wants to communicate to you. You must do some work,

make some effort at attentive and deep reflection on the reading. In times past, when many Christians could learn the Scriptures only by memorizing them, reflection was actually made easier by repeating the words in their hearts. You too must dedicate yourself to reflecting on the readings, using contemporary methods in proportion to your intellectual gifts and education.

Although it is always true that we learn 'not by book learning but by the Spirit's presence, not knowledge, but insight, not just words on paper but love (*non eruditione sed anuntiatione, non scientia sed conscientia, non carta sed caritate*), this is not a slogan which justifies undisciplined or sporadic reading, or reading which ignores the rigors of serious biblical research and the many modern aids we have to help us understand the texts. Why not turn to the commentaries of the Church Fathers on the various books of Scripture? There are many good translations of them. A concordance is also a great help in the task of commenting on Scripture with Scripture. There are also modern exegetical studies and spiritual commentaries. You can evaluate the relative quality of many of these works for yourself. Some of them merely pretend to be serious spirituality, while in reality they contain nothing but personal opinions or eccentric interpretations which square with neither the texts nor tradition. Above all, avoid commentaries which advertise themselves as 'new applications of the Word', but really exploit the Word for their own purposes. Exercise some caution even with the spiritual commentaries you find in both the ferial and the festive lectionaries. Sometimes these interpretations of the texts are a little forced and reflect the personality and words of the writers more than they do the Word of God.

'Listening is not just passively receiving a given text. It also consists in the believer's effort to penetrate the text, to get to the bottom of the divine Word and find its unequivocal meaning. It is related to working diligently and tenaciously to apply the Word to one's life', says Origen.

All these exegetical, patristic and spiritual commentaries are certainly useful tools for meditation and for our personal growth in understanding. Yet in lectio divina what is important is that our effort be personal. It need not necessarily be private. All effort is more fruitful within the daily, lived experience of a community, a brotherhood or sisterhood, for it is in relationship to others that one truly becomes a disciple of the Word. In community, the Word is not just read together but lived and experienced together.

Personal effort will search out the spiritual point of the text. This is not the same as getting hooked on the phrase that inspires the greatest feelings of personal guilt. The central message is always best

synchronized with the mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection. Work at getting at that spiritual sense, the sense which is consistent in Scripture, the spiritual sense which is basic to both the Fathers and modern exegetes. In commenting on Scripture with Scripture, you can seek what the Lord is saying to you.

Don't expect to find only what you already know. What complacency! Don't expect necessarily to find something to please you or ease some situation in your life. This is giving in to subjectivism. Not all texts are completely understandable right away! Try a little humility and recognize that so far you've understood little or even nothing at all, and you'll come to a greater understanding later on. This is another form of obedience: if you admit that you still need to be milk-fed, you won't expect to be nibbling on solid food (cf. 1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12).

When you get to the point of understanding a little of it, chew over the words in your heart (the rumination recommended by the Fathers). Then apply them to yourself and to your live-situation, without getting lost in psychologism or introspection, and without getting locked into an examination of conscience. God is speaking to you. Think about God, not about yourself! Don't let yourself get paralyzed by a scrupulous analysis of your own shortcomings and limitations while the divine Word is demanding your attention.

The Word will discern the state of your heart, judge you and convict you of sin, but remember that God is greater than your conscience (cf. 1 Jn 3:20). When God wounds your heart this way, he always does it with truth and mercy.

Instead of thinking about yourself, stand in awe of the One who is speaking to your heart and of the food which is being offered to you—sometimes a lot, sometimes a little, but always good nourishment. Be amazed that you are welcoming the Word into your heart here and now, without having to travel to the heavens or beyond the seas to find it (cf. Dt 30:11-14). Let yourself be drawn by the Word and transformed into the image of the Son of God, without your even knowing how. The Word which you have received is your life, your joy, your peace and your salvation. God is speaking to you. You need to listen in amazement. Like the Hebrews who witnessed the great works of the Exodus, and like Mary who sang: 'God has done great things in me, holy is his name' (Lk 1:49), you too should be marvelling! God is revealing himself to you. The face of your Beloved, the unspeakable Name of God. Open your heart in welcome! This is the time for faith! God is teaching you directly to model your life on the life of the Son. God is giving himself to you in the Word. Welcome God as you would embrace and hold the infant Christ. God is giving you a holy kiss,

being wed to you as Lover and Beloved. Let your heart celebrate the One who is Love, stronger than death, stronger than sheol, stronger than your sins. God is giving birth to you as logos, as word, as child. Meditation, rumination should lead you to this: to become a dwelling-place for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Your heart is a sanctuary. Your whole person is a temple. This is the theandric reality: the mystery of the divine in the human.

8. PRAY!

Now speak to God. Respond to God's invitations: to the calls, the inspirations, the messages God has given you by the Holy Spirit's power in the Word. Do you see that you have been welcomed into the very heart of the Trinity, into the eternal conversation among Father, Son, and Spirit? Why stop at being an onlooker? Enter the conversation and speak as a friend speaks to a friend (Dt 34:10). You need not attempt any longer to conform your thoughts to God's. Instead, simply seek God's presence. Meditation was only for the sake of this moment of prayer. Now you've arrived! Don't engage in spiritual gossip with God, but instead speak with openness and confidence and without fear. Don't be self-conscious. Rather, be wholly conscious of the face of God which shines forth from the text as Christ, the Lord. Free up your creative impulses: your sensitivities, feelings and emotions, and direct them into this relationship with the Lord. I cannot give you directions here, because each person is unique and knows best how to meet his or her God. Besides, one can't even speak satisfactorily about this experience for oneself, much less for another. What can one say about the fire when one is immersed in it? What can one say about the prayer of contemplation which comes at the end of lectio divina except to say that it is a glowing log which never burns out and that it inflames the believer's heart with love for the Lord?

The art of experiencing the Indescribable, the divine Presence! Lectio divina wants to lead you there, where you can contemplate God as God's own beloved, where you can repeat the words of God's own beloved in joy, in wonder and in self-forgetfulness. This path is not always easy and straight. Don't think that you can just run along its way. Passionate love alternates with fear, gratitude with a complete absence of feeling, enthusiasm with bodily weariness, words which speak with words which are mute, God's silence with your silence: all these experiences are present and serve as the stock in trade of your lectio divina, day after day.

What is important is staying faithful to our daily encounter with the Lord. Sooner or later the Word will open a passageway into our hearts and clear away all the obstacles we set up, obstacles which are always present in any journey of faith and prayer. Only the person who is faithful to the Word knows God's faithfulness: that God will never fail to be available and to speak to our hearts. The faithful person knows that there are times when the Word of God seems absent (1 S 3:1), but that these times are followed by an epiphany. The Word will shine forth. The faithful person knows that these difficult, uncomfortable, dry times are a grace insofar as they remind us of the distance between our experience of God and God as God is.

Thank God for the gift of the Word and for the people who proclaim and explain it to you. Intercede for all your sisters and brothers as the text calls them to your mind, with all their virtues and failings. Try to unite being fed with the Word with your Eucharistic food.

Store up what you have seen, heard and tasted in lectio. Go over it in your heart and in your memory as you go along in the company of others, and seek humbly to share with them the peace and blessing you've received. You will also find a way to bring God's Word into social, political and professional situations; the daily reality of life.

God needs you as an instrument in the world to help create new heavens and a new earth—a future day which awaits you when, in dying, you will see God face to face. Then you will see how you have been and still are a living letter written by Christ, a lectio divina for your sisters and brothers, and how you really are the very Son of God.

Yours,
Enzo