

## Interpreting the Scriptures to Build Harmony and Peace: The Hermeneutic of John Calvin and *Lectio Divina*

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*This article explores how the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century read and interpreted the Scriptures in regard to building peace and harmony. Given that the Reformation is a vast movement, part one presents one of its preeminent representatives: John Calvin, the reformer of the city of Geneva. The second part will say something about the way certain Protestants meditate on the Sacred Scriptures with the aim to create peace and harmony by using lectio divina, a method of interest to Buddhists. The third part relates an experience of reading the gospels that greatly influenced the author and has become, in some manner, the axis of his spiritual life.*

**R**eading Scriptures in the Perspective of Peace and Unity According to John Calvin  
John Calvin was born in 1509 and died in Geneva in 1563. He had a deep influence not only in Geneva, where he lived for more than 25 years, but his teaching had, and continues to have an international radiance.

### *The Topic of Peace and Harmony Are Essential to Calvin's Thinking*

For Calvin, a Christian is someone who has to seek peace and harmony within himself, in his family, in the church, and in the life of the city. Why is this? Because Jesus Christ, his Master, was a man of peace. One must imitate him: "If we want to prove our obedience to our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, then we must bind ourselves in a holy harmony (*pia conspiratio*) and cultivate peace among ourselves."<sup>1</sup> He also writes that we must make every effort to "promote holy unity" and "nourish a healthy consensus" (*consensus*, in Latin).<sup>2</sup> The responsibility of everyone is to "maintain a fraternal accord with all the children of God" and to "watch over the unity of spirit through the bond of peace."<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Preface to the Catechism and the Confession of Faith*, Opera Calvini (OC) 5, 321. Lukas Visser, *Pia Conspiratio: Calvin on the Unity of Christ's Church* (Genève, John Knox Series 12, 2000), p. 15, underlines the meaning of *conspiratio*: "The literal translation of *conspiratio* is 'breathing together.' The term is normally used to designate 'accord' or 'harmony.' For Calvin, there is no doubt a deeper meaning: the Christian community shares in the same Spirit. Calvin uses the term possibly as the equivalent of the Greek *sympnoia* which occurs several times in the writings of Basil the Great."

2. OC 15, 333. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (IC) IV, 1, 1.

3. IC IV, 1, 3, 16. He also states that the Christian's calling is to "maintain the unity of faith," to "keep the bond of unity" which must be unassailable, so that "the saints remain among themselves" (IV, 1, 5), to "maintain the unity of the Universal Church

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Therefore the two key terms—peace and harmony—appear in the same text of Calvin. This clearly shows that peace and harmony are a universal quest and common to all times. For him, a Christian who does not seek them with all his or her heart and strength is not a true disciple of Jesus.

### *There Is No Peace or Harmony without Truth*

But how can we create peace and harmony? For Calvin, the way was clear: through truth! There is no peace and harmony without truth. According to him, truth is found in the Source, which, for us Christians, is God: “when heresies and schisms arise, it is because men return not to the origin of the truth, because they seek not the head, because they keep not the doctrine of the heavenly Master.”<sup>4</sup>

For Calvin, there is no peace or unity outside of truth. And this truth is revealed in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures. If, in order to maintain peace, we make a decision that goes against the Word of God, this is but “an impudent trick.”<sup>5</sup> In his comment on the *Letter to the Romans*, Calvin used this concise formula: “Unity that lies in truth.”<sup>6</sup> And in a letter to the Swiss Reformer of Zurich, Bullinger, he states that the bond of unity cannot be found in anything other than in the pure truth of God.<sup>7</sup>

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which the devilish spirits have always tried to destroy” (IV, I, 9), to be “in charitable conjunction” (IV, 2, 5), etc.

4. IC IV, 2, 6. In this passage he refers to the treatise of Saint Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, V.

5. “It is indeed an impious and sacrilegious attempt to divide those who agree in the truth of Christ: but yet it is a shameful sophistry to defend, under the pretext of peace and unity, a union in lies and impious doctrines.” *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 16, 17* (1539). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38.xx.ii.html>

6. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 16, 17* (1539) in *Commentaires de J. Calvin sur le NT*, Tome IV (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1978), p. 354.

7. OC 11, 29.

### *To Know God We Need to Read the Scriptures*

Scriptures are in effect “the eyeglasses through which we get knowledge of God.” The “silent teachers,” the works of God in creation give us but a vague knowledge of God. To allow us to see Him clearly, God pronounced some Words that come to us through the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> To begin to get to know God, we have to be at the school of the Scriptures. The image of the school is very important in Calvin: it places the emphasis on their serious study.<sup>9</sup> Calvin says when he preaches: “I must be a student, the Word that comes forth from my mouth must serve me as much as you, otherwise woe to me.”<sup>10</sup>

For Calvin, Mary is our model in listening to God’s Word; she, the mother of Jesus, whose students were the apostles themselves: “Thus, on the example of our Lady, we learn to listen so well to what is taught to us by the Word of God, and to read it with zeal, to make such room for it in our hearts that there it takes root,” wrote Calvin on Mary.<sup>11</sup>

### *Interpreting Scriptures with Respect and Soberness*

We then need to read the Scriptures with respect and soberness: the true church is the “sober disciple” (*sobria discipula*), “who draws from the lips of its divine teacher . . . it has no wisdom on its own.” We have to be equally ready to receive the word of God and to submit to it our judgment and our intelligence as a reality that is greater than our judgment, given that it is God who speaks.<sup>12</sup> We

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8. IC I, 6, 1.

9. IC I, 6, 2; IV, 1, 4s.

10. OC 34, 424.

11. OC 46, 111, 482.

12. IC I, 7, 5.

must not add anything of our own concept, nor go beyond what Jesus Christ said.<sup>13</sup> This holds true for everyone, but above all for the pastors.<sup>14</sup> They must proclaim the Word with “simplicity, purity, truth, reverence, and zeal.”

### *Recognizing the Ultimate Authority of Scriptures without Neglecting the Wisdom of Tradition*

A very discussed question within the framework of dialogue between the Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church (also the Orthodox Church) is the relationship between the Sacred Scriptures and other Christian texts, between Bible and Tradition. For the Reformation, Scriptures are the norm that have authority over all others, the rule of all rules (*norma normans*). This is how we need to understand the famous Protestant maxim “Only Scripture” (*Sola Scriptura*), which does not mean that Tradition has no value. It is a secondary norm or *norma normata*. We do not need to add anything that has the same authoritative level as the Scriptures. “The first point of Christianity,” wrote Calvin, “is that the Sacred Scriptures are all of our wisdom, and that we have to listen to God who speaks in them, without adding anything else.”<sup>15</sup>

In the same way, the councils, assemblies among leaders of the churches from the whole world, have a great value for Calvin: “We very willingly recognize,” he wrote, “that if a discussion arises on such and such an article of faith, there is no better means than to unite a council of true bishops to discuss it.” But the councils

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13. IC IV, 8, 13.

14. “That those who speak while officiating, should take care not to put forward their dreams or fantasies: they must instead be God’s messengers, in faith, without adding any personal thoughts.” Quoted by Gil Daudé, *Prier 15 jours avec Calvin* (Bruyères-Le-Châtel: Nouvelle Cité, 2009), p. 29.

15. OC 26, 131.

should not be placed above the Scriptures, because even a council can err on certain points. According to Calvin, the only text that guides in truth is the Bible.<sup>16</sup> We have to also read the Scriptures with the Fathers (and the Mothers) of the church who came before us. It would be presumptuous of us to ignore them. But they are not the source of the ultimate authority. However, when they have been faithful to the Scriptures, we have to recognize them as instruments through which God has spoken.

### *Placing Ourselves in the Essence of the Gospel: Jesus Christ*

In the Scriptures we need, above all, to listen to Christ, the touchstone of every truth. As with the other Reformers, Calvin has an interpretation centred on Christ, who summed up the whole Bible in the two commandments: the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor. It is the knowledge of Jesus Christ, of his unconditional and total love, that allows us to have a correct understanding of the Scriptures. “What do you read?” says Jesus to the youth who asks him what is the most important thing in the Bible. Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, who helps the wounded man on the roadside.

In order to understand the Bible in depth, we have to look through glasses of compassion. It is Jesus Christ, the merciful one, who gives “savor” to the reading of the Scriptures. Referring to the comment of Bernard of Clairvaux on the *Song of Songs*, Calvin says with a flavorful metaphor that the name of Jesus is:

oil and condiment, without which all meat would be dry; . . . salt to give flavour to every doctrine, which otherwise would

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16. IC IV, 9, 13.

be tasteless. In other words, it is honey for the palate, melody to our ears, joy to our heart; medicine for the soul; and every discussion or dispute is foolishness if His name does not resonate.<sup>17</sup>

### *Reading the Scriptures Together*

The reference to the Word of God could be a cause of discord. How many divisions have come about as a result of particular interpretations? Was it not a tragic destiny that Protestantism became fragmented into a multitude of churches? Nevertheless, Calvin did not cease to invite all to a conciliar reading of the Scriptures. He criticises the personal interpretations that threaten peace and dissolve the “bond of unity that God wants to conserve as inviolable.” The interpretation of the Scriptures must be done within the communion of churches.<sup>18</sup> The interpretation of the true meaning of the Scriptures can only be given in a collegial manner.

In the Geneva of Calvin’s time, the five pastors of the city met every week with those of the rural areas for “conferences on the Scriptures,” with the purpose of “maintaining purity and concord of doctrine among them.”<sup>19</sup> He asked that the professors of the Academy join them if possible. In order to be truly doctors of the church, they had to participate in this collegiality.<sup>20</sup> The historian

of the Reformation, Henri Strohl, saw in this cohesion the great strength of Calvinism.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Need for Illumination*

A very important point of the Reformation is that humankind needs an illumination. How should we understand this term in this context? The first Protestant to speak about it was Martin Luther. He wrote that in order to understand well the Scriptures, we need to live an experience similar to that lived by Mary: she was illuminated within from the Holy Spirit’s visit. He says in his beautiful comment on the Magnificat:

The Virgin spoke after having lived a personal experience by which the Holy Spirit illuminated and enlightened her. No one can understand God and his Word, if the Holy Spirit does not illuminate him immediately. The action of the Holy Spirit needs to be experienced and felt, and it is by living this experience that we can learn from the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

In the same way, Calvin says that in order to understand the Scriptures, our reason and culture are simply not enough. The Holy Spirit, who guided the apostles, needs to enlighten us on the real meaning of the words:

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21. “It is one of Calvinism’s strengths to demand more than just an awakening of faith by preaching to isolated individualities, but to accompany these believers by regrouping them in a solid body and giving them responsibilities. . . . This enabled the Calvinistic churches to shine as a beacon with cohesion and strength of resistance which cannot have those groups whose members had nothing in common, save to hear together the Word of God.” Henri Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme* (Neuchâtel, Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1951), p. 224

22. Martin Luther, *The Magnificat (1520–1521)*, Introduction.

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17. IC II, 16, 1; Bernard de Clairvaux, *Cantique des Cantiques*, Sermon 15, 6.

18. IC IV, 1, 5.

19. *Ordonnances*, 1541, Registres de la compagnie des pasteurs de Genève (1964), 3.

20. “On Fridays, they (the professors) should, as much as possible, attend the congregations and the ministers’ meetings.” Ordre du collège de Genève, 1559, in Bernard Gagnebin, *A la rencontre de Jean Calvin* (Genève: Georg, 1964), p. 54.

It is necessary that the Spirit who spoke through the prophets, enters directly into our hearts to persuade us that they have faithfully transmitted what was instructed to them from above. Our spirits do nothing other than vacillate, full of doubt and hesitation, until they are illuminated.<sup>23</sup>

As a consequence, before every reading of the Scriptures, we must invoke the Holy Spirit who inspired them. Here is his prayer in the preface of the Bible of Olivetan, the first French translation from Hebrew and Latin texts (1535): “Let the Lord of lights, through his Holy Spirit, with this holy and salutary Gospel teach the ignorant, strengthen the weak, illuminate the blind and make his truth reign on all peoples and nations.”

### *Living the Scriptures*

In order to have peace and harmony, it is not enough to read and proclaim the Word, but we must live it.<sup>23</sup> It must be *listened, received, and kept*.<sup>24</sup> Calvin emphasized the aspects of receiving and practising the Word with compassion and mercy. It is not sufficient that the gospel be preached for the church to be what it should

23. The famous article in the *Augsburg Confession* recognizes the true church as the one which proclaims the gospel with purity and rightly celebrates the sacraments. The church is a “*congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta*” (art.7). Calvin adds that the gospel must be a personal experience.

24. In the Articles of 1537 (Art.18) he writes: “We mean that the criteria to properly distinguish the Church of Jesus Christ is when the holy Gospel is purely and faithfully preached, proclaimed, *listened and retained*, when its sacraments are rightly administered, even with some imperfections and errors, as always among men. On the other hand, when the Gospel is not proclaimed, *heard or received*, then we do not recognize any form of a church.” In the 1559 edition of the *Institution* (IV, 1, 9), we read: “As wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and *listened*, the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, then there is no doubt that there is a Church.”

really be, but we should also live in fraternity. Unity comes from consensus on a sound doctrine *and* from fraternal love, as Calvin stated: “This union consists of two bonds: that we are in agreement on a sound doctrine, and that there be a fraternal charity.”<sup>25</sup> Unity therefore must be *effective* (agreement on doctrine) and *affectionate* (spiritual friendship).<sup>26</sup> This does not happen immediately among us, but progressively. It is already a reality, although an imperfect one, due to the weakness of our human nature, our ignorance, and our disbelief.<sup>27</sup>

But to work for peace and unity also implies encountering opposition. For Christians, the trials, the sufferings . . . represent for us the name of Jesus crucified or the Cross. Some do not want the peace of Christ and prefer to live in a selfish way. The ministry of Calvin in Geneva was a permanent Cross. In a letter to Guillaume Farel, he confided on his return from exile in Strasburg: “I am

25. *Institution* 1543, CO I, p. 556 : *Haec duobus vinculis continetur: sanae doctrinae consensione et fraterna caritate*. IC IV, 2, 5: “This union is bonded by two elements: a sound doctrine and a fraternal charity.”

26. “The sum is this: that they be joined together in views and inclinations. For he makes mention of agreement in doctrine and mutual love; and afterwards, repeating the same thing, (in my opinion), he exhorts them to be of one mind, and to have the same views. The expression to auto, (the same thing), implies that they must accommodate themselves to each other. Hence the beginning of love is harmony of views, but that is not sufficient, unless men’s hearts are at the same time joined together in mutual affection.” *Commentary on the Epistle the Philippians 2, 2*. (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.txt>)

27. “But ought not the unity of the faith to reign among us from the very commencement? It does reign, I acknowledge, among the sons of God, but not so perfectly as to make them *come together*. Such is the weakness of our nature, that it is enough if every day brings some nearer to others, and all nearer to Christ. The expression, *coming together*, denotes that closest union to which we still aspire, and which we shall never reach, until this garment of the flesh, which is always accompanied by some remains of ignorance and weakness, shall have been laid aside.” (*Commentary on the Letter to Ephesians*, 4, 13. (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.iv.v.iii.html>))

beginning to understand what it means to live in Geneva! Here I am amidst the thorns.”<sup>28</sup> But in the thick of this opposition, these “thorns” identified him with Jesus crucified, and Calvin was not discouraged. He looked to Jesus, who remained faithful and loving right up to the end. In another letter, he wrote: “Remember . . . that everywhere we go, the cross of Christ will follow us.”<sup>29</sup>

### My Experience of *Lectio Divina*

In this second part, I would like briefly to share my experience of meditating on the Scriptures in order to build peace and harmony. I think that you may be interested in also knowing how a Protestant pastor reads and lives the Word today. I would like to talk about a practice that is increasingly being adopted by all the churches and particularly mine. By this, I am referring to the *lectio divina*. The “Divine Reading,” “Divine” in two ways: because its object is the Word of God, and also because its goal is to develop a divine life in us.

This terminology goes back to the Church Father Origen.<sup>30</sup> It was also used in the monasteries.<sup>31</sup> The Second Vatican Council restored it and Pope Benedict never stops underlining its

importance.<sup>32</sup> With the ecumenical movement, where I practise the *lectio divina*—*The School of the Word in French-speaking Switzerland*—we also presented our experience to him, and he underlined the importance of it.<sup>33</sup>

Without using the word, the Reformation has some beautiful texts to describe this spiritual reading of the Scriptures.<sup>34</sup> The Parisian pastor Pierre Jurieu speaks of three essential stages to the *lectio divina*:

[T]o read, to meditate and to pray on the Biblical text: The devotion includes three main exercises: reading, meditation and prayer. A bit of reading will be the first step of elevation (of the soul); a bit of meditation on this reading will be a higher step; and after this, a brief prayer on the reading and

32. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, Pope Benedict XVI said that the *lectio divina* is “a fervent reading of the Holy Scriptures complemented by a prayer . . . in this manner an internal dialogue becomes reality through reading, listening to God speaking to us, and one talks back to Him with a trustful and an open heart . . . this practice, when properly applied will bring a new spring to the Church” (September 16, 2005).

33. Pope Benedict XVI, *L'Ecole de la parole en suisse romande présente sa contribution à la “lectio divina”* (March 11, 2009) <http://dialogueoecumenique.eerv.ch/2009/03/17/lecole-de-la-parole-presente-sa-contribution-a-la-lectio-divina-au-pape-benoit-xvi>. The recent Apostolic Exhortation, after the synod on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini* (2010), considers the *lectio divina* as a privileged way to spiritual ecumenism (No. 86–87). “Listening together to the word of God, engaging in biblical *lectio divina*, letting ourselves be struck by the inexhaustible freshness of God’s word which never grows old, overcoming our deafness to those words that do not fit our own opinions or prejudices, listening and studying within the communion of the believers of every age: all these things represent a way of coming to unity in faith as a response to hearing the word of God” (No. 46).

34. Read the beautiful page on how reading the Scriptures in the *Acts of the Synod of Bern*. All the aspects of *lectio divina* are present. *Actes du Synode de Berne de 1532* (Lausanne: Canton de Vaud, Impr. Centrale, 1936), pp. 140–156.

28. OC. 11, 719, May 31, 1544.

29. *Lettres françaises*, J. Bonnet, ed. (Paris: Meyrueis, 1854), Vol. I, p. 303, June 10, 1549.

30. It is in Origen’s *Letter to Gregory* that appears for the first time the expression *theia anagnosis*, which translates into Latin as *lectio divina*: Gregoire Le Thaumaturge, *Sources chrétiennes #149* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969), p. 192.

31. The classical description of the various stages in the *lectio divina* was given by Guigues the Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative*: Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Sources chrétiennes #163* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970). An important book by Enzo Bianchi which revived the *lectio divina*: *Prier la parole: Une introduction à la “lectio divina”* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1982), or in English: *Praying the Word: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegetown, Minn: Cistercian Publications, 1999).

the meditation will lead you to supreme detachment; after which, one returns again to the reading and meditation in the same order.<sup>35</sup>

### *Doing Lectio Divina Alone or in a Group?*

I try every day to spend some time doing *lectio divina* (but I do not always manage it), for about 45 minutes. I also practise it as a couple (about twice a week); through time it has become a spiritual highlight of our married life: the moment when, with the light of the gospel, we review our life. I still do the *lectio divina* in groups. Some of these groups meet once a month, such as the one which I guide in the context of the “School of the Word”; others are more occasional, such as during a retreat. I have noticed that there is a come-and-go between solitary and group reading. Practising the *lectio* in a group encourages me to persevere reading alone, as I experience each time a fire lit within me.

I have practised this method for more than 20 years. My experience has taught me that each time the fruit of this meditation is a great peace and joy among us. We were able to savor this very tasty fruit, which is deep spiritual unity among us. This is a fruit that I also savor in the Focolare Movement with the meditation on the Word of Life, which is a sort of *lectio divina* lived throughout the month.

### *The Importance of Silence*

The heart of the *lectio divina* is a long moment of silence after reading the biblical text. When I practise this in a group of about

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35. Pierre Jurieu : *Traité de la dévotion* (Saumur, 1678), p. 482.

10 people, it is really a beautiful moment. It is much more powerful to remain silent—for at least 10 minutes—in a group, than when alone. Silence has become the most valuable instrument of interpretation. We practise meditation during this moment. This implies entering into a personal relationship with the text and with oneself, then to reflect on the connection between the text and life in the world around me. We then share our meditations and listen deeply to each other. Finally, we read the text one more time and remain silent once again. During this time, everyone is invited to write or interiorize a prayer, which is a response to Jesus, who visited us through the Scriptures.

### *Lectio Divina in Stages*

There are many ways to do *lectio divina*. But there are certain permanent features. I see them in five stages (in Latin): *preparatio—lectio—meditatio—oratio—communicatio*. Let us take them one by one.

Preparation (*preparatio*) mainly consists in invoking the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit which inspired the Scriptures, and we ask it to enlighten us. Thus, I start each *lectio* with an invocation which predisposes us to read the Word with a free and open heart. The Spirit is the one who creates, liberates, and sanctifies. He is the “good thing” which the Father promises to his children (Lk 11:13). He is the light that enables us to perceive the Word in the Scriptures.

Reading (*lectio*) means reading and re-reading several times the text which should not be too long. We can get tired if it is too long. If a reading list proposes a long text, one may select just a section. During the reading it is important to be silent. When I do the *lectio* in a group, I propose two or three moments of 5–10 minutes

of *absolute silence*. Silence is one of the most important instruments in the *lectio divina*. It signifies that we are not only there to listen, but that we are actively in contact with the text by analyzing it, memorizing it, and relating it to our lives. The important thing is to be actively in contact with the text, to get into it personally, to struggle with it, like Jacob with the angel. At this stage, one must above all, not make any comments or be distracted by notes. One will make use of the commentaries—old or modern—after becoming personally involved in the text.

Meditation (*meditatio*) happens after a while when a verse, a phrase, a word, seems to emerge. I welcome it as a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit wants to communicate with me. I then repeat in my mind the verse or the words, until an idea, an image takes shape. The Church Fathers speak of this repetitive exercise as a sort of “rumination,”<sup>36</sup> to demonstrate that the Word must be assimilated, eaten, digested, like Ezekiel had to do: “Son of Man, take this book. . . . Eat it! It will become honey in your mouth. . . . Ezekiel, open up your heart and your ears to my words and memorize them!” (Ez: 3:1–10). While reading I ask myself what does the text say; during the meditation, what does it say *to me* today, in my life, in the church, in the world? In that moment I ask myself how the text relates to my life. But to look back at one’s life in the light of the Scriptures, one must listen to the Holy Spirit within us. “It dwells by you and it is within you” says Jesus (Jn 14:17). The Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote on this subject: “To learn what is in the Bible one needs two things: listen to what it says,

and lend an ear to the heartbeat of man. The Bible and the heart both say the same thing.”<sup>37</sup>

Prayer (*oratio*) is in that instant when I reply to Christ who talks to me through the text. I draw my prayer from the words of the Bible. The *lectio* lets me see that our prayer is just a reply to what God already told us in his Word. Augustine speaks about this when he writes: “When you listen, God is talking to you; when you pray, you are talking to God.” He also said: “Try not to say anything without him and He will not tell you anything without you.”<sup>38</sup> This means that one must pray with words from biblical texts. A nice example of this exercise of biblical prayers can be found in an anonymous medieval text: “Scripture is Jacob’s well from which comes the water flowing around in prayer.”<sup>39</sup>

Speaking to Christ with his very own words is the first fruit of the *lectio divina*. One of the most beautiful prayers is the *Magnificat*, a tapestry of Old Testament biblical verses inspired by the Holy Spirit when it visited Mary (Lk 1:45–55). The *Gospel of Luke* presents Mary as one who “deeply meditates the words in her heart” (Lk 2:19). In a way she is the model of the *lectio divina*.

After each *lectio* I write a prayer. This enables me to keep a trace of my meditation. When the *lectio divina* is lived in a group, every participant is invited, if he or she so wishes, to share it with the others. A Reformation text specifically mentions this:

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37. Quoted by John Powers, *If They Could Speak: Ten Witnesses to the Passion of Jesus* (Mystic, Conn: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), p. 3.

38. Augustine : *On Psalm 85, 1*.

39. Jean Leclerc, *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1957), p. 73

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36. Cf. *Rule of Pachom, no. 122*, in P. Deseille : *L'esprit du monachisme pacômien* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1968), p. 38.

It is a good thing to put one's ideas in writing in order to compare them later. Because in the way with God, one must always fight and our memory is feeble. Therefore it is useful, on occasion, to have something in reserve. Thanks to this exercise, our hearts will become an arsenal for God, our Lord, where the spiritual weapons are hidden to fight the insidious attacks of the devil.<sup>40</sup>

Communication (*communicatio*) is sharing what we have experienced during the *lectio*. It is important in spiritual life not to keep for oneself what we have received. This is evident when referring to the stories of the Annunciation followed by the Visitation. What does Mary do after the Angel's visit announcing to her the great news of the coming of the Holy Spirit? She hurries off to tell her cousin Elisabeth about it. We must learn to communicate. We do this quite naturally in the *lectio divina* groups. The two or three moments of 10 minutes silence actually encourage the most timid participants to share what they have discovered, to speak in the first person.

What does one feel by sharing our spiritual life? Not only do we communicate it and so encourage others, but we also receive grace in return. The life which we radiate around us by being bold enough to share it and to bear witness, strengthens us and stirs up the fire of the Holy Spirit. In this way we build profound relationships beyond all divisions. Thanks to the *lectio divina*, I now have friends in all the various churches.<sup>41</sup>

40. *Actes du Synode de Berne*, op. cit., p. 147.

41. For a detailed presentation of the history and method of *lectio divina*, see Martin Hoegger, "Ecole de la parole pour lire et prier la Bible," *Hokhma* (1996): 61. And the website: <http://dialogueoecumenique.eerv.ch/2010/10/20/lectio-divina/>

## Reading the Scriptures with the Heart

I would like to conclude with a personal experience, which has become the spiritual base of my life. It has helped me understand the importance of reading the Scriptures in the perspective of both internal and external peace. As a 19-year-old, I was searching for the truth. Therefore, I decided to study Protestant theology, thinking I would find truth therein. I was a non-believer, to the point that one day I entered a church where I wrote on the pulpit: "God doesn't exist!"

After a year, I felt discouraged and decided to change my studies. Just before this I was invited to take part in a meeting of a Christian community in the south of France. They were young people of my age who lived what they believed. I was completely taken in by the spiritual climate. It was then that something totally unexpected happened. During a lecture, my heart was transfixed by a word of the Gospel. That evening, kneeling in my room for the first time in my life I said a prayer which came straight from the heart. The only words which came out of my mouth were: "Forgive me!"

I said "forgive me," because I had done wrong to a number of people and also to myself; I had attempted suicide. The next day I experienced such a deep love of God, which is still the case. While I was returning home on the train, my heart was burning inside me. So I opened the Bible and started reading the *First Letter of John*: "God is love: he who lives in love lives in the Father and my Father lives in him" (1 Jn 4:16).

For the first time, I understood what I was reading. I had studied the Bible for a year without comprehending it. Reading it now was like fire on fire. My heart was aflame as I read. Returning home, the first thing I did was to ask forgiveness from the people

I had hurt. That day I understood that the Scriptures have to be read in order to create peace and harmony. But to be able to do this, one's heart needs to be changed, or as John Calvin says, "God gives us His grace so that we may smooth the rough edges of our hearts."<sup>42</sup>

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42. *Sermon sur le Deutéronome*, quoted by Gil Daudé, op. cit., p. 30.