

The Lectio Divina in the Carmelite Rule

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is essential to the Rule of the Carmelites. It is what nourishes its ideal of perfection, and what gives the principles of spiritual life. The Rule itself is a fruit of constant meditation of the Word of God. The Rule not only recommends the Lectio Divina, but it also practices it. The Rule expresses its thoughts with phrases taken from the Bible.

The Rule uses the *Vetus Latina text* (Translation from the greek of the LXX).

The Biblical authors most preferred are Paul and John. The most quoted **books** are the Pauline letters, Acts, Psalms, Song of Songs, Isaiah and the gospels.

The biblical models proposed by the Rule are: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Elijah, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Paul and the acts of the apostles community.

The most preferred topics are: the work, the spiritual combat, the sharing of goods, fasting, faith, hope, charity, trust and abandonment in God, prayer, the desert, the combat against the idols.

The presence of the Bible at the beginning with a word of greeting and at the end with words of farewell, form and inclusion, in the style of a **Pauline letter**.

The presence of the Bible in the Rule is strong in quantity and in quality.

The type of presence is through quotations: direct and indirect.

- 8 numbers have direct quotations: the pondering of the Word 10: to possess everything in common 12: exhortations 18-19: work 20: silence 21: the priors authority 22: obedience 23.

- 6 numbers have indirect quotations, such as reminiscence, evocations, symbols, references, biblical words, authors, books, biblical topics, expressions, ways of saying. In the numbers 1 "near the spring of Elijah": 3 "many and varied are the ways": 4 "to live in obedience with deeds": 7 "to eat in a common refectory": 14 "the place to pray": 24 "the Lord will reward you".

- 10 numbers make no reference to the Bible: on the request of the rule 3: the cells 5,6,8 and 9: on prayer 11: on permission to have animals 13: on fraternal correction 15: fast 16 and abstinence 17.

We can observe in the presence of the biblical quotations of the Rule a movement in crescendo, which indicates that the spiritual life matures when it is more filled with the Word of God.

-in the first number we find reminiscences (1.2.4).

-in the following we have a biblical background (7.14.).

-in the last numbers there are biblical quotations and references (10.12.18.19.20.21. 22. 23).

1. WHAT THE RULE REQUIRES PREVIOUS TO THE READING OF THE BIBLE.

The Carmelite Rule places the Biblical reading in a context of prayer and meditation. That is, to live a life in which one seeks to understand and to fulfill the will of God in our lives, to read the Bible searching to put it in close relation with our life, as an exercise not only intellectual but that of prayer, of friendly dialogue with God.

Some aspects of the interpretation of the Bible by the Carmelite Rule are:

- **Familiarity:** Saint Albert the legislator of the Carmelite Rule knows the Bible, he has a long relation with it, to the point that he becomes able to think with biblical categories, thru the continuous use of which he makes of the Bible.
- **Fidelity to the spirit.** The fidelity of Saint Albert to the Bible isn't fidelity to the literal sense, but to the ideal of life in the spirit of the Bible and of the Carmel. What we have here is a connection with the life project, a life in the spirit that both st. Albert and the first Carmelites already lived in the midst of the Church tradition and that later on is expressed with biblical phrases. This is possible, thanks to the familiarity that st. Albert had with the Bible. It is a fidelity to the Spirit that walks with us in the midst of the tradition of the church and of the Carmelites.
- **Reading of the Bible with faith.** The Bible is read with faith and as a norm for the religious life. The Rule approaches the Bible with faith, a dialogue with a God who walks with us and with a consideration of our personal experiences. The Carmelites ponder the Bible to nourish their faith, their own ideal of Carmelite life. And to listen to the Spirit for direction an enlightenment.

- **Within the tradition of the Church.** The Lectio Divina is an attitude of life that comes from the renovating tradition of the mendicants, whose frame of reference was the model of the Christian community of the Acts of the Apostles. This model is at the basis of the central part of the Rule (RC 10 to 15). The Rule organizes the teachings of the Holy Fathers (RC 2) and asks that the reading of the Bible be made according to the customs of the Church (RC 11) and of the liturgical tradition (RC 11). The biblical interpretation of the Rule was the same one of the church of its times. The Rule only *highlights some things that were common* to the church in order to strengthen the life of the church. The sense of belonging of the Carmelites to the Church, nourished by the tradition and of the creativity to apply it to their times, has helped the Carmelite Order to adapt to the changes from the Orient to the Western world, from hermits to friars, from Europe to the rest of the world. The need to live what the Bible teaches to our present day points out the importance of the meditation that the Rule asks of the Bible. The pondering of the Bible is necessary to nourish the faith, the ideal and the life of the Carmelites in their present days.

- **Liberty:** The Rule sometimes doesn't indicate that it is quoting the Bible, it quotes by half, it changes words and meanings, and it doesn't point out the source from which it took the biblical text. The Rule quotes the Bible in order to apply its meaning to the present time.

- **By memory:** The Rule joins different passages skipping from one text to another and putting together the meaning.

2. THE RULES METHOD OF BIBLE READING: LECTIO DIVINA.

The Rule asks 9 times to practice the Lectio Divina of the Bible:

Lectio

Num. 7 To hear the Bible during the meals.

Num. 14 Daily mass (made of biblical texts).

Num. 20 To read frequently the Pauline letters.

Meditatio Num. 10 Pondering the Lord's law day and night.
Num. 19 To have holy thoughts
(fruits of biblical reading).
Num. 22 To have Jesus as an example as
presented in the gospels.

Oratio Num. 11 To pray the holy hours (made of psalms
and biblical readings).

Contemplatio Num. 19 The word of God, the sword of the Spirit
must be in the mouth and in the heart.
Num. 19 Act always according to the word of God.

Lectio: The Bible is *read* in the refectory (n.7), in the mass (n.14),
in the canonical hours (n.11) and particularly in the cell (n.10).

Meditatio: The Word read is pondered day and night (n.10), goes
down from the mouth to the heart (n.19) and produces holy
thoughts (n.19).

Oratio: The Word read and pondered, turns into *prayer* in the
canonical hours (n.11), in the mass (n.14) and in the cell, where the
Carmelite keeps watch in prayer (n.10).

Contemplatio: The Word communicates the vision of God,
informing the thoughts, the mouth and the heart (n.19) and thus,
everything is made according to the Word of our Lord (n.19).

The Rule suggests the exercise of the Lectio Divina personal and in
community.

* By the *personal* reading: meditation in the cell (n.10); the Word
in the mouth and in the heart (n.19), to have holy thoughts (n.19);
to do everything according to the Word of our Lord (n.19).

* By the reading in *community*: to hear the word in the refectory
(n.7); in the chapel during the mass (n.14); in the canonical hours
(n.11).

3. PONDERING THE LORD'S LAW DAY AND NIGHT AND KEEPING WATCH AT HIS PRAYERS N° 10.

«*Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty.*»

This number presents 2 biblical expressions:

«***pondering the Lord's law day and night***»: «This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt ***meditate therein day and night***, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein». Jos 1,8: "But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he ***meditate day and night***". Psalm 1,2 (cf. Psalm 77,2-13; 119).

«***keeping watch at his prayers***»: «Continue in ***prayer, and watch*** in the same with thanksgiving» Col 4,2: «***Watch ye therefore, and pray always***, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.» Lk 21,36: «***Praying always*** with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, ***and watching*** thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints». Eph 6,18: «***Watch ye and pray***, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak» Mk 14,38 (cf. Mt 26,41): «But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and ***watch unto prayer***». 1 Pet 4,7.

Saint Albert gives great importance to the Word of God, which can be seen by the interest that he shows to make it the center of the life of the Carmelites. The exhortation to meditate and to pray the word of God, occupies a central part of the Rule and joins together all the elements that fill the Carmelite spirituality.

The patriarch asks for an encounter with the Bible that should nourish the spiritual life, because: "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Lk 4,4).

The main goal of this encounter with the Bible is that: **The Carmelite may identify himself with the Word of God**: that he may think, do and speak the same way that Christ thinks, does and speaks. This will become the main "occupation" of the group.

The word of God is the fountain of supreme life. All the life is orientated toward an encounter with the Bible. Solitude in the lectio divina is a moment of encounter with Christ and his word.

A. PONDERING, « MEDITANTES».

The Bible is placed at the center of the Carmelite meditation. In the biblical texts, the action of meditation is expressed by the Hebrew verb "hagah", that the LXX translate by the Greek "meletáo", both verbs *indicate "to think" with the meaning of a constant actio*: the continuity to reflect upon something. In the middle ages the meditation is placed as the second step of the lectio divina. **The meditation is an exercise, in which a person lets the Word of God, repeated softly, to invade the most inner parts of its being.** It is to repeat interiorly the Word in deep silence, being aware that we are repeating the Word of God.

For Saint Basil, the biblical meditation "simple consists in pointing out a phrase in the mind and repeating it frequently with the lips in a soft voice but being able to be heard by the person".

In this sense of the lectio divina is how Albert understands the "pondering Gods law day and night".

The meditation isn't to pray reasoning, making abstractions, searching for the essence of things, making them object of knowledge, which requires of analysis.

The meditation is being conscience with love of the constant presence of the Lord's deeds in the Bible and in our lives.

The characteristics of the meditation are:

- It is placed between the reading and the prayer, in order to achieve the contemplation.
- Is a pondering in the sense of constant and careful attention to the word of God.
- It consists in repeating softly the Word of God, allowing it to fill our thoughts, actions, motivations and feelings. The silent repetition of the Word of God, slowly will bring to our mind other biblical texts, and other personal experiences and feelings, in such a way that we may be able to recognize in our own realities and ideas present in the Bible. The image used by the monks to explain

this meditation, is that of a mother that gives space in her womb so that the child may grow within her.

- Requires of an attitude of listening and welcoming in the heart, with the desire to incarnate the Bible, tranquility, being constant, silence and solitude in order to concentrate, all the attention of the person in what the Word will bring to mind.
- It doesn't matter if at the beginning one doesn't understand totally the meaning of the word of God, and all of its implications, but by giving it time and of attention to the word it will produce fruits of understanding, of awareness and of putting it to practice gradually.
- The acknowledgment is important: of the person that pronounces the Word, of God: of the goal of the word of God, which is our happiness: of who we are and of what the word of God is doing in our lives and in the lives of our church.

The desire of wanting to put in to practice the word is fundamental, to incarnate it in our lives, that it may be able to fill our actions and motivations to serve.

B. DAY AND NIGHT « DIE AC NOCTE ».

The expression "day and night" is taken from the Bible to indicate continuous action. What we have is a phrase that is a Hebrew stylistic figure called merism, which consists in pointing out the 2 points of a series to indicate it all, for example: heaven and earth in Psalm 115,15 is to indicate the whole world. Or the 2 cities of Israel Dan (north) to Beersheba (south) indicate Israel in its entirety. That is why we are to understand this phrase not in a literal sense but as referring to a continuous action, constantly. Saint Ambrosius, explaining this sentence says that the more continuous time, we are asked continuity in the love for the law.

C. THE LORD'S LAW, «IN LEGE DOMINI».

The wisdom literature identifies the Lord's law with the Lord himself, with his deeds: "I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings" (Psalm 77,12).

D. KEEPING WATCH «VIGILANTES».

The meditation in the Rule is that of keeping watch and prayer. The imperative to keep watch appears many times in the NT related to

prayer (Mt 26,41 = Mk 14,38; Lk 21,36; 22,46; Col 4,2; Eph 6,18; 1 Pet 4,7). In prayer is where one most lives the eschatological awaiting and where hope is nourished: **“Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing constant in prayer”** (Rom 12,12). It is expected of us that we keep the Word in function to keep watch, to be alert not to lose faith, to hold strong in faith (cf. Mk 13,33-37; 1 Cor 16,13; 1 Pet 5,8-9).

But how are we to understand the imperative to keep watch?. There are 3 ways of understanding this expression according to the NT: an ascetical way, an eschatological way and matrimonial way.

a. Ascetical vigilance.

The expression “keeping watch in prayer” is typical of the ascetics of the NT: *“Watch (gregoréo) ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak.”* (Mk 14,38; Mt 26,41).

In this context to keep watch means “to resist the temptation, the weakness of the flesh, to be awake, defeating the tendency to sleep, in order to stay strong in the faith (1 Cor 16,13; 1 Pet 5,8-9).

b. Eschatological vigilance.

To keep watch according to the eschatological key means to be prepared for the second coming of the Lord as the universal judge (Tit 2,11-13; cf. Lk 12,35-40; 21,34-36; 1 Tes 1,9-10; 1 Cor 1,4-9; Ro 8,25; Ga 5,5; Phlp 3,20; 2 Tim 4,8; 1 Pet 1,13; Ap 16,15). It’s the idea of the primitive community: The Lord will return: from there arises the eschatological sense of the Christian life, and in this keyfactor they read the Bible.

- The time of awaiting may take more time (1 Thes 5,1-3; Mt 24,36-42; Acts 1,17; 2 Pet 3,10; Ap 3,3).

- It is a awaiting in faith, like in a night “For we walk in faith, and not by sight”(2 Cor 5,7; Ro 8,24).

- By not knowing the day nor the hour, one must **be prepared** (cf. Mk 13,32; Mt 24,36; 25,13).

- Those who await the coming of the Lord are blessed, because he will come and place them in the table and serve them (Lk 12,37).

c. Nuptial vigilance.

The monks understood the invitation to keep watch in the middle ages, in a nuptial way. That consists in the necessary preparations to enter the feast when the husband arrived and participated in the wedding. To keep watch awaiting the return of the Lord, in order to enter with him in the wedding. This image is taken by the spiritual masters from Matthew 25,1 and Luke 12,35.

The need to keep watch may be read in these 3 senses: ascetical, eschatological or nuptial.

The eschatological sense speaks of the coming of the Lord as a universal judge, and stresses the unexpected of his arrival and the need to be prepared.

The nuptial sense indicates the awaiting of the Lord as a husband whose entrance will mark the beginning of the wedding. But no matter what image we choose the need to keep watch tests our perseverance. The ascetical key helps to be vigilante of the danger of falling asleep (Mt 25,5: Mk 14,38: Lk 22,46), typical weakness of the flesh. That is why its necessary to “keep watch”, wide awake with our eyes open in a state of alert, not only in relation with the spirit but also with the body.

The friars found many expressions to be able to live this value of “keeping watch”:

- The long nocturnal vigils.
- The great silence after Compline,
- Night office at midnight because **“at midnight, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him”** (Mt 25,6).

At the end, it deals with not letting oneself be defeated by a sleep of a night that may be prolonged, by not allowing oneself to despair, to give up hope proper of the pilgrim that recognizes himself on a journey toward the kingdom of God and a collaborator of this kingdom in his own history, of not withdrawing to the seductions of the flesh that bounds us to this world that passes. In this way the Carmelite will be “strong in the tribulation”, “firm in the faith” and “joyful in the hope”.

The 3 keys of understanding the vigilance requires a double activity: of a continuous preparation and purification. Purification that consists in a complete cleansing of what is not from God, even from the smallest attachments that exist in our being.

The biblical Words in the Rule strives the person who wants to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ so that he be keep watch, prepared with the lamps on (Mt 25,10), so that he may not be defeated by the sleep: and must be prepared if the Lord comes as a Judge or as a Bridegroom to take him to the wedding.

Keeping watch is also lived in every day life, in the sense that our work collaborates with the intent that this world may be closer to God and his kingdom. This is the reason why the spiritual combat is itself an experience of Christ (n. 19).

In every day work the Carmelite (n.17) is invited to turn his attention to the Bible taking St. Paul as a model.

The fraternal encounter in the refectory, is where Word of God is listened to (n.7).

The celebration of the canonical hours (n.11) and the Eucharist (n.14): are parts of the history of salvation, which we must be aware of.

The cells must be located to favor the solitude necessary to hear personally the Word of God (n.6).

Silence is also an aid to the welcome the Word of God in our hearts (n.21).

E. IN PRAYER, « ORATIONIBUS ».

Prayer in the Carmelite life is monastic and contemplative.

a. Monastic Prayer, "ongoing and personal".

The first Christians influenced the monks in their desire to "pray unceasingly" (Lk 18,1) and that the prayer be "personal".

The friars found their own expressions to the value of ongoing prayer, first by praying 3 times a day (tertia, sexta and nona) (3 number of completeness). Later on they added Lauds (in reference

to the resurrection) and Vespers (in reference to the final coming of Christ).

From the desire to always be occupied in mind and heart in God arises in the Carmelite the practice of the "holy thoughts", "the shield of the faith", "the sword of the spirit", "to do everything in the name of the Lord" (n.16). The prayer in the Carmelite tradition is during all circumstances of life.

The first Christians asserted the need that the prayer be "**personal**", in the sense of the interaction of all of the dimensions of the person: individual and in community (Rule number 8.9.12). The personal prayer of the friar, "in the secret of his heart", the way of interiorizing, is helped by 3 exercises: (in latin) psalmi, lectio divina and vigile (n.8.9.19).

- **Psalmi**: The ongoing prayer in the chapel (by turns of monks: or by 7 moments (7 being a symbolic number of perfection), and "Opus et laus Deo" work and praise God.

- **Lectio divina**: to learn and developed an attitude of listening and welcoming the word of God, taking it to our own life (n.8.9.12.16.21). The prayer in the first Carmelites is strongly biblical with the method of the lectio divina.

- **Vigile "keep watch"**: The prayer lived with the sense of "keeping watch" indicates an eschatological awaiting. The prayer of the Carmelite leads to work, in an attitude of eschatological expectation and construction of the future, during the every day moments of life. The prayer of the Carmelite is inseparable of the daily works, it's a prayer incarnated in a life committed to collaborate with the kingdom of God here on earth. The Carmelite lives his quest for God in the every day life based on interiorization (n.16.8.12).

The work of the monk is done in **monastic observation**: which comprehends silence, purification of the heart, humility, patience, concentration, keeping watch, self denial and corporal penance. With this we have unity of prayer and work (n.4,5,6,14,15 y 18).

The Carmelite Rule offers monastic structures with equilibrium (adaptations made in 1247), with the goal of preserving in prayer “ongoing and personal”:

- The 3 parts: “lectio divina-vigile-psalmi” (n.8,9,19),
- The relation between private and community prayer (n 8,9,12).
- And the means of: silence, solitude, self denial and work (n.4,5,6,14,15 y 18).

b. Contemplative prayer: “Vacare Deo” (“to dedicate oneself to God”).

The value of “ongoing” prayer of the monks is expressed by the Carmelites, with the attitude of *ongoing attention to God*, called in Latin “Vacare Deo”.

The Contemplation as “seeing the reality with Gods eyes” is also a monastic comprehension, expressed in the fourth step of the lectio divina.

The Carmelite **lives in continuous attention to God**, by always being available for an encounter with God, letting himself be taken and guided by him and enjoying his presence felt in every day life. Contemplation in Carmel, requires dialogue, familiarity and love for God, maturing and growing ever more profound, which leads the person to **live in his presence and to do everything in the name of our Lord** (thus is what comes from the: *contemplatio- sapientia-coformatio*, which we see traces in the Rule numbers 8 and 16. In the Rule the prayer isn’t a momentary act, nor is it reduced to only moments in the chapel, but it’s a dynamic attitude of “vacare Deo” which leads a person to a total confidence in Gods hands, to search for him in our lives, in all situation and of every moment of the day. The continuous attention to God helps to develop the most inner contemplative dimension of the Carmelite.

Carmelite prayer is a dynamic prayer because it puts you in a ***journey of growth*** toward a full communion with God and his mystery, up to the most full transformation of our interior world: ***place oneself in the side of God***, going out of our own mental

patterns in order *to see the world and to love it as God sees it*, in the present time of salvation in the hope of the Lord return. The monastic and contemplative prayer of the Carmelites gives harmony and interaction between: contemplation and action, private and community prayer (n.8-12), present and eschatological future (n.21).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ON AND TO SHARE.

What has been the most important point to me of the presentation of the lectio divina in the Carmelite Rule?

How do I understand and how am I going to live the exhortation of the Rule to “Ponder the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at prayer”?

What new expression of the values of ongoing prayer and contemplative prayer, meditation, keep watch can I think of?