

"If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, you will know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

COMMUNITY *LECTIO DIVINA* AND PREACHING

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St. Dominic de Guzman, as we all know, walked the streets of the world as an itinerant preacher, taking with him the Gospel of St. Matthew and the Letters of St. Paul. This image of St. Dominic walking with the Word is an important image in our family album. Dominic and the Word were faithful travelling companions, co-pilgrims. It is even likely that his first Friars, leaving from Prouilhe for the cities of Europe, imitated their master, and also took with them some biblical parchments on the roads.

We find something similar in the Gospel of St. Luke (24:13-35), where the two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus on the day of resurrection. The two are sad, confused and discouraged, but despite their sadness, and without initially recognizing the Risen Christ who had joined them, he accompanies them and explains on the way some key texts of Scripture. Like Brother Dominic, the disciples traveled accompanied by the Word of life, the Word of God.

Every authentic preaching is born from an encounter with the Word of God. Our Dominican tradition has left us a wonderful example in one of St. Dominic's Nine Ways of Prayer, in which Dominic is walking with the Word. His preaching was undoubtedly born from his contemplative and prayerful listening to the Word of God as he traveled the roads of life. Dominic's itinerancy was more than a geographical movement, it was a spiritual movement, a pilgrimage with Christ, the Word of the Father.

Our brother, Felicísimo Martínez, OP, reminds us of this heritage:

Prayer and contemplation span the entire life of Dominic ... It is a constant and uninterrupted prayer. He prays during the day as he journeys ... keeping silence during the usual hours while continuing to walk, or even singing psalms and hymns. The witnesses at the canonization constantly tell us of this intense dedication to prayer: 'He used to speak always of God or with God in the house, outside of the house, and during his journeys.'¹

St. Dominic took from the monastic tradition the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* - the prayerful reading of the Bible - and gave it a new form. Now it was not only the *Lectio* of the solitary monk who withdrew in silence for a personal encounter with the Word of God. Dominic joined *Lectio Divina* with communal itinerancy, transforming it into a spiritual practice at the service of the preaching of the Good News. Today, we are called to follow in the footsteps of Brother Dominic, discovering the Word made flesh along the pathways of life.

What is intended here is to present a model of Dominican *Lectio Divina*, seeking to live and walk with the Word of God as a community throughout the week, using some of the biblical texts of the Sunday liturgy. The model we present here of *Lectio Divina* consists of eight steps, to be practiced during the week, culminating with the Sunday preaching. There are some steps which are designed to be practiced communally, and others on a personal level. The weekly timetable that is proposed for each step serves only as an example, providing a framework, a weekly rhythm for *Lectio*. Each community will find its own pace.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday

1. ATTENTIVE, CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE: *Lectio Divina* is practiced each day in an atmosphere of silence and contemplative listening. Each time we gather to hear the Word during the week, both on a personal and communal level, we begin with silence. Timothy Radcliffe, OP says:

Only if we learn to remain in the silence of God will we be able to discover the right words, words that are neither arrogant nor empty, words that are both true and humble. Only if the center of our lives is

¹ Martínez, Felicísimo, OP, *Domingo de Guzmán: Evangelio Viviente*, (Salamanca: Editorial San Estéban, 1991), p.100-101.

the silence of God himself, will we know the when language ends and when silence begins, when to proclaim and when to be silent.²

This "remaining in the silence of God" is proper to the prophets. One need only remember Moses before the burning bush in the desert (Ex 3:4-6,) or Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19;8-14) to see the intimate relationship between contemplative silence and listening to the Word – a listening which is at the same time the seed for preaching the Good News. This silence is what Mary lived prior to her consent – her "yes" – to be the mother of the Incarnate Word.

The following true story shows how one man, through his silence and humility, learned to sit each day – with a mendicant and contemplative spirit – in the presence of the Word of God:

A few years ago, a young Dominican friar named Jorge was working a few weeks as a missionary in some rural villages in southern Mexico. Every day Jorge passed by a very humble hut where an old man lived. Each morning the old man would sit down on a stool, with the Bible on his lap. Brother Jorge greeted him in passing, "Good morning, sir," to which the elderly man responded, "Good morning, Padre."

Jorge decided to go and talk to the old man, because until that moment he had only greeted him from a distance. "Good morning, sir, I am Brother Jorge," said the young missionary. "Good morning, Padre, my name is Ramón, at your service." Jorge shook his hand and asked him, "Señor Ramón, what Bible text are you reading this morning? Every morning when I pass by I notice that you are reading the Bible." Señor Ramón looked up at Jorge and replied: "Well, you see, Padre, the truth is I don't know how to read. But you are right, Padre, every morning I sit here and ask the Lord to give me a word to guide me through the day. And you know what, Padre? Every morning God gives me a word, and to this day, has never failed me."

The first step of *Lectio* is precisely that: to sit "in the silence of God," putting our trust in the faithfulness of God's word. As one Benedictine monk says: "No word, however eloquent it may seem, can have real depth, truth, or power to communicate, unless it arises from silence – unless it *expresses*, rather than obliterates that silence..."³ And Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century Dominican mystic, said: "If Jesus needs to speak in the soul, she must be alone and silent. Then he enters and begins to speak."⁴

² Timothy Radcliffe, OP, (*Misión en un Mundo Desbocado: Futuros Ciudadanos del Reino*, Roma: Asamblea de SEDOS, 5 de dic., 2000).

³ Cyprian Smith, *Way of Paradox*, p.59.

⁴ *Maestro Eckhart: Tratados y Sermones*, trad. Ilse M. de Brugger (Barcelona: EDHASA, 1983), Sermón I.

2. READING / TEXT OF PROCLAMATION: With the community gathered (or on a personal level), and after an appropriate time of silence, we read the biblical text calmly and clearly. We can choose for the *Lectio* one of texts from next Sunday's liturgy, (or another text that is convenient). We listen to the words, letting them fall into fertile ground (cf. Mk 4:3).

When we do *Lectio* in community, it is good to hear the same text proclaimed two or three times, and if possible, by different voices, by different people – with periods of silence between each proclamation. We listen as beggars, as Señor Ramón did, hoping that a word or phrase in the text will be given to us, that it strikes us in a special way and falls into the fertile soil of our heart. What does God want to say with this word? Like young Samuel, we respond, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

The reading of the text in this second step is not primarily an intellectual reading. We're not yet trying to understand the text in order to draw conclusions. That step will come later. Now we just put ourselves before the Word with hands and heart open, asking God to speak to us. Fra Angelico's fresco of St. Dominic, sitting at the foot of the cross contemplating the Word, captures well the meaning of this second step. This little parable may help us better understand this step of prayerful reading:

*"A rabbi was approached by a group of his students who had been wrangling over the meaning of a difficult part of the Torah. He asked them to show him the page and then asked what they saw there. 'The words we are disputing about,' they replied, 'the black marks on the page.' 'Right,' he said, 'well, the words contain half the meaning. The white spaces between the words are where the other half of the meaning is to be found.'"*⁵

3. MEDITATION: This step is, perhaps, the most important step of *Lectio*. After hearing and embracing a word or phrase in the text, our "sacred word", we begin to taste it, to chew it, to ponder it. The Prophet Ezekiel recounts his experience of meditation:

I looked and saw a hand stretched out to me with a scroll rolled up. He opened it before me ... and in that book were written lamentations, wailings and woe. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this book and go speak to the people of Israel '. I opened my

⁵ Laurence Freeman, OSB, *Jesus: The Teacher Within*, ch. 4, p.84.

mouth and he made me swallow the book, and he said to me, 'Eat and fill your stomach with this book that I give to you'. I ate it, then, and it tasted sweet as honey in my mouth "(Ezekiel 2:9-3:3).

Each person brings the word or phrase in his or her inner silence, where it can be pondered throughout the week. Sebastian Painadath, SJ says, "The word *meditation* comes from the Latin verb *to meditare* which means 'to go to the center' ... It is a pilgrimage to the divine center of our being."⁶

When we do this step as a community, after the second proclamation of the text, we **ECHO** a word or phrase from the text. Each person says aloud the word or phrase of the text that has touched him or her. We do not comment on the text, we only share our sacred word with the others. It is possible that two or three people may *echo* the same word. We listen to all the *echoes*, recognizing the movement of the Spirit within the community. The Word carries a treasure within oneself. We meditate on the Word until we discover "the pearl of great value" (Mt 13:46).

Thursday, Friday, Saturday

4. CONTEMPLATE THE WORD IN THE WORLD: "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched, concerning the Word who is life ... this we make known" (1 John 1:1-2). During the week, as we listen to and meditate on the biblical text, both personally and communally, we discover – with our eyes and ears open – the active presence of the same Word of God in the world around us. Our contemplation is part of our prophetic vocation. God speaks to us from all that surrounds us. Do we not perceive the Word in everyday life, in the signs of the times? What is God speaking to us?

The courage of the future consists, first of all, in the ability to see things with new eyes. Christ has taught us to see things, people, events with new eyes ... They, too, are signs of the times, paths to God, the presence of God, the Word of God...⁷

5. Prayer: As we continue to ponder (*ruminare*) the words of the text, we respond to the Lord with words and feelings that arise from the heart. Our listening has made us more attentive and in touch with the situations that surround us in the world. Now we come before God in response to

⁶ Sebastian Painadath, SJ, *The Spiritual Journey*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 7.

⁷ Vincenzo di Couesnongle, OP, "Il Coraggio del Futuro."

the gift of the Word. Our prayerful dialogue with God can happen at both a personal and community level. It is happen in many ways: through expressions of gratitude and joy; addressing God with awe and tears; presenting to God our concerns and confusion; or expressing ourselves lovingly or through song or blessing or praise; through intercessory prayer, or simply by being in God's presence in silence and adoration. Prayer does not have a single form. We simply approach the God who first approached us.

6. STUDY AND REFLECTION: After listening, sharing, and praying the Word, we move into the fruitful step of study. Study, in the Dominican tradition, is one of the dimensions of prayer. The two moments compliment one another. As Timothy Radcliffe, OP, says:

Study is not learning how to be clever but how to listen...This receptivity, this opening of the ear which marks all study, ultimately is deeply linked to prayer. They both require of us that we be silent and wait for God's Word to come to us. They both demand of us an emptiness, so that we wait upon the Lord for what He may give us...True study makes mendicants of us.⁸

When we do this step of study at the communal level, it is like putting our loaves and fishes into a common basket – the fruits of our labor. Jesus multiplies our sharing. We can study in small groups, or divide the work among several people, and then share the fruits of the study with the whole community.

Sunday

7. PRAXIS AND PREACHING: The community, aware of the presence of God in the Word and the people, responds through the practice of love, mercy and justice. For us, Dominicans men and women, we incarnate our *Lectio* through preaching and the daily living out of our Christian life. We are the hands, eyes, ears, heart – the Body of Christ in the world. We discover what it means to be a *holy preaching*, a manifestation of the Incarnate Word today. We share with the world the fruits of the Reign of God that we have discovered in our encounter with the Word of Life.

⁸ Timothy Radcliffe, OP, *Wellspring of Hope*.

One concrete form to give expression to the experience of the weekly *Lectio Divina* could be that one of the members of the community preaches on Sunday (or Saturday evening), using the text that has been prayed, mediated on and studied throughout the week. This short preaching (5-7 min.) could be done, for example, during the celebration of Vespers, and it would be an outward expression of the prayerful listening of the whole community.

Every day

8. CONTEMPLATION: Contemplation is not just one more step in the process of *Lectio Divina*. It is a free Gift of God that normally surprises us when least expected. "It is the knowledge of God imbued with love" (St. Gregory the Great), and it becomes a reality in us when God "gives birth to the Word" in the soul (Meister Eckhart). Sometimes we recognize the moment when the Word is born in us, but often it goes unnoticed, the silent work of the Spirit. Contemplation is recognized by its fruits. It is to experience the closeness and intimacy with God in the present moment, in our communion with others.

[Contemplative] prayer is not a half time task. There are no part-time contemplatives. Living in God's presence should be as natural to the Christian as breathing the air that surrounds us. It is the spontaneous expression of our love for the Lord, knowing that we are sons and daughters of God.⁹

The contemplative is the person who has risked his or her mind in the desert – beyond language, beyond ideas – where God is found in the nakedness of the pure trust ... in our being poor and incomplete.¹⁰

You, Eternal Trinity, are a deep sea. The more I plunge into you, the more I discover You and the more I seek You. You are insatiable, You in whose depths the soul is satisfied and yet remains hungry ... longing to see You with light in your light.¹¹

⁹ Henri Le Saux, OSB – Abhishiktananda.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton OCSO.

¹¹ St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*.