SCRIPTURAL MEDITATION
Father Michael Buckley, OCD

I. INTRODUCTION Perhaps I should say a few words by way of *apologia* for this paper. It is not at all Carmelite in character; it does not deal with any specifically Carmelite aspect of spirituality or method of prayer. Yet I feel that it is perfectly in order, and even very useful, to present it here in this Carmelite conference. Let me say why:

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council emphasized that each Order and Congregation should be renewed and inspired by a return to its original spirit - its founding charism. Subsequently many admirable efforts have been made to fulfill the mandate of the Council; and many religious communities have in this way rediscovered the riches of their heritage. Sometimes the search has been painful and arduous; but invariably it has been worthwhile and beneficial. Communities and individuals have reaped a rich harvest from the resulting research and study.

II. FOUNDERS' CHARISM One aspect not so much noticed in all this: the benefits accruing to the universal church. Individual religious groups have been enriched by contact and communion with the special charism of their founders. But many orders too have been inspired by tapping the resources of orders and congregations distinct from their own. We have all become more aware for example of the Jesuit (am I correct?) insight into spiritual discernment in the context of directed retreats. We are all very familiar now with the Franciscan spirit of detachment and poverty, the Cistercian spirituality of silence and quiet; and the dignified and profound Benedictine spirit of liturgical prayer. I should hope too that the church in general is now more keenly aware of our Teresian way and methods of prayer. In a wider contest, we are all somewhat familiar with Orthodox spirituality - even the words *poustinia* and *poustiniks* do not puzzle us any more.

It is in the interest of this larger context - universal church spirituality, so to speak, that I leave aside our own Carmelite spirituality for the moment to speak of a form of prayer which in ancient times was known as *lectio divina*. I will later try to justify the title: Spiritual Meditation, my very own translation of those almost untranslatable Latin words.

On a certain Monday evening some time ago I was walking in the Church grounds in Alhambra, reciting Vespers. It happened to be the fourth week of the month, a ferial day. I had just recited the Magnificat, and the intercessory prayers which follow it, and I came to the final prayer. This is what I read: "Stay with us, Lord Jesus, for evening draws near; and be our companion on our way, to set our hearts on fire with new hope. Help us to recognize your presence among us in the Scriptures we read, and in the breaking of bread."

That evening I was scheduled to give a talk on the scriptures - one of a series - to a group of people. I had been casting about in my mind for an inspiring thought to serve as a kind of preamble to my talk. I immediately realized that I had found the thought I was looking for in this prayer.

III. DISCIPLES AT EMMAUS I recall that episode just now because I want you to appreciate that beautiful prayer. You will recognize immediately its scriptural inspiration. "Stay with us...for evening draws near...be our companion on our way...set our hearts on fire..." The two disciples on the road to Emmaus: dispirited, dejected, without hope; the Stranger who joined them as their companion: their eyes "held" so that they did not recognize him; he explaining to them all the scripture passages which had reference to him; they pressing him to stay with them, for it was towards evening. When he blessed bread and distributed it to them their "eyes were opened" and they "recognized" him. Later they recalled how their hearts were on fire as he spoke with them and explained the scriptures to them. And they recounted to the apostles in Jerusalem all that had happened, and how they recognized him "in the breaking of bread."

That is the scriptural background and inspiration: the last chapter of St. Luke's gospel. It is also the last of the special passages which St. Luke, alone of all the evangelists, gives us. The story of the disciples at Emmaus bids fair to be the most loved passage in Luke's gospel. And, typical of Luke's insight and theology, it brings us face to face with a profound spiritual reality: that of presence: Christ's presence, how we recognize it and become conscious of it. And how we become aware of him present to us and speaking to us in the words of Scripture.

IV. PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES Our forefathers in the faith - Christians down the centuries - were fully convinced of this spiritual reality. They reverenced the Scriptures, prayed the Scriptures, looked to the Scriptures for inspiration and comfort especially at decisive moments of their lives. We have so many instances of this that it is difficult to select one as an example. I feel that the one I am choosing is the most dramatic of all, and the most elegantly described. I will not tell you until the end who is speaking: but I am sure the majority of you, if not all, will recognize who it is.

"Such things I said 'How long, O Lord, how long...' weeping in the most bitter sorrow of my heart. And suddenly, I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy's voice or a girl's voice, I do not know; but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again: 'Take and read, take and read'...Damming back the flood of my tears, I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open the book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open it. So I was moved to return to the place where Alypius was sitting, for I had put down the Apostle's book there when I arose. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh and its concupiscence'[1]...I had no wish to read further and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away."

V. POWER OF THE WORD You will immediately recognize that celebrated passage, the conversion of St. Augustine, so graphically and dramatically described by himself in his Confessions.[2] The climax of his religious experience came as a result of reading and reflecting a text of Sacred Scripture. Such is the power of the Word, verified so often in people's lives, most palpably in the lives of the saints. But we should not think that the power of the Word of God is verified only in the lives of the saints or in the distant past; it is an ever-present reality with all of us, in one degree or another. Which of us, for example, has not experienced, as we listen reflectively to a liturgical reading, a very real sense of God's presence, of God speaking to us. Can we recall, for instance, an occasion when we felt overwhelmed with care, overburdened with sorrow, bereft of any sense of God's providence. Maybe it is just at such a moment that we hear the words: "Therefore be not anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor yet for your body, what you shall put on. Is not the life a greater thing than the food, and the body than the clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they do not sow, or reap, or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you of much more value than they? But which of you by being anxious about it can add to his stature a single cubit? And as for clothing, why are you anxious? Consider how the lilies of the field grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these."[3]

Or we may feel humiliated about our faults and failings, caught in the grip of a diffidence born of pride and self-reliance; oblivious of God's merciful love - perhaps it is just at such a moment we find ourselves in church as the reading is proclaimed from the gospel of Luke, Ch. 15...the three stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost or Prodigal Son.

Or again, our faith is being tested, God seems far away, we are in a cloud and suddenly as if by inspiration we open Luke, Ch. 24; read that consoling story of the disciples meeting Jesus unexpectedly on the road to Emmaus; confessing later that their hearts were burning as he talked to them on the way, and how they recognized him in that, and in the breaking of the bread. I merely speculate; each of you, I believe, can verify this for yourselves. Indeed it may be a much more acute and constant experience, some Scripture text tugging at our heart strings for a long time: indicating that God wishes us to face up to some big decision: "Sell all you have and give to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me."[4]

VI. MONASTIC PRACTICE It is difficult to overestimate the place that the Sacred Scripture had in the life of the early church: it was absorbing, all-embracing. The use of Sacred Scripture for prayer was the monastic practice. It was for the ancient monks what the Exercises are for the Jesuit, what methodical mental prayer is for the Carmelite.

---

[1] Romans 13:13
[2] Book 8, par. 12
[3] Mt. 6:25-29
[4] Mt. 19:21

Many spiritual writers have remarked that Benedict in his rule never speaks of mental prayer. The reason is that Scriptural prayer covers all that we refer to when we mention the name meditation, and more besides.

The word which the early monastic tradition gave to this type of prayer was *lectio divina*. It is a Latin title, because they thought and spoke in Latin. And it is one of those Latin phrases which is well-nigh untranslatable. A strictly literal translation into English would give you the words: "divine reading," which at first sight conveys no precise meaning. The adjective "divine" refers to the book that is used in this prayerful exercise: the Bible. It is called "divine" because, as the early monks were well aware, it is not a book like other books. The Bible is the word of God, which means the Word who created the world, and now desires to re-create it anew.

VII. THE BIBLE AS HISTORY The Bible is merely the expression, in history, of the re-creating Word, re-echoing within the confines of creation, taking it up and fashioning it once more. To succeed in understanding the Bible it is essential to envisage it as a history. It is the history of an assembly of people, an assembly convened by the Word of God, and gradually assuming a certain form both human and divine under the breath of the living word.

Once we comprehend the overall design of God's plan, it is easy to understand how the Scripture can become the whole of our meditation. And we experience in ourselves how the Scripture unfolds itself on three levels or planes. The first is the plane of the history of the people of Israel. The second is the plane of the history of Christ. The third is the plane of the history of the church being built up by our own history. Consequently everything in the Bible relates to us; it is threaded through with great themes, the final application of which refers wholly to us in Christ.

So much for the word "divine," indicating the sacred source of the lectio. What about the reading itself. It is here especially that we must take a profound effort to understand. *Lectio* means literally "reading," but it has not at all the same meaning that we give to the word. If this is to be prayer, and it is, one does not read just in order to have read; here we do not read to retain an idea or a formula, something which will be useful on a future occasion. It is better to liken the exercise to a conversation with a friend; enjoyed for its own sake, and not merely for what we can learn from it. Or we might compare it in a way to intellectual culture; it is of value not for what we learn from it, but through what it makes us become.

VIII. NOT MERELY INTELLECTUAL Entry into this wisdom is clearly not a purely intellectual matter. It might in fact be termed sacramental: it renews in us that of which it speaks to us. We feel that we must lend ourselves, dedicate ourselves as the material of its creative work. It becomes eminently personal, the true mark of prayer. Origen of old distinguished several categories among the readers of the Word. First, those who listen to it with pleasure, but merely as if it were music which delights for the moment, without making any permanent impression. Then there are those who drink it in like rich wine and who are intoxicated with a holy fervor. But the only genuine "hearers of the Word" are those who become, through the Word, "doers of the Word." They are those whom the word of the Cross bruises in their turn. They are those who go down to the wine press with the vine dresser and concur in this crushing of themselves as the necessary condition of their rebirth. They will become hearers of the Word only if they themselves have first of all been touched and marked with its imprint of fire.

The ancient monks distinguished four aspects of this sacred "reading": (the) reading (itself), meditation, prayer and contemplation. These were not four degrees of prayer, as they sometimes seem to mean for us. They were four aspects of a single organic activity. We might attempt to describe the activity or process this way. A person might sit down, Bible in hand, in reverence, in silence. A few moments should be spent in making oneself aware of the presence of God, the presence of Christ among us as we read the Scriptures. Then one should begin to read. The selection can be quite capricious: it may be some passage at random; it may be the continuation of a sequence; it may be a favorite passage depending on our mood. It is interesting to note that the ancients always did the reading aloud: it was always articulated. St. Benedict presupposes this when he prescribes that during siesta anyone who wants to read rather than rest should do so in such a way as not to disturb anyone else (48, 5).

IX. PRAYER OR CENTERING This method of prayer which begins with the reading of Scripture and is closely aligned with the Word of God, draws attention to a long-standing Christian tradition. This recognizes the value of repetitive vocal prayer as a route to contemplation. That ancient tradition is corroborated in our own day by the theory and practice of what is termed the "prayer of centering" (a term we owe to Thomas Merton) corroborated also by the present vogue of eastern mystical practices: mantras, etc. The mantra is a secret word, a word unique to the individual, a word which has power to evoke the personal identity as Christians; a Word which, when we know and love it, can inspire us, can liberate us from all that holds us back from God, and bring us to the apex of Christian fulfillment.

That Word is Jesus, and that Word is deep within us all. Reading the Scriptures aloud is the beginning of prayer because it sets up a rhythm of prayer, a cadence of peace and concentration which is a necessary preamble to prayer. The word of the text is meant to evoke the Living Word within me. The Holy Spirit who inspired the authors of scripture is the same Holy Spirit who has been given to me in Baptism and Confirmation, the Spirit who is the soul of the Church. Perhaps the words of St. Paul have relevance here: "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought: but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with the sighs too deep for words. He who searches hearts knows what the Spirit means, for the Spirit intercedes for the saints, as God himself wills."[5]

A careful, slow, reverent, vocal reading of the text which will form the basis of my prayer is essential; it is important to use the voice and even the breathing as aids to establishing the atmosphere of prayer. All this is an implied act of faith; in God who wills that I should know him and sense his presence by giving myself over to His word in Scripture.

The four "stages" of prayer might proceed like this:

LECTIO After I have composed myself and read the Scripture passage carefully and reverently, I may pause to collect, or center my thoughts and feelings. Then I may go over again what I have read - silently, this time. The point of this exercise is that, after a faithful and reverent reading, some particular words or phrases of the text may strike me as being particularly meaningful or moving. If the passage has been about sin and forgiveness, for example, some words about the ingratitude of sin, or the kind mercy of God may have impressed me in a special way. In the first phase, I use my voice to open my heart to God; in this second phase I am trying to open my emotions and feelings to Him. I think of the way in which the great mystics allowed themselves to be profoundly moved by memories for example of the Passion of Our Lord.

MEDITATIO The next step is to find meaning within a given reading. If I am concerned with sin for forgiveness, I can go on to consider its implications; I can draw lessons about sin and the merciful forgiveness of God. I can explore the feeling which it arouses in me. I seem to recall that St. Thomas Acquinas said that the formal object of Theology was not knowledge, but love. Francis Thompson, in his famous poem "The Hound of Heaven," pictured God as relentlessly pursuing his creatures, seeking their love. Perhaps man too is a pursuer. With a mind and heart insatiably hungering for knowledge and love, he does pursue God, seeking to understand His life and gifts. And it is in prayer that we really share the life and gifts of God.

CONTEMPLATIO/ORATIO This step is surely the most difficult to describe; it is the very heart of this method of prayer. There are two things involved here: a) a person's attempt to contemplate God, and b) a person's realization that God is contemplating them. In the Catholic tradition we have always maintained the distinction between "active" and "passive" contemplation: active contemplation being one's own efforts to penetrate into the mystery of the life of the Trinity: passive contemplation being a person's surrender of one's self to the Trinity which penetrates sacramentally and mystically into our life. It may be that such interpretation of God and the praying soul cannot be programmed into any method of prayer. The best we can do is to encourage ourselves to be "active" - to seek out a deeper sense of the mystery of God's presence. But we should also cultivate a certain awareness of waiting for the Lord and a conviction that He does come. Continuing with the subject of sin and forgiveness, the perfection of prayer would be to have this experience: that while I am using my voice, searching my emotions, analyzing my mental powers to derive deeper meaning from all I have read - while all this is going on, I am taken hold of by the awareness that at this very moment while I am struggling to find God, He has found me in the very center of my being. While I recite, mull over and reflect deeply on the theme of forgiveness, He is loving and forgiving me. While I search for Him, he has found me. This is real prayer: to be caught up by the Lord while we were trying to find Him.

X. SPIRITUAL GROWTH In such a form of prayer, there is little self-reflection in the way of attempts to define the type of prayer or state of spiritual growth. This is for God to know, not for us. The deep mysterious touch of the Holy Spirit incarnates God's word in us in silent mystery, in deep consolation, or in the mysterious knowledge that arises from union with the sufferings of Christ. St. Paul speaks of the scriptures in this way: "All the scriptures were

[5]Rom. 8:26-27

written for our instruction, in order that through the encouragement they give us we may derive hope with confidence."[6]

At first sight a person might think that here we have only a slightly different version of "spiritual reading": an ascetical exercise which became widespread in post-Tridentine spirituality. Monastic tradition however will show that *Lectio* differs considerably from "spiritual reading," or any similar practice of setting aside each day a time for reading of Scripture or religious books. The traditional understanding of *lectio* has qualities and dimensions which go far beyond what we generally understand by spiritual reading.

We all have experienced the joy of curling up in a soft chair with an interesting book. We have taken care of our surroundings; the lights have been adjusted properly; it is our favorite chair; the room is quiet, noises eliminated: we may even have a little drink close at hand, to take care of our immediate needs. We have forestalled any possible interruptions, and concentrated our attention on the act of reading.

XI. CONCENTRATION In a similar way, we begin our Scriptural meditation with a special discipline of concentration; a concentration which reaches far deeper into the personality and calls for much greater attention. The first step is to strive to bring our entire life into a focused awareness; and this can be most clearly concretized in a complex act of reading. This concentration begins with an attention to our bodily posture. All too often it may be overlooked that prayer depends upon a physical substratum. Authors insist on this, even to the extent of telling us that we should sit up straight, be in an alert yet relaxed pose, and feel perfectly composed and comfortable. Even the reading which is part of this prayer is "physical." We are to pronounce the words with our lips, at least in a low tone. Consequently we hear the sentence seen by the eyes, just as today, in order to learn a language, we are advised to pronounce the words. The result is more than a visual memory of the words: the sacred text is inscribed, so to speak, in the body and the soul.

XII. THE WHOLE PERSON Even more important is the step of concentrating and centering all of one's mental abilities. Intellect, memory, will, affections and emotions are still engaged in the process. It is a work which engages the whole person, all the faculties and emotional powers. It is not possible simply to plop into a chair and immediately begin meditation; exterior and interior disciplines are demanded. Our mental and affective powers are brought into a state of readiness by exercises that increase our self-awareness. An element in this self-awareness is the sensitivity which comes to us from the presence of beauty; natural beauty, artistic beauty, or liturgical beauty. Invariably, in the ancient monastic tradition great care was taken to ensure that the religious lived in the presence of beauty. I am always impressed when I visit great monastic establishments (sometimes ruined) at the attention given to this. Often it is the beauty of the natural surroundings - think of how Benedict, Bernard, Francis, St. John of the Cross appreciated this. It can also be the beauty of artistic achievement; or liturgical celebration. Prayer in the ancient tradition was intimately bound up with these forms.

A collection of ancient patristic texts dealing with meditation, which has had an enormous influence since its appearance in a Venetian edition in 1782, goes under the lovely name Philokalia - "love of the beautiful." Perhaps, after all, an appreciation of the good and beautiful has a great deal to do with meditation and prayer.

And this reference to beauty is the note on which to end. I have said something: the rest you can fill in yourself. In the end, prayer is not a matter of theory, but very much of practice.

XIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY 1. Please refer to Article 4 of the OCDS Rule.

****

[6] Rom. 15:4.