CHAPTER 11

Lectio Divina & Carmel’s Attentiveness to the Bible

Summary: This chapter reminds us of the central importance of the Scriptures in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and then goes on to review the essentials of Lectio Divina meditation on the Bible. Whilst there is great flexibility in approaches to Lectio Divina, the basic dynamic is: reading or listening to the text; meditation, through which one seeks to understand and ponder the meaning; prayer, inspired by the fruits of meditation; leading to making space for God, so that God can give us the gift of contemplation. This chapter explores how Lectio has developed as an attitude of the heart rather than a strict methodology, how this attitude was present in a perfect way in Elijah and Mary, and how it enables our relationship with Jesus to grow.
Get prepared: Having a Bible to hand ought to be second nature for Carmelites, and it would certainly be advisable whilst studying this chapter. Any translation will do; the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is widely acclaimed and available in a variety of study and popular editions (make sure you get an edition with the ‘Catholic’ books included, sometimes known as the Apocrypha). Get together any materials you might need to take notes or highlight points in the chapter. Begin your time of reflection with a prayer, perhaps inspired by Scripture; why not simply read the Gospel text of the day and spend some time in silent reflection.

Holy Words

Reading the Scriptures has long been a key practice for Christians and the custom has its roots in Judaism. Devout Jews are expected to know Holy Scripture (especially the first five books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch or Torah), to study it, and to take it into their hearts. This is summarised in the Shema (in Hebrew שֶׁמֶא), a fervent declaration of the Oneness of God, based on Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

...אָחד יהוה אלהינו יהוה ישראל שמע

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them...
when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The *Shema* reminds us that the reality of God’s presence (as we discussed in Chapter 9) must be written within our very hearts, and God’s Word should be with us whatever we are doing. Bearing the Word of God within the heart comes about through the process of *interiorisation*, that is, not only listening to the Scriptures but also allowing them to transform us. Once upon a time every Jewish male was expected to write out a copy of the Torah because copying helps the memorisation process. You can read more about Judaism’s approach to the Scriptures from books listed in the bibliography at the end of the chapter (especially *The Spirituality of Judaism* and *Like the Deer that Yearns*).

**Attending to the Scriptures**

In the early days of the Christian community, the Jewish practice of everybody reading and reciting the Scriptures continued among the followers of ‘The Way’ (as Christianity was first known). It was not until much later that Bible reading was reserved to clergy and religious. The Desert Fathers and Mothers of early Christianity were also avid readers of Scripture. They would memorise parts of the Bible in order to meditate on them and to allow the Word of God inscribed within their minds and hearts to form them and help them turn gradually into saints by the grace of God.

Most probably the hermits on Mount Carmel around the year 1200 learned passages of the Bible off by heart, especially the Psalms. They would not have read these passages in silence but most likely proclaimed them aloud, filling the valleys with the sound of God’s Word.

The hermits on Carmel were following the tradition of the hermits of the desert who had first begun to gather in monasteries from the fourth century onwards. Monasteries (and eventually friaries and nunneries) developed across Europe, and in time these communities reached such a size that there could be hundreds of religious located in one building. Order was kept among so many people by establishing timetables. In Western Christendom everything formal was written in Latin and the timetable was called the *Horarium*. The
Horarium set the schedule for the various chores that needed doing around the place, as well as meals and constitutionals, in order to preserve time for the most important aspect at the heart of religious life, the Liturgy, especially the Mass and the Divine Office. Additionally, there was often a special place reserved within the Horarium for something called *Lectio Divina*.

**Did you know?** The expression *Lectio Divina* was first used by Origen (c.185-254), a Father of the Church. He affirmed that to read the Bible profitably it is necessary to do so with attention, constancy, and prayer.

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### What is *Lectio Divina*?

*Lectio Divina* is simply the Latin term for reading of a ‘holy’, ‘spiritual’ or ‘divine’ nature. It is both a practice and a process, and there are many ways of doing *Lectio*, but it essentially consists of reading Sacred Scripture or another religious text meditatively. This ideally leads to prayer, to active service, to closer bonds with the community we belong to, and thus ultimately to God’s gift of himself, known as contemplation.

Every religious community in the Middle Ages practiced *Lectio Divina* in one way or another, though perhaps not always under that title. Religious regulations, including the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and our own Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert*, said that the monk, friar or nun should give time over to holy reading, either on their own or in a group. Pioneers among Bible meditation were the Benedictine, Cistercian and Carthusian Orders.

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**Did you know?** There are a number of similarities between the spiritualities of the Carmelite and Carthusian Orders. Both emphasise the role of silence in prayer and work, both regard the solitude of the cell as essential, and both stress attentiveness to Scripture. The major difference is that Carmelite spirituality places more emphasis upon the role of the community in bringing solitaries together on a daily basis, whereas the Carthusian vocation is to spend more time in solitude, coming together normally just once a week.

As the practice of *Lectio Divina* developed, some people attempted to set down guidelines so that others would be confirmed in good practice. The most famous ‘method’ of *Lectio* was set out in the 1100s by a Carthusian monk called Guigo de Castro (also known as Guigues du Chastel or Guigo II), in his book *Scala Claustralium* (‘The Monk’s Ladder’). Guigo believed that the ‘ladder’ of *Lectio* consisted of four rungs or stages.
The traditional ‘method’ of *Lectio*

Guigo said the first stage was *Lectio* (reading). This meant listening to (not necessarily reading) a passage from the Bible or another spiritual text several times. The second stage Guigo identified was *Meditatio* (meditation). This meant reflecting upon the passage and its meaning. The third stage is *Oratio* (prayer) inspired by the passage which turns us to God. Guigo said that the final stage of *Lectio* – in fact the reason we do it at all – is *Contemplatio* (contemplation); this is a stage that we cannot bring about by ourselves – rather we have to wait for that grace from God, and silence is often recommended as an aid to this.

Don’t get bogged down by the Latin terms, or the idea of *Lectio* as a ‘method’. *Lectio* is really very simple: we read the Scriptures, we reflect upon them, this leads us to prayer, and waiting on God in silence. Finally, this opens our hearts in a spirit of *vacare Deo* and disposes us to God’s gift of contemplation.

**Meditation and contemplation**

Guigo’s breakdown of the stages of *Lectio* is not accepted by everybody today, and many practitioners of *Lectio* would add the importance of *Collatio* (sharing the insights of others in a group) and *Actio* or *Operatio* (allowing *Lectio* to lead you into concrete action and service of others). However, Guigo does point out to us that *Lectio’s* purpose is to lead us to the point of contemplation, that is, an openness to God and God’s action in our lives. Meditating on the Bible in the spirit of *Lectio* disposes us to seek union with God in contemplation. Previous chapters have already pointed out the difference between meditation and contemplation. This is how it is described in a modern book about *Lectio*:

> **Meditation** refers to a reading process in which words and events are prayerfully pondered and reflected on with the object of drawing from them some personal meaning or moral. It is basically an activity of the intellect and reason, aided by grace. **Contemplation** is variously described as a ‘resting’ in God, or a ‘loving gaze’ upon him, or a ‘knowing beyond knowing’. All attempts at verbalizing the experience necessarily fail to express the reality, for the simple reason that contemplation transcends the thinking and reasoning of meditation.

(Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, p. 9).

We Carmelites – like all humanity – are called by God to become contemplatives. Therefore *Lectio* is not an end in itself; we practice *Lectio* in order to be united face to face with the living God. There are other means of becoming contemplative, but the Carmelite tradition over the centuries has constantly recommended *Lectio* and the pondering of the Bible as a particular element of our charism.

**Did you know?** Carlos Mesters, O.Carm. (1931-) is one of the Carmelite Family’s greatest exponents of *Lectio Divina*. Dutch by birth, he has lived mostly in Brazil, praying with the Bible amid the Christian Base Communities. Fr. Carlos says that the Church has much to learn from the way the poor read the Scriptures, and he recommends group
Lectio as well as individual Lectio so that we can hear God speaking to us not only through the Bible but also through the insights and experiences of one another.

Stop and think: Can you recall any occasion when you were inspired to undertake a particular action because of your pondering of Scripture?

Lectio: an attitude, not a method

Lectio Divina can be practiced on your own or as part of a group. It can be done in complete silence, or with group discussion. It can be done for a few minutes, or for over an hour. It can be done with a single line of Scripture, or with a longer passage. Some religious orders tend to emphasise one particular method over another. There are many guidelines for how Lectio might be done, and among the Carmelites who have written on the practice are Carlos Mesters, Joseph Chalmers, and Bruno Secondin (see the resources listed at the end of this chapter). But it is very easy to become embroiled in technique, and that is not the point of Lectio at all. What method you choose is not as important as developing a regular habit of encountering God in the Bible and in other spiritual writings such as those of the Carmelite saints. This might mean setting aside half an hour each day to pray with a Gospel passage, or it might mean reflecting on a line from the readings at Mass. This pondering of the Word can happen as a designated activity, or be something that we ruminate upon as we go about our other routines and tasks.

Although Lectio involves reading or listening, it is naturally inclined towards simplicity and silence. As we read in the last chapter, Carmelites are aware that listening to God is more important than speaking to him. Through Lectio our hearts penetrate the words and discover the Word; or rather, the Word penetrates our hearts. Therefore most Lectio sessions – however long or short they are – consist mostly of silence in which we open our hearts and make ‘space for God’ (vacare

Carlos Mesters preaching on the Word of God at Aylesford Priory in 2006.

Bruno Secondin, O.Carm., has encouraged Carmelites to return to their roots in pondering Scripture and the Rule of Saint Albert.
Deo). Some have likened the dynamic to a meeting of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in which people remain silent, speaking only when they feel truly moved by the Holy Spirit. Many practitioners would recommend sitting in complete silence for the last 5 or 10 minutes of any Lectio session, setting aside the text itself and simply resting in the presence of God. In the silence we can try to clear the mind (as much as is ever humanly possible), perhaps selecting a ‘sacred word’ from the text to voice silently in the heart when we become distracted, a word that symbolises our desire to give the time and space to God (our intention rather than just our attention).

The contemplative gaze

Ultimately, Lectio becomes an attitude rather than a method. The gift of contemplation from God gradually allows us to read everything – not only the Bible but also our own lives and the world around us – with the eyes of God, and to love with the heart of God. Developing a Lectio-type awareness means that we can pick up a newspaper and read it with a contemplative gaze.

The idea behind Lectio is the same now as it was for the monks who followed Guigo’s guidelines, and it is really very simple and beautiful. The Bible is a collection of holy texts written by human hands but inspired by God so that he could communicate with his people. God still wishes to communicate to us through Holy Scripture which is ‘alive and active’ (Hebrews 4:12), and which guides, rebukes, comforts and teaches us. As we ponder the Bible – whether in Lectio or in any other form of Biblical prayer – we gradually come to see how our lives can be read within the light of God’s Word, and discern how God is speaking to us today through the ancient Scriptures.

Lectio: in the spirit of the Rule of Saint Albert

When the bell indicated the time for Lectio Divina in a medieval monastery, the religious would stop whatever they were doing and go to their cells or gather together to read. They might do that for between 2 and 3 hours a day, as well as listening to holy texts in the Liturgy and over meals in the refectory.
Medieval Carmelites followed timetables too, and the additions to the *Rule of Saint Albert* made by Pope Innocent IV in 1247 speak of observing the canonical ‘Hours’ of the Divine Office throughout the day and night. The first task of a religious in the Middle Ages was to learn the Psalms of the Office by heart so that they could always live with the Scriptures within themselves; their hearts became living books containing God’s Word. The Divine Office and *Lectio* are part of the same process: listening regularly to the Holy Word and using it as a way of discovering the one God who dwells deep within us.

*Lectio Divina* is not unique to our Carmelite Order, but it is profoundly in the spirit of Carmel because the *Rule of Saint Albert* (printed at the front of this book) says that the Carmelite is to ‘stay in his (or her) own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord’s law day and night and keeping watch at prayers unless attending to some other duty’ (Chapter 10). The *Rule of Saint Albert*, that all Carmelites share as a foundational document, specifies little about a Carmelite’s daily routine, except that pondering the Lord’s law – that is the person of Christ and the Scriptures – is to be the Carmelite’s constant activity. In this regard, our *Rule* echoes the Psalmist:

> Happy are those who have not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, and have not stood in the path of sinners, and have not sat on the seat of the pestilential; but whose desire is the Law of the Lord, and who will meditate on his Law day and night. They shall be like the tree planted by streams of waters, which shall give its fruit at the right time; its leaf shall not fall off, and whatever they do shall prosper.  

*(Psalm 1:1-3, translated by Nicholas King, S.J.)*

In the vision of life approved by Albert, rooted in the Scriptures, Carmelite life is to become a constant *Lectio Divina*, since he says everything we do ‘should have the Lord’s word for accompaniment’ (Chapter 19). Albert demonstrated this in the very structure of the *Rule* itself; many passages are extracts from the Bible or allusions to it woven together.

Albert also recommended that Carmelites should find particular inspiration in a Biblical figure who himself contributed to the canon of Scripture, Saint Paul: ‘You have both the teaching and the example of Saint Paul the Apostle, into whose mouth Christ put his own words. God made him preacher and teacher of faith and truth to the nations: with him as your teacher you cannot go astray.’ (*Rule*, Chapter 20).

Rather than setting strict prescriptions for how we should spend our time, Albert reminded Carmelites that seeking God is not so much about following strict timetables but rather about a general desire to be in the presence of the living God day and night, and that a wonderful way to do this is to immerse yourself in the Word of God.

**Stop and think:** How do you ponder the Lord’s law day and night? What does it mean for you, given your particular life circumstances?
Did you know? A hallmark of the pontificate of Benedict XVI is his call for Christians to return to a prayerful study of the Scriptures. On 16th September 2005 the Holy Father said: ‘I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *Lectio Divina*: the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart. If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.’

God is revealed through Holy Scripture

Carmelites seek to be contemplatives. To grow in friendship with God we spend our time reflecting on the Scriptures, nurturing brotherhood and sisterhood with our fellow Carmelites, and growing in love with the rest of the world. The fuel to sustain this sort of life comes from Christ himself, as we encounter him in prayer, in other people, in the
Climbing the Mountain: The Carmelite Journey

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Eucharist, and in the Scriptures. The Church reminds us of this in the Second Vatican Council document Dei Verbum:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body. (§21)

Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965. It is the Church’s declaration on how God reveals himself to his people, and as one of the great documents produced by a recent Council of the Church it should be studied by all members of the Carmelite Family to deepen our appreciation of the faith. In Dei Verbum the Church teaches us that the Scriptures are just as much part of the bread of life as is the body of Christ in the Eucharist. As we will read in Chapter 13,
the Eucharist or Mass feeds us from both hands: on one hand the reading of Scripture, and on the other hand the body and blood of Our Lord. When we read the Scriptures at home, in addition to what we hear in Mass, Lectio Divina becomes a continuation of that feeding from God.

A phrase often used in conjunction with Lectio Divina is ‘rumination on the Scriptures’. Rumination means literally ‘to chew over’. Some of the early exponents of Lectio Divina likened it to a cow chewing grass; the cow ruminates on the grass, extracting as much goodness as possible. The cow then swallows, regurgitates the grass, ruminates further, and then swallows to another stomach. The whole process is slow and gentle, extracting goodness over a considerable period of time, and producing – like the cow producing milk – nourishment not only for ourselves but also for the benefit of others. Likewise when we ruminates on the Scriptures, gradually, ponderingly, repeatedly, the Word of God gives us food for the journey, and allows us to nourish others on the same pilgrimage through life.

Did you know? In the Catholic and Orthodox liturgies it is traditional for bishops to bless the people with the Book of the Gospel after it has been proclaimed.

Did you know? In the Middle Ages Carmelite scholars helped develop the Church’s understanding of the ‘four senses’ of Scripture. Bible texts can be read in: (1) the literal sense, in which the text is taken at face value; (2) the allegorical sense, which interprets certain passages to produce statements of doctrine from the Christian perspective; (3) the tropological or moral sense, which interprets passages to produce ethical guidelines
What did Jesus think about the Scriptures?

We Carmelites – like all Christians – are called to a life of allegiance to Christ (Rule of Saint Albert, Chapter 2). That being the case, we should consider what Jesus himself thought about the Scriptures.

There is only one Gospel – one Good News of Jesus Christ – and it is recorded in four accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three Gospel accounts are known as the Synoptic Gospels, from Greek words meaning ‘seen together’; the Synoptic Gospels give ‘eye-witness’ style accounts of Jesus’ life, showing a high degree of similarity in terms of content and point of view. According to the Synoptic accounts, Jesus’ public ministry began with his baptism by his cousin John. Jesus then left straightaway to go into the desert where he was tempted. In the desert the only words Jesus used when responding to the devil’s taunts were quotations from Scripture (Luke 4:1-13). When Jesus started preaching it was in the synagogues, where the practice was to read a passage from the Scriptures and comment on it, just as we have our homilies today. According to Luke (4:16-21) Jesus unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and having read the text (sometimes dubbed the Lucan manifesto) proclaimed that ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled

Many ancient depictions of Christ show him holding a book representing his teaching of the Word of God, such as this medieval mosaic in the Cathedral at Cefalù, Sicily.
in your hearing.' Jesus showed the scribes how they had misunderstood Scripture by explaining the true meaning to them (Matthew 22:29-33). At his Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-4) Jesus was not alone; he was flanked by Moses and Elijah who represented the Law and the Prophets recorded in Scripture. Jesus' parables and teachings were littered with references to Scripture.

The account of the Gospel given by John the Evangelist likewise highlights the importance of Scripture to Jesus. John's account was written after the Synoptic Gospels and offers more theological reflection. John demonstrates that Jesus' actions had scriptural echoes, and often his actions are described as taking place 'so the Scriptures would be fulfilled'. The Crucifixion is a prime example. John describes the casting of lots for Jesus' clothing (19:23-24), the drinking of sour wine (19:28), and the piercing with a spear (19:32-37) all in terms of how through them Jesus was the fulfilment of the Scriptures. In John's account of the Crucifixion Jesus declares 'It is finished!' as he dies, meaning that the revelation of God's love for us has been completed: there is no more to say, as John of the Cross explained (Sayings of Light and Love §100). After his Resurrection, Jesus continued to explain the Scriptures to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), causing their ‘hearts to burn’ within them.

In summary, Jesus knew the Scriptures, and is himself Scripture living and breathing. He is indeed the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Jesus is the Word that God the Father speaks to reveal his love for all of us. If we are to become like Jesus, then we too need to be familiar with the same things that Jesus found so important – and one of them was the Scriptures. Jesus was the perfection of Lectio Divina.

The Old and the New Testaments
All four gospel accounts start with a reference back to the Old Testament: Matthew with a genealogy putting Jesus firmly in the line of kings; Mark with a quotation from Isaiah; Luke with the story of Zechariah performing his duties in the Temple; and John with a passage which goes right back to Creation and Genesis. Christianity has no difficulty in reading the New and Old Testaments together.

This partly explains why Carmelites have no difficulty in tracing our own spiritual roots right back to Elijah and Elisha. The Carmelite Family has an important role in reminding the Church of the enduring relevance of the Old Testament.

Elijah and Mary: models of Lectio
The prophet Elijah, Father of all Carmelites, was a man who listened to God’s Word, and acted upon it. He learned to read the experiences of his life in the light of God’s loving presence. He pondered God’s will for him and for the people of Israel, and thus can be seen as a model of Lectio Divina.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother and Sister of Carmelites, is another classic example of someone whose whole life became a Lectio Divina. She knew the Scriptures and thought about them. When she proclaimed her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) Mary’s own voice was full of God’s Word, her hymn of praise being wall-to-wall Scriptural quotations. This was not simply an accident; Mary had interiorised the Bible to such an extent – that is, she had read, absorbed, and lived according to the Torah so much – that she spoke in Scriptural terms. This came about through the Holy Spirit, since Jesus
promised that ‘the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ (*John 14:26*). Mary was reminded by the Holy Spirit of all the great promises of God and burst forth in a song of joy.

Mary was the epitome of *Lectio Divina* because whenever the word and will of God was made known to her she ‘treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (*Luke 2:19, 51*). Our Lady shows us that *Lectio* isn’t confined to when we read the Bible for five minutes or an hour, but rather it is a process that carries on throughout our daily lives. Mary probably knew the words and actions of Jesus more intimately than anyone else, and thought deeply about them. That is why Mary is the perfect example of one who ‘hears the word of God and obeys it’ (*Luke 11:28*).

**Stop and think:** A Carmelite once described Mary as ‘an icon of *Lectio Divina*’. What does that phrase mean to you?

**The Bible in the early Carmelite tradition**

As we read in previous chapters, the Carmelite Family has always regarded Elijah and Mary with reverence as people who proclaimed and pondered the word of God. They are therefore models of *Lectio Divina*, not simply as a method of prayer but as a way of life. Perhaps it is because of our Order’s devotion to these figures from the Old and the New Testaments that we Carmelites have always had a particular attentiveness to the Bible, studying it, reflecting upon it, and preaching it.

As we learned in Chapter 8 on Carmelite history, the Carmelite Order first began to send friars to universities in the Middle Ages. Here it would have been standard for Whitefriars to learn not only about the Bible, but also what famous commentators had written about it. A number of Whitefriars became Bible commentators themselves, and although ours was never the biggest order in fifteenth-century England there were more Carmelite doctors of Sacred Scripture at Oxford and Cambridge than any other group of religious. Many treatises and sermons about the Bible were written by pre-Reformation Carmelites. Most of these were in Latin, but some were in the mother tongue. A medieval Carmelite from Aylesford, Richard Maidstone, wrote a version of the seven *Penitential Psalms* in English verse as a way of teaching people their meaning in Latin:
For love of God, who bought us dear,
To whom we ought to make our cry
Because of sins committed here
In youth and age, so many, aye;
The seven psalms are often sought
To purge us of our faults committed,
And into English they’ve been brought
So sin in man may be repented.

(Preface to Richard Maidstone’s *Penitential Psalms*,
translated from Middle English by Johan Bergström-Allen)

One of the most famous medieval Carmelite texts, *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites* (better known as *The Book of the First Monks*), places great emphasis on the Bible’s importance within our Order. The compiler, a Catalan friar called Felip Ribot, wrote that in the early days of the Order the brothers gathered in the chapel on Mount Carmel, ‘commending themselves to the Virgin in the seven canonical hours each day, pouring forth fervent prayers, petitions, and praises to the Virgin and her Son. There also they assembled for humble discussion about the word of God’ (Book 6, Chapter 5).

We know that some medieval Carmelites promoted Bible-reading among the laity, which was not common in those days. A pious woman in medieval East Anglia, Margery Kempe, records that a local Carmelite, Alan of Lynn (c.1348-1432) discussed the Bible with her on many occasions (*Book of Margery Kempe*, Book 1, Chapters 69 & 70).

**Stop and think:** Do you know of any Carmelite individuals or projects that promote the study of or prayer with Scripture?

Study of the Scriptures is encouraged for all Carmelites, religious and lay; many Bible study resources are now widely available.
Carmel’s promotion of the Bible today

The Carmelite Order today continues to promote reflection on Holy Scripture as a marvellous way of encountering Jesus; indeed, it is one of the foremost apostolates we can offer the Church and the World, whether as lay people or as religious.

Mention has already been made of Carlos Mesters, O.Carm., and his promotion of *Lectio Divina* among the poorest of the poor, sharing with them the liberating message of God’s love to all of us as revealed in the Gospel. Fr. Carlos has written extensively about his experience of *Lectio Divina* and it is largely thanks to him that this important tradition has been rediscovered in the Carmelite Family since the Second Vatican Council.

At an academic level, Carmelites have been in the forefront of Biblical scholarship in modern times. Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (1917-2002), was a renowned scholar and co-editor of the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Craig Morrison, O.Carm., has taught at one of the Church’s leading centres for Bible research, the Biblicum (Pontifical Biblical Institute) in Rome. The former Prior General, Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., has written and translated books on *Lectio Divina*. Among the Discalced Carmelites James McCaffrey, O.C.D., has traced the links between the Bible, the *Rule of Saint Albert*, and the writings of Carmel’s saints. Today, all Carmelite friars must study and reflect upon the Bible as part of their formation, which includes learning an ancient biblical language such as Hebrew or Greek. Lay Carmelites too are expected to immerse themselves in Scripture as part of their formation; the 2003 *Rule for the Third Order of Carmel* states that ‘Great importance is to be given to a prayerful listening to God’s word: *Lectio Divina* involves and transforms the believer’s entire existence’ (§39).
As well as encouraging Bible study, Carmelites help others to ponder God’s word in the prayerful, prayer-filled, attentive reading of Scripture. Twice a month Carmelites in Rome, lay and religious, gather in the ancient Carmelite church of Santa Maria in Traspontina for Lectio Divina. These are attended by a wide variety of people from across the city, including senior Vatican officials. Before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger attended the Carmelite Lectio sessions, and his pontificate has been marked by his frequent calls for the growth of Lectio Divina within the Church.

Lectio Divina has become a way of life central in most Carmelite communities. These communities approach Lectio in a variety of different ways. In some houses of the Dutch Province, for example, the same passage of Scripture will be read at community celebrations for a month, allowing for plenty of rumination. In some Carmelite houses in Italy, Scripture is reading during some meal times, as Chapter 7 of the Rule of Saint Albert recommends. Lay Carmelites are also experiencing and sharing the fruits of Lectio Divina; not only has Lectio become a standard feature of many Lay Carmelite meetings, but it has also proved an effective means of introducing new people to Carmel because it emphasises important aspects of our spirituality: openness to God, silence, attentiveness to the Scriptures, private and public prayer. Since attentiveness to Scripture is common to all Christian traditions, Lectio can also be promoted by Carmelites as a way of overcoming denominational differences, as Carmelite Spirituality Groups have discovered in Britain and Ireland, and beyond.

Knowledge of and immersion in the Word of God is truly characteristic of a community that authentically reflects the Carmelite tradition. Patrick Thomas McMahon, O.Carm., makes the following observation:
The Carmelite today must be a person who is impregnated with the Word of God. This is perhaps why Carmel has never much been given to devotional prayer. The sort of devotions that characterized some other orders, especially those from the 18th and 19th centuries never took hold in Carmel. The prayer life of Carmel has always been simple: the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, and meditation on the sacred text of Scripture.

*(Nine Themes in Carmelite Spirituality)*

**Stop and think:** How do we choose a text for *Lectio*? Some people pick passages for meditation at random, seeing at what page the Bible opens; this method allows plenty of opportunity for the Spirit to breathe, but sometimes the passage is not obviously meaningful. Others choose a favourite passage, but the risk in this is that we only meditate on texts that make us feel comfortable; to avoid this most people choose the day’s readings in the Church’s *Lectionary* cycle. Others go through a book of the Bible bit by bit. Some communities pick a passage that seems appropriate to the theme of their meeting or the needs of the time. What method do you think is best?

**Did you know?** Saint Thérèse of Lisieux had a particular love of Scripture, knowing the gospel accounts practically by heart. To mark the visit of her relics to England and Wales in 2009, the British Province of Carmelites published a collection of articles about how Thérèse lived and loved the Bible, in a book entitled *The Gospel Sustains Me*.

**Carmelite Saints and Scripture**

A long litany of how our Carmelite Saints have read the Bible would not be very useful in an introduction to the topic, but the following summary is informative:

*Lectio Divina*, the practice of the prayerful listening to the Word of Scripture, leads to an ever more intimate communication with Christ and an ever more radical conversion in one’s own life. Today this practice has returned to being a daily form of nourishment in our communities. There are many echoes of this too in the spiritual tradition of Carmel. For example John of the Cross advises: ‘Leave behind all the other things which you still have and limit yourself to only one which contains in itself all the rest: that is sanctified solitude accompanied by prayer and holy divine reading. Persevere in this by forgetting all other things.’ Mary Magdalen de Pazzi compares the Word to Jacob’s ladder which enables us to climb to the Father’s ‘womb’; Thérèse of Lisieux writing to Father Roulland communicates her experience of being a disciple of the Word in this way: ‘I close the book of the wise that breaks my head into little pieces and turns my heart dry and I take the Scriptures in hand. Then everything becomes
clear to me; a simple word unlocks infinite horizons for my soul and perfection suddenly seems so easy.’

*(Growing As Brothers,*
Carmelite Spiritual Directory Project 10 § 2.1.1)*

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The hard part: the Word transforms us

Lectio sounds pretty attractive, doesn’t it? Well, there is a hard part. Not only do the Scriptures tell us the truth about God, but they also tell us the truth about ourselves, and that can be uncomfortable. As you read the Scriptures you find examples not only of holiness but also of all sorts of nastiness: from the pettiness of the disciples arguing about who would be the greatest (Luke 9:46) to David arranging the death of Uriah so that he could marry his wife Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). As we read these sad stories we find so much that actually applies to us. We can be just as self-centred, as unfaithful and capable of sin as the people we read about. We are not inherently evil, but we often choose the selfish and easy way over the will of God. By reading the Scriptures we are brought face to face with the holiness of God and our own deep need of redemption. But that is liberating because the truth is we can open our hearts to receive the mercy of Christ. Lectio Divina is a transforming experience, provided we are honest and prepared to change. It is for this reason that the 2003 *Rule for the Third Order of Carmel* emphasises the role of Lectio Divina, the Divine Office, and the Sacraments so that Carmelites may ‘regularly receive forgiveness for their sins and the grace to continue the journey’ (§37). Lectio develops in us the ‘purity of heart’ (puritas cordis) and ‘space for God’ (vacare Deo) which are so central to the Carmelite way of life.

Lectio waters the desert into a garden

When we looked at Elijah in Chapter 6, the image of fire was prevalent. The image which might serve us best when considering Lectio Divina is water. Reading the Scriptures is like watering the garden. Without water plants grow brittle and eventually die; it is the same with us. We are called to bear fruit that will last (John 15:16), and fruit cannot grow without plenty of water. Like fire, water is a constant image throughout the Scriptures: the Garden of Eden was between the four mighty rivers (Genesis 2:10); when the Israelites crossed the desert God provided water from the rock (Exodus 17:1-7) later interpreted as Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4); Ezekiel had a vision of the river coming from the Temple (Ezekiel 47:1-6); Jesus talked about life-giving water (John 4:14); and Paul said that ‘Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word’ (Ephesians 5:26). And, if you want to extend the metaphor, at Cana Jesus turned water into wine at the behest of his mother. Jesus can transform the water of our lives into the new wine of God’s kingdom, and wine brings joy (Psalm 104:15).

Lectio Divina in the community and in private

Part of the responsibility of the Church is to show us how to develop a relationship with Christ. One of the principal ways in which she does this is through the Liturgy, that is, the public prayers and rites of the Church, primarily the Divine Office and the Eucharist. In the Eucharist or Mass, Scripture is a principal ingredient; we are nourished by both the breaking of the bread and the breaking-open of the Word. The text of Morning
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and Evening Prayer is pretty much all Scripture; the other offices are the same (only in the Office of Readings is a text taken from outside Scripture, such as the writings of a saint). Likewise the Rosary (although not formally part of the Liturgy) is a meditation on Scripture; most of the ‘mysteries’ are Biblical events, and reciting the Hail Mary 150 times (for the original 15 mysteries) corresponded to the 150 Psalms. Through these forms of worship the Church teaches us that one of the principal means of fostering a relationship with Jesus is through reciting and interiorising the Scriptures. Saint Jerome (c.340-c.420), the most famous biblical scholar in Christian history, said that ‘Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ’ (Commentary of Isaiah, Nn. 1.2: CCL 73, 1-3). Thérèse of Lisieux appreciated the truth of this statement, and carried a small book of Gospel extracts next to her heart. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity was deeply influenced by the letters of St. Paul, which led her to the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Did you know? Carmelite missionaries have been taking the Word of God to the people of Latin America for hundreds of years. The pastoral care of a whole region of Peru known as Sicuani is entrusted to the Carmelite Family. Since the North American Province of the Pure Heart of Mary (PCM) arrived in 1949, seven houses of friars have been established as well as communities of sisters. In 1958 the Holy See created Sicuani an Apostolic Prelature; this is similar to a diocese but entirely administered by the Order, and the Carmelite friar in charge of the Prelature is usually ordained a bishop. The Carmelite Family in Sicuani – including lay people – minister to a population of some 300,000 people in 29 parishes and about 800 chapels spread across a vast and mountainous area of Latin America. Evangelizing in this region requires the use of hundreds of catechists, who spread the Word of God in communities with low literacy levels and low incomes.
Did you know? The *Mysteries of Light* which Pope John Paul II added to the Rosary in 2002 were first proposed by a Third Order Carmelite. Saint George Preca (1880-1962) was a priest in Malta, and a Carmelite Tertiary. He formulated the *Mysteries of Light* in 1957 as a way of meditating on the Good News of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Our relationship with Christ is formed within the community of the Church, but we also have a personal relationship with him. *Lectio Divina* is a wonderful way of developing that relationship, either communally or individually. The Liturgy, our worship of God, our relationships with other people are all part of one massive *Lectio Divina*!

Given that we encounter Christ in the liturgies of the Church, why does the Carmelite tradition emphasise individual *Lectio* in private as well as *Lectio* in the community? It could be said that someone who listens to the Word through the Liturgy in a prayerful manner has already done enough *Lectio* for one day. That might be true. However, there are two main reasons why private *Lectio* is also important. The first is that private reading exposes us to more passages from the Bible than are possible from the snatches we hear in communal reading. We therefore appreciate the Bible in a wider context, and are more able to link our public worship of God to our private relationship with God. The second reason is that Jesus wants to develop a direct personal friendship with us. There are things that Jesus wants to say to us personally in the heart – and one of the surest ways for that to happen is through our private meditation on the Scriptures.

*Lectio* is not about studying the Scriptures at an intellectual level, although Bible study is well worthwhile and may richly deepen our appreciation of *Lectio*. Rather, *Lectio* is an aid to fostering ‘the conversation with the one whom we know loves us’ (as Teresa of
Jesus defined prayer. *Lectio* at home on a daily basis enables us regularly to be challenged, comforted and inspired at a personal level. *Lectio* is the most wonderful experience and can very often lead to an emotional outpouring of some sort – whether that is repentance at the recognition of some deep-rooted sinful attitude or sheer joy. Tears are not uncommon with *Lectio* because it opens our hearts to the healing presence of God, and tears can sometimes be more easily shed in private. In the last chapter we considered affective and negative forms of prayer; *Lectio Divina* can blend both approaches. In the early stages of *Lectio* meditating on the passage before us can lead us to respond emotionally, perhaps imagining ourselves in the Biblical scene. In the later stages of *Lectio* we might set the text aside and simply rest in God’s presence without particular thoughts or feelings.

**Stop and think:** As well as pondering God’s word, how do you proclaim it? How do you evangelise?

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**What more can be said about Lectio?**

Lots! In an introductory chapter there is no time to cover more technical matters or specific methods of *Lectio*. The resources listed below discuss *Lectio* in further depth. You could consult all the suggested resources, or you could read this chapter again, but if you do not put on the habit of reading the Scriptures regularly, all the books in the world will never enable you to understand what *Lectio* is truly about, namely a deeper relationship with – a fuller allegiance to – the Lord Jesus Christ. So, pick up your Bible, open it and read it. And read it. And read it. Ruminate upon the Word of God, ponder it in relation to your life. Then you will begin to glimpse the height and the depth of the love of God which passes all understanding (*Ephesians* 3:18-19).

**Conclusion:** In this eleventh chapter we have seen how *Lectio Divina* is more an attitude and way of life rather than a strict method of prayer. We have considered how its various stages can benefit individuals and communities, and we have seen how the Bible has always been placed at the heart of the Carmelite tradition, from the *Rule of Saint Albert* down to the rediscovery of *Lectio Divina* in the twentieth century. We have seen how an attitude of ‘holy reading’ was embodied in the lives of Elijah, Mary, Christ, and the saints of Carmel, who came to read the world around them with a contemplative gaze. *Lectio Divina* is most truly Carmelite, and no process of formation in our tradition is complete that leaves a lay person or religious ignorant of the different theories and practices of *Lectio*.

Perhaps conclude your time of study and reflection with a moment of prayer. Actually doing *Lectio Divina* would be wonderful; you might like simply to pray using a phrase from Scripture that has caught your attention, and ruminate on it in the days ahead.

In the next chapter we will reflect on other aspects of Carmelite living that might be termed Carmel’s attitudes.
Ideas for Reflection, Discussion and Action

- Reflect on any passage in this chapter – or any passage from Scripture – that has stood out as significant for you, either individually or as a community.
- Has your appreciation of Scripture deepened or been affected in any other way since you came to Carmel?
- How much time do I devote to Lectio on my own or with a group? How can I arrange my life to fit in a stretch of time devoted to reading Scripture?
- Do you agree with Pope Benedict XVI that Lectio could bring about a new springtime in the Church? How might this be manifested?
- Am I really willing to allow the process of Lectio to transform me?
- Do some parts of the Bible excite or move me more than others?
- Do I read about the life of Jesus so that I can learn about him? How much of my spiritual reading is from the Bible, and how much is from other sources?
- In what ways do you take Saint Paul as your model and teacher?
- How do you think that Lectio might support you in your work, in your family life, and in your service of others?
- What is the link between Scripture and a spirit of service?
- Do you know anyone that you could introduce to the practice of Lectio Divina?
- How important is it to know something about the Bible’s textual history and biblical culture in order to engage in Lectio?
- Pray for Carmel’s work of evangelization in Sicuani, in your own country, and in other parts of the world.
- Now that you are over half way through this series of reflections on Carmel’s rich spiritual heritage, why not look back over a chapter you have already read and revisit some of your ideas and reactions?
Recommended Further Resources

There are hundreds, indeed thousands, of books and other resources on the Bible, and more titles on Lectio Divina are appearing in bookshops all the time. Any good resource which helps deepen your appreciation of Scripture is worth spending time with, and you might find some study aids useful such as a Biblical commentary or concordance. Realistically, it might be best to start with reading more about how Carmelites have approached the Word of God over the centuries, and some of the following titles would be helpful to you. Best of all is actually reading the Word of God itself and pondering it alone and with others.


Carmelite Curia’s online *Introduction to Lectio*: www.ocarm.org

The Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain: www.cbagb.org.uk


Patrick Fitzgerald-Lombard, O.Carm., *Gospel Reading* website: www.gospelreading.org.uk


Romero de Lima Gouvêa, O.Carm., *Lectio Divina*, available on the Contemporary Authors page of the Carmelite Spirituality section of www.carmelite.org


Chapter 11  Lectio Divina & Carmel’s Attentiveness to the Bible

Patrick Thomas McMahon, O.Carm., *Nine Themes in Carmelite Spirituality*, printed in 2009 in *Carmel in the World* and *Assumpta* magazines, and available online at www.carmelite.org

Carlos Mesters, O.Carm., *Meditating Day and Night on the Law of the Lord*. This is printed at the back of John FitzGerald’s, *Backwards into the Future*, (listed above), and also on the Contemporary Authors page of the Carmelite Spirituality section of www.carmelite.org


Patricia Tomkins, T.O.C., *Feasting on God’s Word*, available online on the Contemporary Authors page of the Carmelite Spirituality section of www.carmelite.org