

II

THE PROCESS OF *LECTIO*

1. Morning solitude

We need to begin the process of *lectio* in a quiet place of solitude. “But you, when you pray, go into your room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is there in secret” (Mt 6:6). The morning is the best time for this because the mind is freer and more vigorous, and the light received will be of use all throughout the day. “And very early, before the beginning of the day, having risen, he went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35). Certain people read before they go to bed, and that is good, they consider that the Word works while they sleep (cf. Mk 4:26-29), and this is true. However, it is quite insufficient; when we want to meet someone we do not encounter that person in our sleep. Now, the Lord wishes to speak to us, he has something to say to our waking mind, and wants to enlighten and guide it throughout the day¹⁵. For these reasons it is good and even preferable to do

¹⁵ The day will be like music, a musical variation on a single theme or even a single musical phrase, that of the light received. Other signs during the day will answer back to it, and the whole will be a concert played on the fundamental note of this light. God, like a pedagogue, continues with one and the same idea, but he develops several nuances. Therefore a day may often be

lectio early in the morning. In any case, it would be useless to do it when one is tired. Our attention is important, because *lectio* is an exercise that requires pooling all of one's existential energy and, therefore, when tired, we are not in the best state for it. Doing it under these conditions would simply not be serious; it would be better to get rest.

2. Before Christ

So we are facing Christ and not just a text; and we want to listen to him. He wants to speak to us through the Readings of the Mass. We usually have two texts: an Epistle (or a passage of the Old Testament [in the Latin Rite]) and the Gospel. The references can be found on the liturgical Calendars. The aim is not to analyse the texts, nor to study them. Reading the Bible, studying, going to Bible-study classes, reading the commentaries of the Fathers, all of this is useful and does not conflict with *lectio*, but these things should be done at another time; as they are simply not the same activity as *lectio*. We may say to ourselves: "Now, I will listen to the Lord who wants to speak to me" but, if I have already meditated on the same text previously, the Lord will be able to tell me something "new" today. The process of *lectio* requires me to make an act of faith: "these two texts are God's words and, therefore, the Word of God". The same texts may say different things to different people and to the same, at a different moment in his spiritual journey. The Word of God accompanies the believer and gives him what he needs according to the spiritual state he is in. We must believe this. Let's take an example: A man taking part in an Ignatian retreat was to meditate on the texts. He already knew one of the texts as he had meditated on it before, so he left it aside. When the Priest accompanying him found out about this, he sent him back to his room to take up the "well-known" text again and listen to what the Lord had to say to him. He was truly surprised to discover that this text spoke "differently" that is, in a new way; but it is possible that the words now striking him were not the same ones he had noted the first time. Each time it is as if the Lord were marking a different word or phrase of the text with a highlighter!

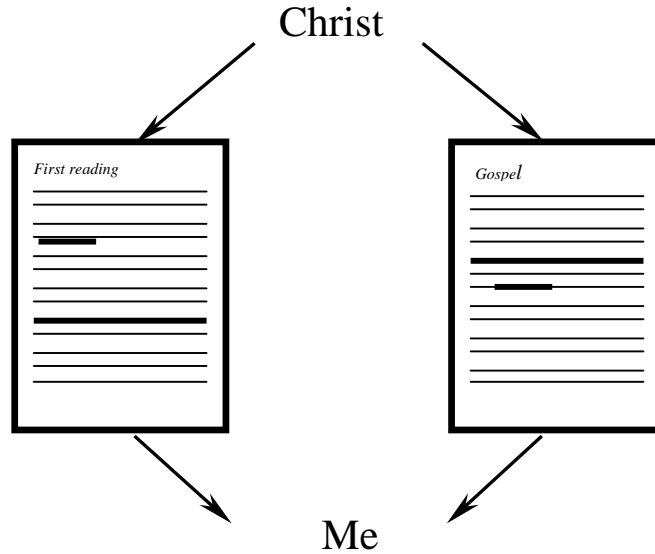
consecrated to a single theme, one light beam. As the days go by, the light beams complete each other and, like in a puzzle, they slowly come together and reveal the entire mystery of God. In this teaching method, the angels play a major part, that Saint John of the Cross attributes to them – following the tradition going back at least to Dionysius the Areopagite – the motion (of the morning): "There is no place for the motion of the appetite **stimulated by the angel** when this faculty (the will) is occupied by something else (i.e. other than God)" (Maxim 54 / Dichos 42) and also: "Observe that your guardian angel does not always incite the appetite to work, although he constantly **illuminates the intellect**; therefore, do not wait to have a impulse to do virtuous acts, given that the intellect and understanding suffice" (Maxim 53 / Dichos 41).

3. Reading the two texts

a) The first request; re-reading

We begin by invoking the Holy Spirit¹⁶. A possible prayer would be: “Come, Holy Spirit, illuminate me, help me to understand the Word today”¹⁷. After invoking Him, we read through the text, it is normal to understand the contents of the text, but this effort to understand should not be transformed into exegetical research or deep study¹⁸. The notes at the bottom of the page may be used, but without being dwelt on. A clear decision as to endurance and patience is necessary as the body significantly slows down the operation of the intellect.

Let us then ask the Lord to tell us what He wants: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening”. This is the first request and the most important one because the entire evolution of the process of *lectio* depends on it.



¹⁶ “But since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another (the first is the intention of the sacred authors) and no less important **principle of correct interpretation**, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. ‘Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written’ (*Dei Verbum* 12, 3)” (CCC 111). We will discuss this question in part IV of the main book on the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ We certainly cannot listen to Christ, nor see him and understand his Word without the Holy Spirit. He connects us with Christ and **vivifies** the relationship.

¹⁸ These approaches may be used at another time. They are not at all the same kind of activity.

b) The quality of the request; the example of the blind man

The quality of this request is decisive. It should be made with a pure intention, with all the energy of our being. The best illustration of the quality necessary for this first request is the call of this blind man¹⁹ who had probably heard one of his beggar friends from another village talk about the Lord who had healed him. One day, while he is sitting on the roadside, he hears the commotion of a crowd. He asks what's happening, and someone tells him that Jesus of Nazareth, in Galilee, is going by. He remembers his friend who has been healed and now sees. His hope is roused, and he cries out: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd continues to pass, he cries out again, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" People push him away from the road; he is a nuisance. The disciples tell him to pipe down "keep quiet, he's got better things to do", but the blind man just keeps getting louder, because the Lord does not seem to be paying attention to him. Then the Lord turns around and asks him to be brought forward. "The blind man throws off his cloak and jumping up onto his feet runs toward Jesus". – What do you want? – I want to see. – Do you believe that I can heal you? – Yes. – May this happen on account of your faith. And immediately he was healed. When this man asked the Lord to give him his sight back, he was not just passing time, amusing himself or asking out of intellectual curiosity. **His entire being was calling out to be healed**²⁰ and to see. He knew what he was expecting the Lord to do, he knew that he could heal him. We should have this same attitude; a request coming from our entire being, as if it was a matter of life or death, a desire to be healed, the desire to see, to see something more for today. And when we go to the doctor we are not ashamed of showing our wound, or wounds. In the same way, here we leave him free; we present him our entire being and ask him to act as he wills.

c) The first reading is not enough

After reading the text for a first time, we may retain a word or a sentence of the text that speaks to us more than the rest. It is therefore possible that the

¹⁹ Mk 10:46-52 and Lk 18:35-43.

²⁰ As an illustration of **the question of desire**, we can read the following story:

"One day, the Lord was walking along the seashore when one of his disciples came up to him and said to him: 'Lord, how can we reach God?' The Lord took his interlocutor into the water and pushed him under. A second later he pulled him back out and, taking him by the arm, he asked him: 'What did you feel?' The disciple answered: 'I felt my life leaving me. My heart was beating so hard I thought it would burst. I frantically tried to breathe and to escape'. The Lord then said to him: 'You'll see the Father when your desire to see him will be as intense as your need to escape and breathe was just a moment ago.'" (Cf. *L'enseignement de Râmakrishna, Paroles groupées et annotées par Jean Herbert* [Paris, 1972], p. 300).

Lord is using this word or sentence to say something to us, but we are not entirely certain of this. The rest of the work aims at acquiring the certainty that this is truly what he wants of us. We usually have the tendency — the majority of the time — of projecting our own thoughts into the text. In fact, we come with our problems and impose them on the Lord, asking him to throw light on them and to give us a solution²¹. He knows very well what we need, he knows our problems, but often, he wants to deal with something else, with something simpler and more concrete. We, on the other hand only want to talk about what troubles us! We need to know how to let go and, from the very beginning of the *lectio*, entrust our problem(s). Actually by putting them on his shoulders, we are doing exactly what we need to in order to be able to listen. A psalm reminds us of this: “Unload your burden on Yahweh and he will sustain you (...)” (Ps 55:23); and the Lord himself says: “Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). He cares for all our worries.

In the parable of the sower, the third patch of ground is good soil but it is covered with thorns. Now, these thorns do not represent our problems, because always there are some, but rather they suggest worry, which like a rope or a heavy chain restrains our hearts. “[Other seeds] fell in among the thorns, and the thorns rose up and choked them” (Mt 13:7). “And that sown among the thorns, is the one who hears the word, and the **anxiety** of this age, and the **seduction** of the riches, choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mt 13:22).

Like a stone on the bottom of the sea, we are paralysed by worry, as if worry were able to change things. “And who of you, by worrying, is able to add one cubit to his life?” (Mt 6:27); “you are not able to make one hair white or black” (Mt 5:36). Now, these chains stifle the Word and prevent us from listening to what the Lord wants to say to us. We must therefore hand over to the Lord everything that preoccupies us. By freeing our heart in this way²², we can consecrate ourselves to the “one thing that is needed”²³: the quest for the Kingdom.

The Lord tells us: “Seek first the kingdom of God and other things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:33). But, in fact, in the majority of our situations, we reverse the Lord’s advice and we ask for “the other things” and, if there’s a small place left, we put “the kingdom of God” at the end of our list. But this

²¹ This way of imposing our problems, desires or requests on the Lord is comparable to a young lady who, sitting next to her prince charming in a secluded corner, puts her hand over his mouth and asks him to speak ...

²² This liberation is the result of an **act**. Nevertheless, the **feeling** coming from the problem may persist after the act, because it belongs to a more exterior sphere of our being.

²³ “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and disquieted about many things, but one thing is needed” (Lk 10:41-42).

is precisely what the Gentiles do, in the words of the Lord, as if a man's life depended on his immediate needs²⁴. We forget that he is aware of all our needs and looks after them²⁵, and that we should not ask for perishable things. He does invite us insistently to "Ask and you shall receive" in fact, he tells us to ask for the Holy Spirit²⁶, the Will of God. In thus giving the first place to God, the heart purifies itself, since the purity of the heart consists in giving this first place to God in a genuine and concrete way.

It usually happens that, even after the first reading of the text, we do not find today's divine light. This may be so either because the text is difficult or because we lack concentration. It then needs to be re-read a second or third time or even more.

d) Not just ideas

The aim is not to pick ideas out of the text. Once someone asking himself if he had done his *lectio* well made a list of the ideas he had found, there were 12 in the first text and 5 in the second, so altogether 17: $12 + 5 = 17$. However, in reality we should come up with: $1 + 1 = 1$, since Christ speaks a single word to us through both texts²⁷. We should avoid applying our intellect to the text, this would be a mistake. We need to be receptive, and that is the most difficult thing to do. Our intellect should not only be silenced but also "malleable" to the text, just like a light-sensitive film, while we wait for a word, a sentence to speak out to us, to imprint itself upon us and come to life, more luminous and more intense than the remainder of the text.

4. Rules of discernment: am I listening or not?

a) Two texts, one word (95 %)

Even after several readings of the first text, sometimes we may not find anything. (The order of reading is not absolute, and one can begin with the

²⁴ "Then he said to them: 'Be careful! Be on your guard against avarice, for even in abundance, a man's life is not secure'" (Lk 12:15).

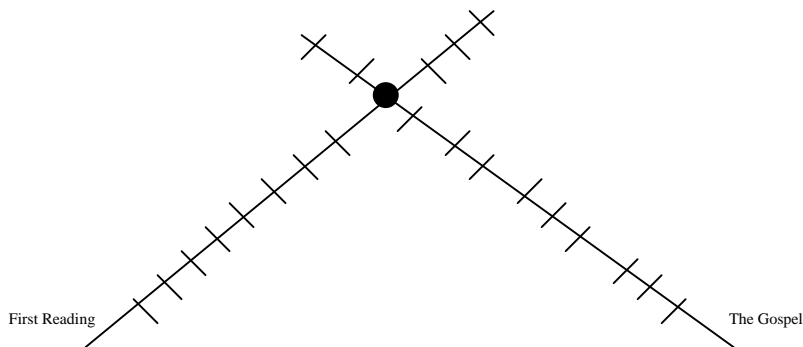
²⁵ "And if God so clothes the herb of the field, that is here today and tomorrow shall be cast into the furnace, **will he not do much more for you**, o men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying: What will we eat? or: What will we drink? or: What will we wear? – all things that the gentiles seek – for **your heavenly Father knows that you need of all these things**" (Mt 6:30-32).

²⁶ "If, then, you, who are evil, are able to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall the Father who is from heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who pray Him!" (Lk 11:13).

²⁷ On Sundays, in the Latin Rite, there are three texts in all (including the Gospel): $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$! It goes without saying that in the course of the week we may add the psalm to the two readings. Nevertheless there is one single light. The psalm may also be used to express our own personal prayer, but that is not properly directly our subject here.

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Gospel.) Then we go on to the second text, and read it attentively. In general, with the Gospel, things light up more easily. However, it could also happen that we receive several beams of light and not just one. We do not know which one comes from the Lord. This brings out the interest of having two texts. Like two lines that can only cross one another at a single point, two texts can only touch on a single idea, "for me", today. One text filters the other, each text eliminates the elements that ought not remain in the other. On the following diagram the short lines on each long line represent the succession of ideas in each text.



At the end, after repeating and insisting, we notice that the Lord only says one thing at a time through the two texts. There is no need to search for words that are literally the same, for example "mercy" here and "merciful" there. Generally, the two texts are not connected, the first one may be an extract from one of Saint Paul's epistles, and the second from the Gospel of Saint Matthew²⁸. Each author follows his own direction. The only common denominator of the two texts is that both are the Word of God and if we encounter the same idea in one and the other, this is either a mere coincidence, or we are starting to hear the Lord.

The fact that the Lord speaks to us through these two texts, with one single idea, brings our certainty to "95 %" ²⁹, he actually has spoken and this does not come from us or from our desires. This is **the main criterion** to be taken into account and verified. And, although we are going to give four other

²⁸ As days go by, each of the readings is continuous. In the Catholic Latin Rite, the first reading depends on the yearly course – even or odd – while the Gospel is the same. Conversely, on Sundays there are three readings (including the Gospel); all these readings are distributed over three years (A, B, and C).

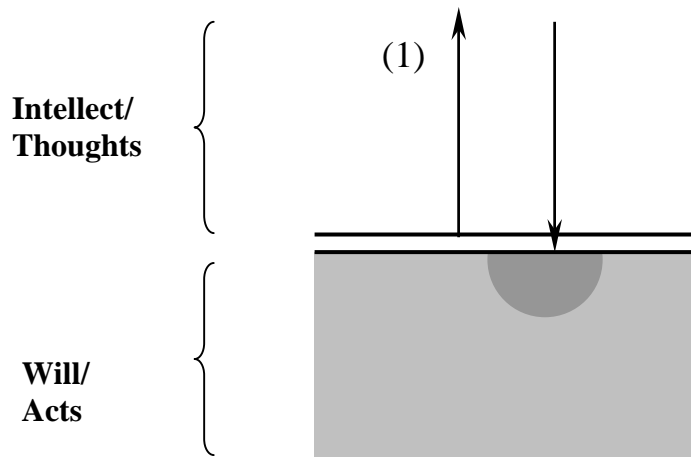
²⁹ The number 95 is a way to indicate that we are coming close to absolute certainty.

criteria, we should base ourselves primarily on this one because it guarantees the highest degree of certainty. Indeed, this criterion is itself the channel through which the light comes. It lets us mark out the light. Given its course (from God, through the texts, to one person) and given the fact that it is divine, this light is not multiple but "one". Until we have only one single idea, **one** light beam, we must continue beckoning God by asking for His Holy Spirit and the revelation of his will for us today.

In the following paragraphs we will discuss the four complementary signs that help us confirm the origin of the received light. Even if the explanation is longer, these four signs in terms of importance only constitute "5 %" of the weight! This must not be forgotten in the discernment process. Let us now consider the four signs that allow us to complete this certainty that a given word actually does come from the Lord.

b) The four signs

The single word received has at least four characteristics. Before dealing with them, let us see what composes a human being. In the following diagram we see the two zones of our being: the intellect and the will.



We will better understand what the intellect and the will are if we note the words of Saint Paul: “you do not do what you would like to do” (Gal 5:17)³⁰. So, I have within me volition, i.e. the thought, the intellect, which recognizes the good thing to do, and then the agent of my activities, i.e. the will, the acts. Saint Paul remarks that, in him, and in each of us, there is a break between the intellect that knows what is good and the will that does not accomplish it. The diagram clearly shows this break. It is a gap in us separating the two faculties of the soul: the intellect and the will. We also note that the will is ill since it cannot accomplish what the intellect discerns. The weakness and illness of the will are shown by the grey covering the zone that indicates it. The number (1) on the diagram represents the call of the blind man who wants to see; while God’s answer is symbolized by the arrow coming from above and barely touching the will at a concrete point, an area in our life which needs to be changed or of something to be done. In the diagram the area of the will in need of healing is darker than the rest of the zone of the will. This arrow pointing from above symbolizes the light received. Let us now analyse the four most important characteristics of this arrow, which help corroborate our discernment.

i) A new taste

An example will help us to better grasp the characteristics and action of this light (symbolized by the descending arrow). 'The other day we had a dispute with someone and he was rude and spoke badly of us, or even did us harm and hurt us. Our heart is filled with bitterness. At best, we do not hate this person but we do not want to hear anything about him'. And just today, as if by chance (but, of course, there is no “by chance” with the Lord), during the process of *lectio*, the Lord gives us this word to hear: “Go reconcile yourself with that person, pray for him, bless him”. This word is a new light beam that penetrates our intellect. It suggests a concrete action, and we understand that it comes from God and not from us. By penetrating us, this light received gives our intellect an impression of newness. This is confirmed by the fact that the indication God gives us is really the last thing we would have liked to hear today. Our usual inclination (“the old us”) would have preferred something else, but the Lord highlights some aspect he wants to change in us, to transform within us. We feel the contrast between this new light and our usual light. This first characteristic, “the new taste”, results from an “intrusion” of the Holy Spirit. Or, in other words, even if the comparison is

³⁰ Or in another passage: “The good I want to do, I never do; the evil which I do not want, that is what I do” (Rom 7:18).

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too strong, it is like the apparition of the Lord to the Apostles locked in the upper room - He suddenly appears.

When *lectio* is practiced on a daily basis, a new desire arises in us, an expectation of the hour when we will meet the Lord and when something will be "revealed" to us. We can compare this spiritual desire with the human desire we have to listen to the latest news, to read the paper or when waiting for a letter from a dear friend or waiting to meet him. *Lectio* is really never boring. All these aspects together are the basis on which the first characteristic defines itself: the word has a taste of newness because it comes from God.

Scripture can be like a love letter from God to his own creature. In a similar sense, this is what pope Gregory the Great says to Theodorus, the physician of the Emperor:

"But, since he loves the more who presumes the more, I have some complaint against the most sweet disposition of my most glorious son the Lord Theodorus; namely that he has received from the Holy Trinity the gift of intelligence, the gift of wealth, the gift of mercy and charity, and yet is unceasingly bound up in secular causes, is occupied in continual processions, and neglects to read daily the words of his Redeemer. For what is sacred Scripture but a kind of epistle of Almighty God to His creature? And surely, if your Glory were resident in any other place, and were to receive letters from an earthly emperor, you would not loiter, you would not rest, you would not give sleep to your eyes, till you had learnt what the earthly emperor had written.

The Emperor of Heaven, the Lord of men and angels, has sent you his epistles for thy life's benefit; and yet, glorious son, you neglect to read these epistles ardently. Study then, I beseech you, and daily meditate on the words of thy Creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God, that you may sigh more ardently for the things that are eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys. For a man will have greater rest here if he has now no rest outside of the love of his Maker. But, so that you may act thus, may Almighty God pour into you the Spirit the Comforter: may He fill your soul with His presence, and in filling it, compose It." (Letter IV, 31 (PL 77, 706AB))

ii) Practicality

The second characteristic is this, we notice that the given word is concrete, that it touches the ill part of our will. It is not some word addressed to our neighbours; we are not doing their meditation. Nor is it a theoretical meditation on some point of the Christian faith. No, this word concerns something concrete calling for a particular act or action from us, a real change of the will. The arrow illustrates this, its point touches our will, indeed it will be a particular area of our will where a change or transformation is necessary. We must therefore have a true desire for conversion, each time, so that the light may penetrate right down to our will. Otherwise, refusal and flight will prevent the light from descending and reaching the will. Not that it does not have this aim, but we impede it from achieving its goal. This shows us how essential the quality of our attitude is. The Lord unceasingly says to us: "I stand at the door, and I knock"; I won't force you, I don't impose myself on my friends' freedom! They have to decide to open the door. This is the fundamental know-how of prayer (whether of *lectio* or *mental prayer*, each according to its own methods). If one does not want to be healed, or even worse, if someone thinks that he does not need healing, it is useless for that person to approach Christ or his word. So we see that this word, which Christ speaks to us, is concrete; it touches the will and incites us to a particular action. This action may be simultaneously inward and exterior, as in our example: "reconcile yourself with your neighbour". However, it may also be only an inward action which is necessary for example an act of detachment, of confidence or a sacrifice. No one sees it, but it may cost us great effort. So the second characteristic of the light received in *lectio* is its concrete facet, which leads to true change, to conversion.

Scripture, a bitter-tasting book

"And the voice that I heard coming from heaven spoke to me again, saying, 'Go, take the little scroll that is open in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land:' and I went to the angel, saying to him, 'Give me the little scroll;' and he replied to me, 'Take, and eat it up, and it shall make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it shall be sweet as honey.' And I took the little scroll out of the hand of the angel, and did eat it up, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey, and when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter."
(Rev 10:8-10)

In fact, the word received does often have a bitter taste in our stomach; we feel troubled when this word penetrates and stirs us. When the light touches the darkness this provokes a certain kind of pain, a bitter taste. But this is transformed into sweetness and liberation. The bitter taste is actually a good sign; it indicates that the Lord has uncovered the illness and is working on it. If we want this light to consume the darkness, if we collaborate with the light, the darkness will be changed into light, liberation and new birth.

iii) A word that seems of "little" value

We might consider that the word He speaks to us is very "little". What does "little" mean? In our life, through the contemplation of the Cross, we came to understand that the Lord united himself to each of us in a unique way. Therefore, the Cross is not firstly an instrument for torture or a place of suffering; it is rather the place of our union with Christ, the clear and irrevocable promise of our union with Him. This union, the fruit he obtained for us by His death on the Cross, is called to slowly be accomplished, day after day. In fact, we are looking at the summit of Mount Thabor and wishing we were already there. The child within us wants everything immediately, and finds little indication in the Lord's words to him that would permit arriving there quickly. We are disappointed and we do not understand or, we could put it this way, the Lord wants us to be living fully, here and now, and we are disconcerted by his silence concerning the things that we believe to be important or essential and that, in reality, do not attract his attention. We do not see why the Lord gives so much attention to tiny little things. A married man might one day be asked to put his napkin on the table differently because, for the past twenty years, his has been placing it in a way that irritates his wife. And the Lord actually comes and asks him to do that! It is strange how such a little thing is given such great importance when there is a big project to be realised: one's union with God, or at a time when so many people are dying from hunger or AIDS. This is so because Christian life is made of little things and of faithfulness in little things: "Well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things" (Mt 25:21)³¹. Life on earth consists of this faithfulness in little things whilst we, on the contrary, are looking at the top of the mountain. It is

³¹ And elsewhere: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Lk 16:10).

good to look on high, to dream and dream well, St. Teresa of Jesus recommends this. She asks her daughters to have elevated thoughts³² and great desires³³; but we need to keep our eyes on the little step in front of us, the step that contains within itself the entire mountain for today, for without it we could not reach the mountaintop³⁴. That is the realism of the Gospel. What use is it really to think about tomorrow and to wait for tomorrow's directives, if we do not do today's work? "Each day has enough problems of its own" (Mt 6:34).

iv) Impossibility

Although this word appears trivial to us, it will seem impossible for us to put into practice. "I am incapable of going and reconciling myself with the person who hurt me because my heart is full of bitterness and paralysed. What should I do? I do know that this is the will of God, but I just cannot do it"

One day a young rich man came to see the Lord³⁵, at this point one might object that, as we are not rich therefore this Gospel passage does not apply to us. However if we look a little closer, we will find that we can be richer through our desires. Even if I am materially poor, I may wish to own a nice car or to have a good job. Therefore, I am still caught up in the possessions of my desires! It is impossible to fool the Lord, we are all rich. In that sense, this Gospel passage is addressed to all of us.

So it is a good thing to enter into the role of the young man by applying this text to ourselves and to ask, with him, for eternal life or, more simply, to follow the Lord and to be united to him. This is the goal of Christian life, and the love of the Lord on the Cross reveals it to us. He died in order to unite us with him. This union is not, as some think, reserved to monks and religious, or to so called "born saints". No, Christ died for everyone and for each one of us, for you in a special way; and you therefore have the vocation to be united to him. We must use all the possibilities he gives to us to receive all that he obtained for us on the Cross.

³² "it will be a great help to us if we have sublime thoughts" (*Way of Perfection* 4, 1). "In other little notes I have written to you I have said this, and now I want to repeat it and implore you: always preserve courageous thoughts, for by doing this the Lord will give you grace so that your actions too will be thus" (*Conceptions of love of God*, 2, 17).

³³ "It is important to never let one's desires lessen ... indeed, if the saints had never decided to desire it they would never attained such high states" (The autobiography of St. Teresa of Jesus: *Life* 13, 2). "it is a great thing to have great desires" (*Conceptions of love of God*, 2, 17).

³⁴ This would be the ascetism of "littleness" in which St. Teresa of the Child Jesus was a specialist.

³⁵ Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10,17-22; Lk 18:18-23.

Here we are then with the young rich man who wants eternal life. The Lord asks him: "Have you observed the commandments?" And he replies that he has, since his childhood. The Lord looks at him and says to him: "You only lack one thing, go, sell all your possessions, give the price to the poor, and then come and follow me". The Gospel tells us: "The young man, having heard the word, went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions". This is the feeling we have when the Lord wants us to abandon something we are attached to, or to do something we are not used to doing. We are so deeply stuck in our habits that they have become a part of us, and when the Lord tugs at it, it is as if he were trying to tear off a part of ourselves. Then, "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Verily I say to you, it is difficult for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of the heavens'" (Mt 19:23). And the Lord goes even further and insists: "again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God". In short, it is impossible.

When comparing Christianity and Islam (or Judaism), one would tend to say that the latter two are easy religions but that Christianity on the contrary, is difficult. But what does "difficult" really mean? The term implies that it is necessary to make an effort to put the Gospel into practice, and this is affirmed: "Strive to go in through the straight gate" (Lk 13:24), "for many are called, and few chosen" (Mt 22:14). So it is a question of effort. But there is a great danger in this, for one might be misled into reducing life in Christ to a matter of volition. The Lord assuredly shows us in this passage that this is not the case. We do not accomplish our Christian vocation through the force of our will but rather through the humility of our imploration. We also encounter this impossibility of accomplishing the commandments of God, according to the light of the Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount³⁶. Here the Lord quotes the commandments God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, with the introduction, "You heard that it was said", and then he put them under the light of the Gospel, "but I say to you". And, in this, we see that he wants us to fulfil the commandments deeply and radically; and, at this point, we realize that it is simply "too much", whoever gets angry against his brother shall be in danger of the Gehenna of the fire! And a man should not desire a woman in his heart because, in reality, according to God, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart! "Who can be saved"? The disciples let all of the Gospel's light enter into their hearts, it penetrated them from head to foot but they show that they are honest, "And his disciples having heard, were amazed exceedingly, saying, 'Who, then, is able to be saved?'" (Mt 19:25). In fact, someone might be able to leave everything, be detached from his parents, even his children, his wife, but renouncing oneself is quite another

³⁶ Mt 5:1-7.29; Lk 6:20-49.

matter! It is perhaps at the moment a person discovers his radical inability to follow Christ that he truly becomes a Christian for the first time! Saint Paul did assert, "Though the will to do what is good is in me, the strength to do it is not" (Rom 7:18).

Wishing is not doing. 'I wish to do the will of God but am incapable of accomplishing it'. We must therefore go beyond our inability. It is our normal condition, but on the other hand, it is necessary to transform it into a prayer, "Lord, since this is what you're asking of me and you want me to accomplish it, you can do so by giving me the necessary strength. Therefore, give me this strength, your Holy Spirit, so that the word you want me to put into practice may become incarnate in my life today". Saint Augustine says this in his own way: "Lord, help me to do what you command and command what you will". He asks for the strength of God (this is our second request) in order to be able to accomplish what God asks; and then he leaves the Lord free to ask whatever he wills.

When we feel difficulty in what God is asking of us, or when our will refuses to act, this indicates that the "old us" is still there – although we do understand why God is suggesting this action. Indeed, his request is in purposeful contradiction with our "old will", and the Lord wants to heal it. This repulsion and feelings of impossibility are consequently normal. He did say to Peter that his ways are disconcerting: "another will gird you, and take you where you do not want to go" (Jn 21:18)³⁷.

We clearly realize how and in what sense this word seems impossible to us and at this point it is important to remember that we need the assistance of God to enact the "impossible".

In the previous paragraphs, we analysed the first request and the light that comes out of it. We saw the main way to discern if the light perceived is really the light of God - as described previously in *4a) Two texts, one word*. We had also further clarification by verifying the light received through the four signs. Now we will sum up the whole process of the *lectio* including the second and final request.

5. The process of *lectio*; two requests

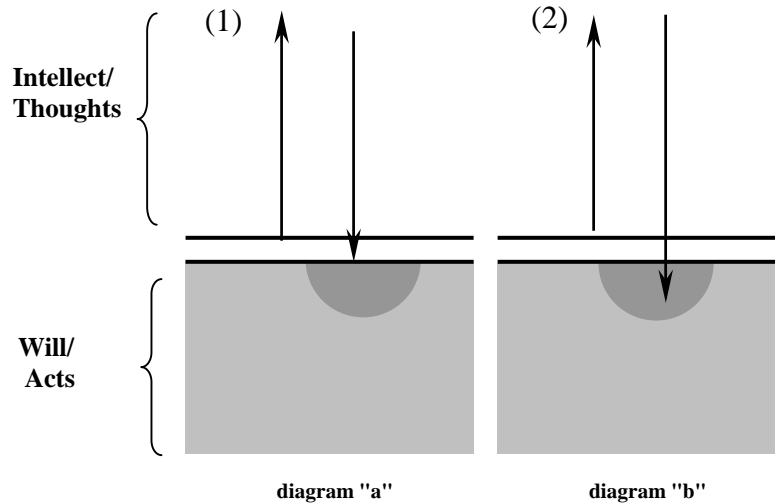
Lectio includes only two requests that bring two respective answers from God. The first request (1) (see diagram below) is: "Lord tell me what you want of me" or "let me see the step to achieve today". And the second (2) is:

³⁷ "What use is it to give something to God if he is asking you for something else? Consider what God is asking for and do it, for in doing so you will satisfy your heart more than with things for which you have an inclination" (St. John of the Cross, Maxim 93 / Dichos 77).

"Lord, give me your Holy Spirit **in order to** incarnate and **realize** what you are asking of me"³⁸.

The second request has the main goal to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to realise what he asked us to do in his first answer. It is obvious that without his strength "impossibility" remains impossible. Following the second request the Lord replies giving us his strength to act; the received impulsion (and this is necessary) helps us fulfill what he has asked. He will heal our heart and give it the strength to pray for the person who has offended us, to go and pardon him. The response of grace is represented, in the diagram "b", by the arrow penetrating and transforming the will.

Lectio is in fact only accomplished when, in receiving his power, our will is transformed and becomes able to **realize** his light; the divine union of heaven and earth.



Attention should be paid to the fact that the second arrow goes beyond the gap separating the intellect from the will and touches the area or the point in question. Conversely, the first descending arrow, indicating the point the Lord wants to heal, does not yet touch the will. It shows and indicates but does not yet act. The Lord always has the extraordinary delicacy of never (or, at least almost never) pushing us³⁹.

³⁸ These two requests can be expressed differently, as Saint Augustine suggests: give me the grace to do what you ask of me and then ask whatever you will!

³⁹ A short remark concerning this, to illustrate the behaviour of God and the Saints: The Virgin