

DON BOSCO AND THE BIBLE

Part II: Lectio Divina

Source:

La Bibbia con don Bosco, Una lectio divina salesiana, 1. L'Antico Testamento, Morand Wirth.

AN EXAMPLE OF “LECTIO DIVINA” BY DON BOSCO

We may use this example as a guide in preparing materials to teach our young people how to do “lectio divina”. How to go about this?

- *By using the themes he selected and which we find in the “lectio”, for example creation, sin, death, etc.*
- *By adopting the way he did each step of the “lectio divina”*

Introduction

The patristic and monastic term “lectio divina” may be defined as a prayerful reading of the Scriptures. This term never passed through Don Bosco’s lips or through his pen. Even if he had known the term, it is not certain that he ever used it or recommended it because *Don Bosco favored hearing God’s Word rather than reading the Bible.*

Don Bosco was not tied to a specific method of praying, although it is true that he has given some simple advice on meditation or mental prayer. However, we would not be betraying his thought if we speak of a *Salesian lectio divina* and its diverse elements: *lectio* (reading), *meditation* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), *contemplatio* (contemplation), and *actio* (action).

We shall attempt to illustrate the Salesian lectio divina by taking as an example the “Seven Considerations for Each Day of the Week”, proposing to the young in the Companion of Youth (GP 31-54) the classic themes of creation, sin and the Last Things.

Lectio

The point of departure of these considerations is not the reading of a text of Scriptures. However, they are based on a biblical citation or an allusion to some biblical text.

The first consideration is on the purpose for which man was created and which is based on the fact that he was created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26).

The second reflection is on mortal sin and has for its biblical basis the “Non Serviam” (I will not serve) which Jeremiah puts in the mouth of God’s unfaithful people (Jer 2:20).

The third reflection is on death. It is an appeal to be always ready according to the advice of the Lord (Mt 24:44).

In the fourth consideration which is about judgment Don Bosco cites a verse of Daniel about the books open before the Judge (Dn 7:10).

Meditatio

The fifth consideration is a description of the torments of Hell using the imagery of hungry dogs. It is taken from the Psalms (Ps 59:7).

The eternity of punishment, the sixth consideration, seems to be an allusion to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Lk 16:26).

Finally the consideration on paradise contains these words of the psalmist: "I am filled with the glory of the Lord" (Ps 17:15).

As you can see each of the seven considerations is based on some word or image of the bible.

This step corresponds for the most part on that which Don Bosco places under the heading "*Reflections*" (*considerazioni*). Here one reflects on the origin and the ultimate end of man, the purpose of which is for the youth to keep in mind these eternal truths.

We are frequently reminded to "consider", to "reflect", to "think", to "remember", to "see", to "know" and to "understand".

To keep the attention of the youth, *Don Bosco makes use of images which the youth will never forget*: the last moments of one's life, the judgment scene, the horrible images of hell, the representation of paradise which seems to be that of a night filled with stars but at the same time that of day filled with light.

But in order that the reflections do not remain at the intellectual level, Don Bosco sought to arouse strong sentiments in the reader: acknowledgment of the gifts received, horror for mortal sin, temporariness of earthly life, fear of divine judgment, "unbearableness" of separation from God and of eternal punishment, the delight of seeing God in paradise.

The more one thinks of certain things, the more one is set on fire. Don Bosco used to say this to his Salesians (MB IX, 997), quoting a phrase from the psalmist which he interprets in his own way: "In meditatione mea exardescet ignis (in my thoughts a fire blazed forth)" (Ps 39,4).

Oratio

At the end of the reflection on the end of man, *one finds this invocation*: "My God, forgive my sins and let me not again commit the misfortune of offending you; on the contrary may I faithfully serve you in the future. Mary, my hope, intercede for me."

The meditation on mortal sin ends with an act of contrition: "Lord, enough of my offenses. I do not wish to spend the rest of my life offending you. Instead I will spent it loving you and weeping for my sins."

At the end of the reflection on sin, one prays: "My Lord, from now on I am converted to you. I love you. I will serve you till the end of my life."

After meditating on judgment, one says: "My Jesus, grant me the grace of being one of the blessed in heaven. Most holy virgin, help me and protect me in life and in death and especially when I will face your divine Son for judgment."

Contemplatio

Regarding the end of man one finds this invitation to *contemplate* the love of God: "Consider, oh my child, that your body and your soul were given to you by God without any merit of yours, creating them in his image. He made you his son in Baptism. He loved you and that tender father continues to love you."

In the following consideration on sin, Jesus says: "Son, I have created you from nothing. I have given you what you have now. You were condemned to death because of sin. I died for you. I shed my blood to save you."

In the consideration on paradise, one can read: "What great consolation shall be yours when you find yourself in heaven in the company of your relatives, of friends, of the saints, of the blessed and you will say: 'I shall always be with the Lord!'"

Actio

But the most significant part of these "Seven Considerations" is the *practical application*, the "*firm resolution*" in view of "*actio*" (GP 36).

One can say that all the considerations are geared towards a *change of life*, a *conversion to God*. How else can we explain Don Bosco's apparent pleasure in the use of the macabre? For example, he writes about the final end of the body as being thrown to X a pit where

But there is also an *apologetic intent* in Don Bosco's insistence on human effort: *to be saved, faith is not enough; works are also necessary*. For this reason Don Bosco recommends to youth: "prepare yourselves with good works to hear the favorable sentence." In concrete they are warmly advised to "pray during the day", to flee from sin, that is "that pleasure, that vengeance, that anger, that bad talk, that blasphemy", "to make a good confession, promising the Lord to forgive your enemies, to repair the scandal given, to be more obedient, to not waste time, to sanctify the holy days of obligation, to fulfill the duties of one's state in life".

A SALESIAN LECTIO DIVINA OF THE BIBLE

Here the term "Salesian lectio divina" is NOT to be understood as the Salesian way of praying the Bible using the 5 steps of "lectio", "meditation", "oratio", "contemplation" and "action". Rather it is approaching the Bible with a certain sensitivity which Don Bosco bequeathed to this Salesians. That sensitivity was, of course, influenced by St. Francis de Sales.

Why "lectio divina"?

The appellation "lectio divina" serves to underline how to Don Bosco approached the Bible. His was not that of an exegete but of a believer. Don Bosco loved the Word of God. For him the Bible was a book that was meant for one's life. And it is also in this light that the biblical citations or allusions found in the "Seven Considerations" should be understood.

Why "Salesian"?

By adding "Salesian" we do not intend to attribute to St. Francis de Sales a particular influence in the way Don Bosco read Sacred Scriptures. But we do wish to highlight the great human and spiritual affinity between St. Francis de Sales and St. John Bosco.

We see this, although rarely, in a certain literary dependence. It is possible that the "Seven Considerations" have been influenced by the ten meditations proposed to Filotea in the first part of the Introduction to the Devout Life. In fact, the consideration on paradise is almost taken to the letter from the corresponding meditation of St. Francis de Sales.

One knows that Don Bosco used to recommend the reading of the writings of the bishop of Geneva, and in particular, the Introduction to the Devout Life. He also wanted to publish the complete works of the future doctor of the Church (MB XI 438).

Above all it was the example of St. Francis de Sales, his sweetness, his missionary fervor, his passion for souls, and his apostolic zeal which influenced this Saint from Piedmont to choose him as patron and model of his educative and evangelizing work.

These general characteristics gives us the "permission" to attempt some kind of Salesian "lectio divina" among other possible ways.

A Salesian reading of "Da mihi animas":

After the victory of Abram against the four great kings of the East, the king of Sodom, having come to meet him, said: "Give me the people; keep the goods for yourself."

In the *Latin* text of the Vulgate one reads: "Da mihi animas, caetera tolle tibi", which Msgr. Martini* translated (*Italian*) as: "Dammi gli uomini, tutto il resto tienlo per te (Give me the people, all the rest keep them for yourself)."

[*Don Bosco appreciated this "learned interpreter of the Bible", whose authority is "universally accepted" (MB VIII, 784), declaring moreover that the translation of the Bible by Martini with text and notes is one of the most beautiful studies which could be made on the Bible (MB IX, 709).]

The *literal sense* appears equally in the "Sacred History" of Don Bosco, where one can read: "The king of Sodom also offered to Abram all the spoils, seeking only the freedom of his people; but Abram, excluding that which belongs to his soldiers, refused to accept anything and generously returned everything to him".

Understood in the *spiritual sense*, the request made by the king of Sodom to Abram becomes a prayer to God, asking from him "souls" to be saved, renouncing everything else. Don Bosco made it his motto.

He spoke of it in the *Life of the Youth Domenic Savio*, when he narrated the boy's arrival at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Turin. "As soon as he arrived at the Oratory, he came immediately to my room in order to put himself, as he used say, completely in my hands. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the wall where a piece of cardboard displayed in large letters a saying which I often used: Da mihi animas caetera tolle. He looked at them attentively and I helped him to translate them as follows: 'Give me souls, and take away everything else'. He thought for a moment and then said: 'I

Da mihi animas (Gn 14:21)

understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business”.

For the “*strenna*” for the new year Don Bosco reminded his boys on December 31, 1863 that the “program of this house is what is written in my room: Da mihi animas, caetera tolle. I seek nothing but your souls; I desire nothing but your spiritual welfare. What do I promise you? I promise you and I give to you all that I am and all that I have. For you I study; for you I work; for you I live and for you I am ready to give even my life” (MB VII, 585).

In the “*Cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà*” where one finds a meditation on zeal, he affirmed forcefully that zeal for the salvation of souls is not at all restricted to the ministers of God, that is, to the clergy. Every Christian is sent to pray thus: “Give me the souls of my brothers, of my relatives...give them to me”.

On the occasion of one of the meetings of the *Salesian Cooperators*, Don Bosco asked them to become “true followers of St. Francis de Sales who made himself all things to all in order to gain them all for God, and he often repeated: ‘Give me souls and take away the rest’” (MB IX, 547).

In 1884 in the process of choosing the *official motto of the Salesian Society*, there was a divergence of opinions. Don Bosco resolved the problem by declaring: “A motto was already adopted since the beginning of the Oratory..., when I was visiting the prison: ‘Da mihi animas, caetera tolle’. The Chapter applauded Don Bosco and adopted the historic motto” (MB XVII, 365-366).

Lending his voice and his thought to *Galantuomo*, the almanac of the *Lettura Cattolica* for 1888, Don Bosco was able to say one more time: “My prayer to God is: ‘Give me souls and take even the rest’”.

A Salesian reading of “Bonum est viro....”

“It is good for a man to bear the yoke from his youth.”

This verse is one of the OT quotations that Don Bosco placed along the corridors of the Oratory (MB VI, 949). He also included it among the “Moral Maxims Taken From Sacred Scriptures” which he added to his booklet of Sacred History entitled: “An Easy Way to Learn Sacred History”. He reformulated it this way: “Blessed is the man who from his youth has formed the habit to observe the divine law” (MB VI, 949).

The yoke indicates the divine law, the commandments that should be observed. In the Companion of Youth Don Bosco applied this verse to his young readers: “Blessed is the man who from his youth shall have begun to obey his commandments.... Courage, therefore, my dear boys. Give yourself early to virtue and I assure you that you will always have a joyful and contented heart and you will see how sweet it is to serve the Lord” (GP 12-13). Perhaps the transformation of this verse into a beatitude is influenced by the verse from Jeremiah: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord” (Jer

**Bonum est viro
cum portaverit
jugum ab
adolescentia
sua (Lam 3:27)**

17:7).

The same consideration appears in the "Holy Counsel" of 1849 in which he announced a week of retreat for the youth. After having exhorted parents and employers to encourage the youth to participate, Don Bosco addressed himself to the youth: "My dear young people, ...the Lord calls you to listen to his sacred words. He places before you a favorable opportunity to receive his graces and his blessings. Profit from it. Blessed are you if from your youth you have learned to observe the divine law" (MB III, 606-606).

St. Joseph, in as much as he is our model has carried from his youth the yoke of work and of prayer. It is for this reason that the author of the "Life of St. Joseph" applied to him the biblical maxim: "It is good for a man to have carried the yoke from his youth."

In the good night of September 10, 1867, Don Bosco offered this explanation: Bonum est viro cum portaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua. It says: "Bonum est viro, not that he will be blessed, but that he is already blessed on this earth, cum partaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua, that he begins to give himself wholly to the Lord from his childhood. In fact one who begins to do good from childhood until old age, shall be blessed because there is nothing to bother his conscience. He may even become poor, but he is contented because he has peace of heart" (MB VII, 940-941).

In another good night of July 28, 1875, Don Bosco recounted this event to the students at the Oratory: "In a visit to a school I promised a prize to that student who would be able to tell me in writing what it is that can make a man happy in this life. Someone said it is riches; another, a good brain; another, virtue; another faith; another, hope; another, charity. But no one gave the right answer. I then made this comparison. What can make a colt happy? To be trained early in that work which it will do in the course of its life. Now let us apply this to man. Now a pupil remembered having read in a book of devotion this sentence: 'Beatus homo cum portaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua', which means: 'Blessed is the man who from his youth shall have learned to observe the commandments.' This boy wrote this verse in a card and gave it to me. I read it to the whole school and then said: 'Take care, therefore, now that you are young, to observe the commandments of God and you shall be happy in this life and in the other life. I tell you the same thing: Do this and you will see who sweet it is to serve the Lord. Good night'" (MB XI, 253).

In his spiritual testament, Don Bosco repeats one last time his message addressed to those aspiring to become Salesians: "Hold on firmly to this great principle: 'It is necessary to give oneself to God sooner or later, but God calls blessed he who begins to consecrate himself to God in his youth. Beatus homo cum portaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua.'