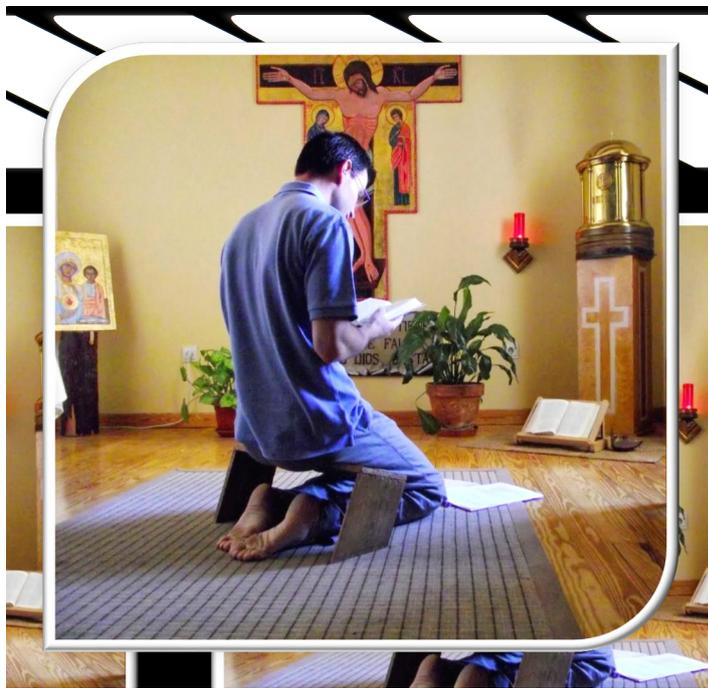


POINTERS AND SUGGESTIONS
FOR DAILY MEDITATION
IN THE SOCIETY OF
ST FRANCIS DE SALES



CATANIA 2020



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Introduction

“I need to make a very special and clear recommendation regarding a means that I consider is essential for any method of spiritual work to be effective. I intend to speak about meditation... If the Lord is not with us and does not work with us, our work will inexorably be condemned to sterility. All this means that prayer and the spirit of union with God are necessary: we need to pray and meditate a lot; we need to have our novices pray and teach them in time to meditate well. Our members when they come to the novitiate already love prayer in general ... But they could not have any idea about meditation. Therefore, at the beginning of the novitiate, your first great concern should be to teach them how to meditate, well convinced that only when they have begun to have a taste for meditation will novices be able to begin real progress in the spiritual life.”¹ (Fr Philip Rinaldi).

WE HAVE CHOSEN TO BEGIN THIS BOOKLET of ours with a quote taken from a 1930’s letter addressed by the then Rector Major to the *Cari Maestri degli Ascritti* (Dear Novice Masters), because to us it seems to sum up well the fundamental aim we have set ourselves: to provide some pointers and concrete suggestions in order to return to making something *vital and effective* of this *practice of piety* that our Constitutions prescribe and that the Church continues to point to as essential in the initial formation of young seminarians and religious.

“To be formed in the spirit of the Gospel” we read in the *ratio* of the *Congregation for the Clergy*, 2016, entitled *The gift of the priestly vocation*, “the interior man needs to take special and faithful care of the interior spiritual life, centred principally on communion with Christ according to the Mysteries celebrated in the Liturgical Year and nourished by personal prayer and *meditation* on the inspired Word. In *silent prayer*, which opens him to an authentic relationship with Christ, the seminarian becomes docile to the action of the Spirit, which gradually moulds him in the image of the Master.”²

This renewed exhortation of the Church to *silent prayer* and to the *art of meditating*, as *resources* that allow us to preserve our identity, comes to us at a particular moment of our experience as believers and religious. Fr Clodovis Boff wrote some years ago: “The daily grind stuns and baffles us. Always agitated, we live projected outwards. We are like a popular boarding house with its bustle of people of all kinds. And so we run the risk of losing our identity. We no longer know who we are and where we are going. We are becoming empty and subjectively impoverished and, as a consequence, we lack inner peace, we fall prey to discouragement, anguish and, at times, depression.”³

The effort and strain that has swept through the daily practice of *meditation*, however, is not something recent, if it is true that already in 1971 another Rector Major, Fr Luigi

¹ P. RINALDI, *Cari Maestri degli ascritti*, in ASC A 384.01.15.

² CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The gift of the priestly vocation. Ratio fundamentalis institutionis studiorum*, 8 December 2016, 42.

³ C.M. BOFF, *Come fare meditazione. Il metodo della ruminatio*, (How to make meditation, the ruminatio method) Cinisello Balsamo 2010, 8.



Ricceri, stated in his *Report on the state of the Congregation* presented to the *Special General Chapter*: “It seems to us that we can say, based on the external data we possess, that there has been a notable decline in the congregation, a very noticeable lowering of the spiritual level, especially in the area of piety and spiritual life”;⁴ and two years later, in his circular on *Our Prayer* he wrote: “The painful summary of everything however is here: we pray little and badly.”⁵

This authoritative, courageous intervention of the Salesian magisterium is in line, as we will have occasion to say, with other voices that have preceded and followed it. Don Bosco himself, in the second Italian edition of the Constitutions (1877) wanted to insert in a central position, after the introduction *To the Salesian confreres* and before the constitutional text, a lengthy letter by St Vincent de Paul to his religious (of active life!) on the importance of *meditation* in common and the need to get up at the same time in order to make it; a clear reminder of the importance of a *practice of piety* that, we may hypothesise, became problematic from then on for the young Congregation. “The grace of vocation is bound up with prayer”,⁶ St Vincent had written to his religious; and with the authority of this *Saint of charity*, Don Bosco made it his own, framing this message of the French saint in an important way and entrusting it to the fledgling Congregation.

This booklet of ours, addressed to all the confreres but in a particular way to those who share responsibility for initial formation of novices and young Salesians, comes from the desire to contribute to making some rules of the game more vital and shared, rules that are the basis of a healthy pedagogy to prayer, in line with the current teachings of the Church and with our tradition.

It would seem especially important to us to emphasise the need for this initiation to prayer during early formation to Salesian religious life. For on it will depend, often continuously, the very *attitude* with which we will live out the different moments of our community life and our personal life of prayer for the rest of our years. The lack of this gradual *pedagogy*, combined with a practice focused on the *obligations* of religious life rather than on the authenticity of the *relationship of love* which can fill each and every one of our *practices of piety* with meaning, can make the experience of prayer tiring and lifeless, at times indelibly.

After some initial clarifications that are needed in order to undertake the journey, we have dedicated a few pages to the role and opportunity of a *method* that makes the *meditation* envisaged by our Constitutions more effective and fruitful. We will then move on to a practical description of some *methods*, from the more simple and immediate ones to some other more structured ones that the experience of the Church and the Congregation have given us.

By its very nature and because of the purpose it sets out to achieve, this booklet needs to be “experienced” personally and communally, as well as to be read with care. The various

⁴ SGC, *Report on the state of the Congregation*, 32

⁵ ASC no. 269, 12.

⁶ *Regole o costituzioni della società di S. Francesco di Sales secondo il decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, Torino 1877, 47.



methods proposed should be gradually tested in *practice*, preferably with the help of a *guide*, with a view to developing a personal and effective *method*.

In his letter of invitation to the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth, the then Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chávez urged us: "We must have a deep knowledge of Don Bosco's spirituality and also live it. A knowledge of the external aspects of Don Bosco's life and activities and of his method of education is not enough. At the foundation of everything, as the source of the fruitful results of his actions and activities, there is something we may often overlook: his deep spiritual experience."⁷ The precious charismatic legacy we have received comes to life again for us in the task of returning to *reading the past*, especially our valuable magisterium, *in order to write a future* that is consistent with the gift that has been handed down to us. In this perspective, we have sought to include in the text some *fragments* of Salesian teaching on the theme of *meditation*.

Don Bosco wrote in his *Life of St Vincent de Paul* published for the first time in 1848, and then reissued in 1876 and 1877, close to the first Italian editions of our Constitutions: "There is nothing so in keeping with the Gospel as the gathering of enlightenment and strength through prayer, reading and solitude, and thus making people part of this spiritual pasture. It is to imitate what was done by our Lord, and after him by the Apostles; it is to combine the tasks of Martha and Mary; it is to follow the example of the dove, which digests half of the food it has swallowed, and then with its own beak passes the rest into that its chicks' mouth to feed them."⁸

Our hope is that this precious *spiritual food* can continue to nourish and make ever more fruitful the mission entrusted to our Congregation.

⁷ AGC no. 394, 11.

⁸ G. Bosco, *Il cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo De' Paoli*, Torino 1848, 39-40



Beginning the journey

“The Lord leads all persons by paths and in ways pleasing to him, and each believer responds according to his heart’s resolve and the personal expressions of his prayer. However, Christian Tradition has retained three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. They have one basic trait in common: composure of heart. This vigilance in keeping the Word and dwelling in the presence of God makes these three expressions intense times in the life of prayer.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2699).

THE FIRST THING TO DO, before beginning our journey, is to try to understand the terms we will be using: *mental prayer*, *meditation*, *contemplation*... are they synonymous, or do we need some clarification? These initial clarifications will help us approach our less recent tradition with greater awareness, and interpret some of the texts our magisterium has handed on to us. Every genuine *memory*, in fact, translates into a task, into the responsibility to remain faithful to ourselves and to the *gift* we have received.

Our current *Constitutions* C 93, says: “For us *mental prayer* is essential. It strengthens our intimate union with God, saves us from routine, keeps our heart free and fosters our dedication to others. For Don Bosco it is a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation.” Instead, we read in the *Regulations*: “Every day the members will spend in common at least half an hour for *meditation* and some time in *spiritual reading*.”

Let us be immediately clear that the personal reading of a good book can be a great resource for our spiritual life; in the strict sense, however, it cannot regularly replace the time given to *meditation* which, as we will be saying, is in the first instance silent prayer, a personal and intimate dialogue with God.

These initial clarifications, even if they force us to be pharmacists for the moment, are essential if we wish to approach the Church’s tradition with greater awareness, and interpret some of the texts that the history of Christian spirituality has *passed on* to us.

Vocal prayer, mental prayer, meditation, contemplation

In its more common and general understanding, the adjective *mental*, when used to describe the term ‘prayer’, is the opposite to the adjective *vocal*; so it is not used in reference to prayer that involves *logical reasoning*, but prayer that involves the *affections*, the human being’s inner self, prayer that doesn’t need words to express itself. Carmelite Fr Albino of the Child Jesus writes in his *Compendium of Spiritual Theology*: “Prayer is called mental when it takes place in the powers of the soul without any external manifestation. Every act of faith, hope and charity, every thought and spiritual affection is *mental prayer*, that is, an encounter with God.”⁹

Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro instead, in his *Methods of mental prayer*, attributes this meaning to the term *diffused mental prayer*, which he describes as “any pious thought that might have

⁹ ALBINO DEL BAMBINO GESÙ, *Compendio di Teologia Spirituale*, Torino 1966, 336.



God or things that relate to God as its object.”¹⁰, distinguishing it from *formal mental prayer* that for him is “the particular exercise of the spiritual life with which we give a determined amount of time daily or regularly, excluding every other occupation, and without the use of pre-established verbal formulas.”¹¹

Formal mental prayer, then, would be the *practice of piety* that our Regulations refer to. “The prayer that the Constitutions prescribe for us as nourishment of the spirit” Fr Paul Albera writes in his circular on *Don Bosco the Model of the Salesian Priest* “is mental prayer which, according to St Teresa is ‘pure communion of friendship by means of which the soul spends time alone with God.’”¹²

Diffused mental prayer, constant, real attention to the *presence* of God, then is the particular gift for which our founder is recognised and that ordinarily we call *union with God*, or also the *grace of unity*.

In this booklet, however, we consider *mental prayer* and *meditation* to be synonymous. In the history of Christian spirituality, they have most often been used indiscriminately,¹³ both indicating, according to Lercaro’s terminology, *formal mental prayer*, or in other words the particular practice of piety recommended or prescribed in religious or priestly life, and distinct from *diffused mental prayer*, which can be thought of as *routinely thinking of God*, something that should accompany personal prayer and more generally our entire life. In any case we repeat the fact that the expression *mental prayer* does not mean reference to prayer which only involves the *mind*, the intellect, but to prayer that is not reduced merely to *vocal* expression. It is prayer that involves all of the inner self of the one who is praying. “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” (Mt 15:8).

However, we do note that in some cases the term “meditation” has been reserved for the *reflective* aspect more than for the *prayerful* aspect of religious practice; when understood this way, for example, it is used as we shall see to describe the second moment of Guigo (Guy) the Carthusian’s *Lectio Divina*. We will have something to say about this.

The use of the term meditation¹⁴ is common to many spiritual and/or religious traditions of various origins. What is common to these different perspectives is the search for a time or particular technique that focuses the individual’s energies on their *interior life*.

The term *contemplation*, then, often employed in our early Salesian tradition as well, refers much more clearly to the fundamental object of every prayer experience and, in the final analysis, to the *end or aim* of the believer’s life, which is *union with God*, the *deification* the Fathers speak about and which the Orthodox tradition often calls on. Fr Egidio Viganò wrote: “Mental prayer evolves gradually from meditation to contemplation; it is an interior attitude through which one enters into relationship with the love of God. St Teresa has described it as dealing with the Lord on friendly terms.”¹⁵

¹⁰ G. LERCARO, *Metodi di orazione mentale*, Milano 1969, 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² P. ALBERA, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, Torino 1922, 443.

¹³ Cf. G. LERCARO, *Metodi di orazione mentale*, cit., 3.

¹⁴ To avoid misunderstanding, any time we refer to the particular practice of piety envisaged by the Regulations, we will use meditation in italics.

¹⁵ AGC no. 338, 14.



Don Bosco tells us the same thing in his life of Dominic Savio: “His preparation for Holy Communion was most thorough. Before going to bed the previous evening, he said a special prayer to prepare himself... In the morning he carried on his preparation, but his thanksgiving was liable to have no end to it. If he were not reminded he would forget about breakfast, recreation and even morning class, so caught up was he in prayer or rather, in *contemplation* of the divine goodness who wonderfully and mysteriously passes on to mankind the treasures of his infinite mercy.”

We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy curé about his prayer before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the ‘interior knowledge of our Lord,’ the more to love him and follow him.”¹⁶ In any case it is therefore the same *caritas* that, in the moment in which it makes us more intimate with God and with ourselves, restores our awareness of the task that has been entrusted to us: that of being “a good gift” for all our fellow travellers...

Teachings on meditation at the beginnings of the *Society*

The clearest testimonies of the relevance ascribed by Don Bosco and his fledgling Congregation to this particular *practice of piety* are probably the teachings on the *importance* of meditation and on *how* to make it. These would be imparted from the time of the first *canonical* novitiate located for the first five years at the mother house at Valdocco under Don Bosco’s paternal gaze, following the official approval of the Constitutions of the *Society* on 3 April 1874.

The *Salesian Central Archives* have preserved the handwritten exercise books in which the first novice master, Fr Giulio Barberis,¹⁷ wrote down neatly and fully the text of the conferences he gave the novices from 1875.¹⁸ The early pages of the first exercise book are dedicated precisely to a lengthy conferences entitled *Meditation and how to make it*; we could say that this topic is really the *entrance* to the experience of the novitiate.

A brief quote drawn from these pages expresses well the sentiments and deep beliefs of this priceless *master* of bosconian spirituality: “Oh if only I could entice you to it [meditation] a little today; If I could make the usefulness of it penetrate your hearts a little, if I could teach you well how to do it; so that I would come out of this conference all happy and consoled and could say: Oh Lord, I have put many on the right path, I have given into the hands of

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2715

¹⁷ From 1874 onwards, Fr Giulio Barberis would practically have responsibility for formation in the Congregation for the rest of his life: novice master until 1900, he was then provincial for nine years and finally Spiritual director of the Congregation until 1927, the year of his death. Considered the “guarantor” of fidelity to the founder’s spirit, he would also have the task of overseeing all the novitiates of the fledgling Congregation.

¹⁸ Cf. ASC B 509.03.01.



many others the key to perseverance; I have rekindled the fire of fervour in those who did not have it. May the Lord make it so."¹⁹

The *method* taught by Fr Barberis since those early years, as we shall see, then taken up again and perfected in his *Vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*, is substantially the Ignatian one; no surprise given that some years later the First General Chapter of the fledgling Congregation (1877), when tackling the question of choice of text for the confreres' *meditation*, would insist on the appropriateness of *continuing to use* the text by Jesuit Fr Luis de la Puente.²⁰ We read in the minutes: "Especially recommended is the introduction. It is an introduction that should be read a hundred times and learned off by heart since it is worth its weight in gold. Whoever follows well what is said there will find the way of making meditation immensely facilitated; but one needs to have patience; beginners must be well instructed; we have to make sure they all have the book in hand, and have them learn by that method."²¹

Historian Fr Eugene Ceria wrote, in the context of 1875: "That year the novitiate was pushed far forward on the path to normality... Piety was the cornerstone upon which the religious life of the Oratory was to be based if regularity was to be established. Among the practices of piety two are of the utmost importance: the annual spiritual retreat and the daily meditation."²²

Fidelity to the charism brings with it, as we will say in the next paragraph, an awareness of the importance the founder attributes to *mental prayer* in religious life, but it does not imply the strict repetition of forms and methods that are the children of a precise historical time. As *Optiones Evangelicae* stresses, it is about, "a dynamic fidelity open to the impulse of the Spirit, which passes through ecclesial events and the signs of the times."²³

With Don Bosco and with our times

The mandate that Vatican Council II entrusted to consecrated life is that of the *constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes*.²⁴ Along the same lines the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* states: "In the first place, there is the need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice" (no. 36).

The *charism of the founder*, however, is presented as a *living reality* prolonging its effects in history, creatively bringing up to date, in fidelity to the gift received, the founding experience. Progress and return to the origins, renewal and fidelity are a pair and as such need to be

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ His widespread *Meditaciones de los misterios de nuestra santa fe, con la práctica de la oración mental sobre ellos*, published for the first time in Valladolid in 1605, saw very many editions in many languages.

²¹ ASC D 578, 116-117. In the 1875 Italian edition we consulted, published by Marietti, this lengthy *Introduction* takes up 36 pages.

²² BM XI, 254.

²³ *Optiones Evangelicae*, 29.

²⁴ Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, 2.



kept together. We could say that every charism is destined to remain faithful to its own *genetic patrimony*, its own DNA, but also to grow and develop as a *living organism* that grows while remaining faithful to itself.

In relation to our theme it seems to us that we can clearly identify as an *essential charismatic element* the attention given from the very beginning to the *meditation* that Don Bosco constantly recommended to the first Salesians but also to the laity and young people.

He wrote to *Cavaliere* Ubaldi di Bellino in 1862: "Every morning, mass and meditation. After midday a little bit of spiritual reading." In 1867 he wrote to Fr Giovanni Anfossi, a past pupil of the Oratory at Valdocco: "Meditation and the visit to the Blessed Sacrament will be very powerful safeguards for you: benefit from them." "I recommend three things to you" he wrote the same year to cleric Luigi Vaccaneo: "attention to meditation in the morning; mixing with companions most given to piety; temperance with food." To *Cavaliere* Federico Oreglia, another friend and benefactor of the Oratory, he wrote in 1868: "Do not forget to make your meditation and spiritual reading every day." And as recommendation to the boys leaving for holidays: "While you are at home, at least go to Holy Communion on Sundays. During the week do not let go of your meditation each morning."²⁵

We note that Don Bosco constantly distinguished *meditation* from *spiritual reading*, here as elsewhere; the latter, as we were saying, is certainly useful for spiritual life, but it is not strictly *prayer*. This thought allows us to emphasise that the habitual use of a text during the time envisaged by the Constitutions for daily *meditation* can be likened to a very useful personal spiritual reading, but strictly speaking it does not absolve us from the indication that we dedicate at least half an hour in our day to an intimate and personal dialogue with God.

In the years preceding the foundation of the *Society of St Francis de Sales* and the definitive approval of the Constitutions, Don Bosco was able to apply the *principle of gradualness* to the religious in his fledgling Congregation, in relation to the requirements of religious life. We ought not forget that in the year he began the journey towards *institutionalisation*, some of his "religious" were not even sixteen years of age.²⁶ Healthy realism, other than the desire to avoid burdening the conscience of some of them with moral obligations beyond their strength, probably inspired Don Bosco to a healthy prudence.

Despite all this, as we have seen, over those years there was no lack of explicit reference to the importance of daily *meditation* and the Constitutions approved in 1874 would ultimately established the length of time: *saltem per dimidium horae*.²⁷ For example, in a handwritten sheet in 1866 we read that Don Bosco spoke often when preaching the first series of retreats to his fledgling Congregation from 1866, of: "Meditation: whether short or long always do it. It is a mirror for us, says St Nilo, for knowing our vices and lack of virtues; but it should

²⁵ The letters we have made reference to can be found in the second volume of the *Epistolario* edited by Fr Francesco Motto, in the following pages respectively: 526, 446, 458, 494-5, 407.

²⁶ On 18 December 1859, when signing his act of belonging to the Society of St Francis de Sales, Francesco Cerruti was fifteen, Luigi Chiapale sixteen, Antonio Rovetto seventeen. The average age of this group, other than Don Bosco and Fr Alasonatti, was less than twenty-one years of age.

²⁷ *Regulae seu Constitutiones Societatis S. Francisci Salesii juxta approbationis decretum die 3 aprilis 1874*, Torino 1874, 37.



never be omitted. The person who has no prayer is lost (Saint Teresa). In *meditatione mea exardescet ignis*. It is like the warmth of the body to the soul."²⁸

Personal prayer and Liturgical prayer

In this first part of the booklet we have sought to also hint at one of the possible reasons for the loss of interest, in priestly and religious life, in the practice of *meditation* in the time following the end of Vatican Council II and, in particular, the *rediscovery* of the Liturgy as the source and summit of the Church's life.

If it is undeniable that the different forms of *methodical prayer* were born and developed mainly during certain periods in the history of spirituality in which the *liturgy* and theological reflection on the celebratory experience had lost relevance and depth, it is also true that in no case did the *liturgical reform* initiated by the Second Vatican Council want to diminish the importance of *personal prayer* and all other expressions of Christian piety.

In No. 12 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* the Council Fathers wrote: "The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father, in secret [29]; yet more, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he should pray without ceasing."

Many years earlier, in *Mediator Dei*, Pius XII has said: "Unquestionably, liturgical prayer, being the public supplication of the illustrious Spouse of Jesus Christ, is superior in excellence to private prayers. But this superior worth does not at all imply contrast or incompatibility between these two kinds of prayer. For both merge harmoniously in the single spirit which animates them."

The matter, however, is not resolved by discussing the *greater or lesser dignity* of the two kinds of prayer, but by starting out from the belief that personal prayer, meditation, devotions and pious practices prepare for liturgical action and originate from it. In fact the Liturgy, "is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (SC no. 10).

The heart of the *liturgical spirituality* which the Apostolic Letter *Spiritus et Sponsa* makes reference to, on the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, lies not in the exclusive use of the means offered by the liturgy, but in the awareness that all the other means are *orientated* and *subordinated* to it.

From this point of view we strongly affirm that daily *meditation* is an extraordinary *resource* for appreciating the texts of the Eucharistic liturgy and for making participation in it more authentic and effective, since it is the *fonte e culmine* of the life of every believer.

The habit, then, of using the time for *meditation* to personally say the *Office of Readings*, an often widespread practice among the confreres, due to the length and variety of texts offered, risks distorting the very identity of this time which our Constitutions says is for *mental prayer*, a familiar, silent *spending time* with God. At the strictly *juridical* level then, the

²⁸ ASC A 225.04.03.



two *obligations* are distinct and require, each due to its peculiar features, energies, ways of doing them and their own time.

The anthropological value of meditation

A final reflection in this introductory part is dedicated to a fundamental matter. The initial reference to our Constitutions, in fact, could risk framing the theme of *meditation* in a *juridical* perspective, the one we have also hinted at in the last part of the previous paragraph.

In reality the experience teaches us that if we keep our gaze fixed on the *obligation*, here as elsewhere we risk losing sight of the *value* and benefits that derive from this healthy *habit*.

“Keep silent, what a strange expression!” Bernanos has his main character say in the *Diary of a Country Priest*. “It is silence that keeps us!”²⁹

The realisation of the loss of interest on the part of some regarding the practice of daily *meditation* must not result in a moralistic kind of exhortation. Such an approach would be a loser, because it would rely on a *willingness* that is incapable of grasping the deep meaning of things and the *motivations* that should enlighten our actions.

The risk that we religious continue to run during our periodic efforts to revise our spiritual life, is to obstinately indulge in an *ethics of obligation* rather than to look for the true *motivations* that should sustain our human and spiritual experience. In other words, it seems that at times we find great difficulty in asking whether something is “doing us good”, and instead continue tormenting ourselves by thinking that “we have a duty to do it”.

The habit, then of making meditation *in common*, from the earliest years of our formation journey, has probably made it more difficult to develop personal beliefs about the importance of considering our meditation as a precious resource, rather than a duty. The result is that in most cases when it comes to lacking support for a community *timetable*, the practice of *personal mental prayer* gradually comes into crisis.

One might wonder, even more radically, if prayer in our religion can even be considered an *obligation*. We know that this happens in other religious contexts, while in Catholicism the *duty to pray* in a strict sense seems to be the prerogative of clerics and religious. In the recent past, then, an attempt was made to leverage the so-called *virtue of religion* to show that the *moral obligation* of every believer to respect God springs from *justice towards God*, “giving back to him” the *glory and honour* that are his due.

Today we understand that a perspective like this is not enough to sustain our life of prayer. The dialogue and intimacy between two *persons* who love on another must flow from a deep need, from the immediacy of a *relationship* that needs to be looked after and fed by appropriate times and moments, but that could even be *threatened* by strict and insufficiently internalised rules and *habits*.

Often our initial formation has foregrounded the *obligation* to respect, from the time we entered a religious community, times for prayer in common and the different *ways we do this* without allowing for sufficient growth in the *relationship* that should make this dialogue a joyous one and without having applied the *principle of gradualness* that is the basis of

²⁹ G. BERNANOS, *Diary of a country Priest*, Penguin Classics 2019.



every genuine *pedagogy of prayer*; daily prayer from the Psalms, too, in the early years of our religious experience, is often *imposed* without an adequate biblical formation; it seems that what is important is saying (or singing) the *words* together, without worrying too much about *healing* our vocal prayer by involving the *mind* and *heart*.

The periodic exercise of *freedom* that sustains and motivates every deep relationship, should accompany the growth of awareness of every young confrere regarding the *beauty* and *gratuitousness* of a life of prayer that can sustain the gift of ourselves and renew the *motivations* that are the basis of our choice to be religious *out of love for...*

Here we would have to appeal to an *ethics of happiness*, something to dear to both Aristotle and St Thomas, that gives first place to the profound conviction that *virtue and happiness* dwell at the same address, or we appeal to themes in Pope Francis' magisterium and his constant calls to joy; or, rather, to the very many scientific studies by Christians and non-Christians alike that link the practice of meditation with *physical and psychological health*, as well as spiritual health.

It should be forcefully proclaimed, even in a purely anthropological context, that *meditating* is good for you and that the task of the formation process is to restore to each confrere an awareness of the *value* and *joy* that flow from personal prayer, rather than making it something that needs to be *checked on* and evaluated.

This is the ideal towards which we are striving.

Reading the past in order to write the future: From a circular by Fr Paul Albera

The circular entitled Don Bosco Model of the Salesian Priest by Fr Paul Albera in 1921 is certainly one of the most interesting for "recognising" some of the features of our original Salesian spirituality and piety. The two central paragraphs of this long letter, no. 15 and 16, bear the titles What our prayer should be like and Method for praying well.

15. What our prayer should be like

The prayer that our Constitutions prescribe for us to nurture the spirit is mental prayer which, according to St Teresa, is "pure communion of friendship by means of which the soul spends time alone with God, and never tires of showing love for Him whom we know loves us"; and according to St Alphonsus Liguori, it is "it is the furnace where souls are inflamed with love of God". "If it helps", says St Augustine, to live with wise men, because there is always something to be gained from their conversation, what should be said of those who habitually live in the company of God?" Therefore we, my dear confreres, in order to conform ourselves to the spirit of the constitutions, should give mental prayer the character of true intimate entertainment, of simple and affectionate conversation with God, both to show him our love, and also to get to know better the works necessary for our sanctification and to encourage us to practise them with greater generosity. This practice, taken in its broadest meaning, is not only morally necessary for the preservation of the spiritual life suitable for a priest, but absolutely indispensable for progress in the supernatural life. We must therefore attend to it with constancy, not letting ourselves be discouraged by the difficulties that we may encounter there; and possibly do it in common, during the entire half hour prescribed.



16. Method for praying well

In doing mental prayer we follow the method learned during the novitiate and the years of our religious formation, and the norms contained in the booklet: "Practices of piety in use in Salesian houses". Let us avoid burdening the mind and heart with minute divisions and subdivisions: these things hinder the work of the Holy Spirit, and take away from the soul the freedom of movement that is necessary for it to rise up to God. But let our meditation be active, that is, a true work of the powers of the soul, which nevertheless does not degenerate into arid speculation but limits the activity of the intellect only to the considerations necessary to move the will and excite supernatural affections in it. Spiritual teachers state that it is the common doctrine of the Saints that a special way of prayer corresponds to each degree of perfection. Hence, as long as our soul is absorbed in outward cares and occupations, however good they may be, as long as it is exposed to grave dangers of sinning, and at the same time less expert in spiritual things, we will need many reflections and considerations to lift up our minds and hearts to God and move our will to holy and strong resolutions. However, as the power of the passions diminishes in us, as the desire for spiritual progress becomes more vivid and the love of God more ardent, the work of the intellect will play an ever-decreasing part in our prayer, while the movements of the heart, holy desires, supplicating questions and fervent resolutions will prevail. This is the so-called affective prayer, which is superior to mental prayer, and which in turn leads to unitive prayer, called ordinary contemplative prayer by the spiritual masters.

Perhaps someone will think that a Salesian should not aim so high, and that Don Bosco did not want this from his children, since at the beginning he did not even impose on them methodical meditation in common. But I can assure you that it was always his desire to see his children rise, by means of meditation, to that intimate union with God which he had so admirably achieved in himself, and he never tired of urging us to this on every propitious occasion.



Suggestions and general reflections on the “method”

“Lord, teach us to pray!” (Lk 11:1). The disciples would like to pray but do not know how to. It can become a real ordeal wanting to speak with God without knowing how to, being forced into silence before him, being aware that the echo of our invocation is confined within ourselves, that the heart and mouth speak a twisted language which God does not want to hear. In this painful situation we have recourse to people who can help us, who know something about prayer. If someone who knows how to pray were to involve us, allow us to share in their prayer, we would have some help! Certainly here those Christians who have already come a long way can help us a lot, but only through the one who must help them, too, and to whom they will direct us if they are genuine teachers of prayer, that is, through Jesus Christ” (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*).

P RAYER IS *dialogue, encounter, exchange of feelings*. The initiative is always God’s, his Spirit’s. No one can come to this encounter unless God “lifts them up”. “Who would ever be able to free themselves” exclaims St John of the Cross, “from their way of acting and from their imperfect condition, if you, O my God, did not raise them up to you in purity of love....?”³⁰

Christian prayer in its deepest expression, then, is not the result of an effort or some human technique, but rather a *gift*. Just the same, like any other gift of Grace, this requires an *active acceptance*, collaboration with God’s action in us. In addition to this, this gift is “inscribed” in our nature, respects its fundamental laws and dynamics.

As a human activity, then, prayer is “teachable”. The Gospels themselves testify to this possibility; there are many teachings about prayer in them.

Seen this way a *pedagogy of prayer* is possible, one that helps us to arrive at the “threshold of the mystery”; the rest lies “beyond”, is Grace, the gift of the Spirit.

The history of Christian spirituality from its origins until our time, is rich in pointers to and teachings about prayer and, more especially, about *meditation* or *mental prayer*. Saints, founders, masters of the spirit have given life to *schools of spirituality*, including teaching methods for deep personal prayer.

However, the method is not the prayer; no simple automatic approach is possible. However, in its respect for human nature and its laws, it can be an effective *introduction* to prayer, a help, a start; the fact remains that when prayer, on occasions in our life, springs up spontaneously and immediately, the forced use of a method could end up even being an *obstacle* to prayer.

It is appropriate to repeat this. The method is inscribed in the concreteness of our lives. Its fundamental task, its very nature is to help us organise our time of prayer while respecting our anthropological dynamics.

³⁰ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Prayer of a soul taken with love*, 25.



It is significant, in this regard, to reread the beginning of the famous letter of Guigo (Guy) the Carthusian to his friend Gervasius. "One day while I was busy with manual work I began to reflect on the human being's spiritual activity. Then suddenly, four steps were offered to my intimate reflection, that is *reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.*" *While I was busy with manual work...* It is in this practical and real context that Guigo's intuition is inscribed. He is recognised as the one who thought up the *method* of *Lectio Divina*.

The choice of method is subjective, and in our life it is temporary, never definitive. "From the rich variety of Christian prayer as proposed by the Church, each member of the faithful should seek and find his own way, his own form of prayer" (*On some aspects of Christian meditation*, no. 29).

So, there is no *method* that can be universal (*for everyone*) and immutable (*forever*). Each of us is called, dynamically, to build up his own, personal *pedagogy of prayer*.

Knowledge of some of the methods that the tradition has handed down to us allows us, however, to know the "rules of the game" and to choose the pointers that best meet our current situation or difficulties. Paradoxically we could add that the function of these *methods of mental prayer* is to... lead us to do without a method, gradually introducing us to a state of theological *prayer* that can mark the end of any methodological complication.

In this regard St Francis de Sales writes in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "It may be that sometimes, immediately after your preparation, your affections will be wholly drawn to God, and then, my child, you must let go the reins, and not attempt to follow any given method; since, although as a general rule your considerations should precede your affections and resolutions, when the Holy Spirit gives you those affections at once, it is unnecessary to use the machinery which was intended to bring about the same result. In short, whenever such affections are kindled in your heart, accept them, and give them place in preference to all other considerations."³¹

In our tradition, this particular charismatic gift received from the founder and invoked daily is defined as *union with God*. As Fr Luigi Ricceri has said, "for us it remains a summit, an ideal towards which to strive, but not yet fully achieved; therefore it must not serve as a pretext to deprive our soul of that solid nourishment that the encounter with God can give it."³²

We would like to repeat, in the light of what we have said thus far, that the *method* adds nothing, from a *theological* point of view, to our concept of prayer, but at another level, the *anthropological*, it is of genuine *assistance* especially at ordinary times or in times of *dryness, tiredness*.

It would be impossible, in this short space to enter into detail regarding the countless number of meditation *methods* that the Church's tradition has handed down to us³³ or

³¹ ST FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 11, Chapter VII.

³² L. RICCERI, *La nostra preghiera*, Editrice SDB, Roma 1973, 58.

³³ The most suitable tool for getting to know the classical methods of the Catholic tradition today is still the text by Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro (1891-1976) entitled *Metodi di orazione mentale*, published for the first time in Genoa in 1947 by Bevilacqua & Solari - Apostolato. There are many interesting and more recent texts, but less systematic; among others, in Italian, G. COMOLLI, *La senti questa voce? Corpo, ascolto, respiro nella meditazione biblica*, Torino 2014; F. JALICS, *Esercizi di contemplazione*, Milano 2018; S. WELCH, *Mindfulness cristiana. 40 semplici esercizi spirituali*, Cantalupa 2018; F. LENOIR, *Rallenta, ascolta, respira - La meditazione che apre il cuore al mondo*, Milano 2020.



regarding those, including from more recent history, which are part of the valuable contribution that founders and spiritual masters offer through the various *schools*, movements they have given birth to.

Our task will be that of simply outlining some general principles and proposing some *methods* that we believe are more suited to our spirituality and consistent with our traditions, with the *sensitivity* of the Church in the post-conciliar period and with the progress of the anthropological sciences.

The three fundamental stages of *meditation*

A first attempt to unify these methods and reduce them to the essential brings us to the realisation that, in most cases, the *time* given to meditation is ordinarily *organised* in three stages: *preparation*, the *body of the meditation*, *conclusion*:

1. **PREPARATION:** the *preparation* consists of a kind of *entry* to prayer. We could say that the essence of this first stage is acquiring the *awareness of God's presence*. It is a kind of *re-appropriation* of our inner energies, which are *gathered together* in the confident certainty that *here and now* the Lord wants to resume his dialogue of love with us.

In our congregation it has happened, in recent times, that this first stage has been accompanied or guided in community meditation by a vocal prayer of introduction to meditation; this could be an aid to concentration, but in some cases it risks becoming a "delegation", a distracting habit, and therefore, paradoxically, an obstacle to genuine personal concentration.

2. **MEDITATION:** the *body of the meditation* is the heart of the experience; in the light of the Council's reflection and the Patristic tradition, we believe that the Word of God should always be at its centre. We read in *Dei Verbum* no. 21: "For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."

So that *meditation* is genuine *mental prayer* and not purely *intellectual reflection* on themes of the Word, it must be open to a *dialogue*, a response of love to the initiative of God who is speaking to us; it needs to introduce us to prayer and suggest to us what its *matter* should be. "And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together" *Dei Verbum* insists (no. 25).

3. **CONCLUSION:** The *conclusion* is the time in which the *transforming efficacy* of the Word of God is embodied in the concreteness of our daily journey of growth in faith and in the love of God and our brothers and sisters. A new awareness, a living sentiment of love, a *resolution* (with due attention given to avoiding any kind of *moralism*), a corner of our daily life to throw some light on...; Francis de Sales called it a *spiritual bouquet*, while in *Lectio Divina* it is given the name *actio*. "By prayer" Don Bosco writes in the notes he used for the *instructions* for the 1870 retreats "we mean everything that lifts up our



affections to God. Meditation in the morning is the first. Everyone always does it, but coming down to practice, it always concludes with a resolution so as to benefit from, avoiding a defect, practising some virtue."³⁴

Before going into the presentation of some *methods* for *meditation* or *mental prayer*, it seems important to us to spend a few words on the role that our body has in prayer and *meditation* in particular. These considerations too, like those on *method*, have no particular *theological* relevance but belong to the concrete nature of a wise *pedagogy of prayer*.

The role of the body in prayer

In prayer it is the whole of the person that must enter into a *relationship* with God, so also the body must adopt a position most suited to and in harmony with this very special relationship; something similar also happens in our ordinary relationships with our brothers and sisters.

The body's position, also, can symbolically express the very content of our prayer. The publican in the parable in Lk 12 remains *standing* and *at a distance*, expressing his prayer through his humble attitude; In the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen *knelt down* and *cried out in a loud voice* to God not to place any blame on those who were stoning him (cf. Acts 7:60). Jesus himself, in the Gospels, often enfleshes his prayer with his body's attitude: *looking upwards* he prays during the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus (cf. Jn 11:41) or at the beginning of his priestly prayer (cf. Jn 17:1); he lies down with his face to the earth at Gethsemane, while his sweat becomes drops of blood (cf. Lk 22:44).

In our tradition, perhaps as a consequence of a certain anthropological *dualism* that almost opposes the *body* to the *soul*, great importance has not generally been given to the role of the body in prayer and, more particularly, in *meditation*. There is no lack, however, in the history of Christian spirituality, of teachings and traditions that enhance the role of the body, recovering the instances of a *unitary anthropology*. It is enough to mention, by way of example, the ancient tradition of the *nine ways of praying of St Dominic* (this is the description of the nine different positions that the saint took in his prayers), or the indications that Ignatius of Loyola constantly gives to those who have embarked on the path of the spiritual exercises ("...enter into contemplation on one's knees or prostrate on the ground or supine with the face up or sitting or standing, always looking for what I want..." [no. 76]).

Over recent decades and in some particular contexts, awareness has grown of how much the body's demeanour and position can favour (or hinder) prayer. Proof of this is the concern that animated an intervention by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled in 1989 the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation*. In this important document, the only post-Council one dedicated uniquely to themes of prayer, the characteristics of Christian prayer are traced in the light of Revelation, in order to then highlight some *errors* or absolutes related to some *meditation techniques* or *practices* coming from other religious traditions, which could be attractive to people today.

³⁴ MB IX, 708.



At the same time, however, the document is very balanced in stating that “Human experience shows that the position and demeanour of the body also have their influence on the recollection and dispositions of the spirit. This is a fact to which some eastern and western Christian spiritual writers have directed their attention ... The spiritual authors have adopted those elements which make recollection in prayer easier, at the same time recognising their relative value: they are useful if reformulated in accordance with the aim of Christian prayer” (no 26).

Finally then, these *techniques* of relaxation, concentration, *psycho-physical* recollection are in no way to be condemned or demonised, but their *instrumental* and *relative* value are to be stressed: “The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be ‘mastered’ by any method or technique. On the contrary, we must always have our sights fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom God’s love went to the cross for us” (no. 31).

In conclusion, let us try to sum up some of the pointers that we consider useful and current in a healthy *pedagogy of meditation*:

- experience teaches that the body’s position and demeanour are not without their influence on the individual’s recollection and disposition;
- the choice of position most suited to concentration is a completely subjective one. In general, however, we can say that such a position, in order to be helpful for recollection, should be neither *too comfortable*, leading to excessive relaxation, nor *too uncomfortable*, since it would hinder concentration. At any rate the position chosen should be able to be reasonably maintained throughout the meditation time;
- *Psycho-physical relaxation techniques*, especially those that refer to the control of *breathing* or *training*, can be a useful aid, an introduction to meditation, but they should not be made absolutes and they depend on sensitivity and previous experiences, on each individual’s experience;
- of particular importance also is the choice of a peaceful *setting*, one suited to recollection. For some and at certain times some *background music* can be helpful, or *dimmed lighting* in the surrounds or *incense*, an icon or a lit candle... But even in this case we are dealing with *relative* matters that can certainly be helpful for some (and an obstacle for others...); here too the principle that any kind of *automatic* approach is to be avoided is valid, and that meditation is simply, in essence as St Teresa of Avila said, *thinking about God who loves us...*
- meditation is ordinarily done *in common* in our Salesian tradition. This circumstance can be an *added value* because it supports our fidelity to the Constitutions and contributes to strengthening *communion* through the mutual witness of faith. The already highlighted danger remains of a *routine* that might not encourage autonomy and the maturing of a personal journey of prayer, in the long run weakening the *authenticity* of our motivations.



Criteria used for the choice of the suggested methods

This booklet proposes offering some *methods* that can still be proposed today to our Congregation and especially to novices and young confreres.

The choice we have made is based on certain principles, responding to certain *criteria* that we believe embody the needs and characteristics of our formation programs and, at the same time, of our charismatic identity. Let us try to spell these out:

1. A first criterion seems to us to be sought in the necessary *harmony with the current progress of theological sciences* and, in particular, with the awareness of the *centrality of the Word of God* in the life of every believer. "Consecrated persons will be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world, if they can renew themselves constantly in the light of the word of God" (*Vita consecrata*, no. 85);
2. A second criterion to be considered is *consonance* with the tradition of our religious family. The return to our *sources*, requested by the Council as an essential premise for the renewal of religious life, allows us to appreciate some *spiritual traditions* and certain pointers that can revitalise our *meditation*. In this regard it may be interesting to highlight the fact, including with reference to the first criterion, that the meditation texts by Jesuits De la Puente and Rodriguez that have accompanied meditation by Salesians for around a century, make constant reference to the *mysteries* of Christ's life as they emerge from the Gospel accounts;
3. A third essential criterion is *fidelity to our Constitutions*. "Every day the members will spend in common at least half an hour for meditation", we read in the *Regulations* no. 71; similarly in the first constitutional text approved in 1874, we read: "Singulis diebus unusquisque praeter orationes vocales saltem per dimidium horae orationi mentali vacabit."³⁵ Probably we should more often emphasize the adverb *saltem* (at least half an hour...!). In any case, we entrust to Fr Paul Albera the exegesis of our constitutional dictate: "The prayer that our Constitutions prescribe for us to nurture the spirit" as he says in his circular entitled *Don Bosco the Model of the Salesian Priest*, "is mental prayer which, according to St Teresa, is 'pure communion of friendship by means of which the soul spends time alone with God and never tires of showing love for Him who we know loves us' ... in order to conform ourselves to the spirit of the constitutions, should give mental prayer the character of true intimate entertainment, of simple and affectionate conversation with God",³⁶

³⁵ "Every member, as well as vocal prayer, will give no less than half an hour a day to mental prayer".

³⁶ P. ALBERA, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, Torino 1922, 443.



Reading the past in order to write the future: From a circular by Fr Luigi Ricceri

This heartfelt letter of the Rector Major, Fr Luigi Ricceri, entitled *Our Prayer* (ASC no. 269) goes back to 1973. The context is the *Special General Chapter*, the first to be held after the conclusion of Vatican Council II, and the beatification of Fr Michael Rua. It is a circular written "authoritatively", strong words on the vital topic of prayer written in the light of data collected for the *General report on the state of the Congregation* prepared for the opening of GC21. The crisis and many defections over those years thus found a key to their interpretation in the serious and profound deficiencies of the confreres' prayer life. According to Fr Ricceri, the causes of this shortcoming have their roots in the early formation period, where there has often been a gap in the pedagogy of prayer, compounded by inaccurate beliefs about the role of prayer in Salesian life.

Serious and profound deficiencies occur in the area of personal prayer: desertion or total abandonment, in many cases, of meditation, spiritual reading; the same can be said of visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary, etc. In other cases we have to lament the hollowing out of meditation as "mental prayer" through its arbitrary substitution by different forms, perhaps under the banner of novelty, but which are not true prayer at all. Apostolic impoverishment of work, sometimes done merely "professionally", without apostolic intention and perspective.

I could add other findings. But the painful summary of it all is this: we pray little and badly. One Provincial described the situation in his Province thus: "A degree of absence of God in our language and actions. Wounded faith. Tired or over-exerted hearts. Insufficient peace and calm for prayer and joy. The motivations for our actions lack evangelical roots and strength. Interiority is very much lacking." Perhaps we can see any number of confreres reflected in these sincere and courageous observations.

There are so many reasons

Faced with the picture outlined above, a natural question arises: what are the reasons for this situation? Although they are of different kinds, they are many and they all converge. Some have very distant, complex roots that are not easily detectable, since they are largely an inner reality that is to be identified with the intimate history of each individual's spiritual life.

There are those of a general nature dependent on the sociological environment, the change of culture, currents of thought, especially around the concept of man and the world, certain theological or pseudo-theological hypotheses or theses accepted uncritically, at least de facto. Others, on the other hand, have more direct relevance to our Congregation, such as the notable changes in the educative and pastoral field, the different and new rhythms of community life, or the real lack of peaceful "space" for recollection and dialogue with God.

Quite a few reasons have their roots in the distant period of formation, where it can often be seen that there has been a real emptiness in the pedagogy of prayer, aggravated later by our kind of eminently active life and by very approximate and inaccurate ideas on the role of prayer in Salesian life.



Suggested methods for meditation

“Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. It expresses therefore the communion of redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity. This communion, based on Baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church, implies an attitude of conversion, a flight from "self" to the "You" of God. Thus Christian prayer is at the same time always authentically personal and communitarian. It flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God. Within the Church, in the legitimate search for new methods of meditation it must always be borne in mind that the essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man.”³⁷

THE *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in no. 2707: “There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower (cf. Mk 4:4-7,15-19). But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus.”

We have chosen to present some of these methods that the history of spirituality has handed down to us, dividing them into two large groups: there are simple methods that can be immediately understood and used, and that offer no particular complications, and there are structured methods with a more complex, articulated scheme containing numerous subdivisions and stages.

1. SIMPLE METHODS

These first methods, then, do not require complex *organisation of the time* for meditation. Some can also be thought of as *preparatory* to a more articulated approach or even as part of such.

This should not lead us to believe, however, that these *simple* methods are also *easy ones*, because in some cases they require a *childlike* heart and a good habit of *concentration* and awareness of the fundamental objective of any meditative practice that always remains an *introduction* to the threshold of Mystery.

In his *Il Cattolico Provveduto* Don Bosco wrote: “To pray means to raise one’s heart to God, and to spend time with him by means of holy thoughts and pious feelings. Therefore every thought of God and every look at him is prayer when it is joined to a feeling of love ... Praying is therefore very easy. Everyone can at any time and in any place raise his heart

³⁷ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Some aspects of Christian meditation*, 15 October 1989, no. 3.



to God through pious sentiments. There is no need for refined and exquisite words, but simple thoughts accompanied by devout inner affections suffice. A prayer that consists only of thoughts, for example in a quiet admiration of the divine greatness and omnipotence, is an internal prayer, or meditation, or contemplation. If it is expressed in words, it is called vocal prayer. Both ways of praying must be dear to the Christian who loves God. A good son willingly thinks of his father, and vents the affections of his heart to him."³⁸

Simple repetition

There are many spiritual traditions that make use of the repetition of a word or a phrase to foster concentration and, in the great religions, prayer. In *yoga* or *transcendental meditation* the use of a *mantra* (from the Sanskrit roots *man*, meaning "mind" and *tra*, meaning "protect") is recommended to focus and free inner energies from any distraction; but, we insist, the point of arrival of Christian meditation is not "to empty the mind" (*no pensar nada*), but to think of God by loving him (St Teresa).³⁹

In the Christian tradition of the past centuries, the use of *brief prayer phrases* was often recommended, a true synthesis between *vocal prayer* and *mental prayer* and an effective tool for acquiring the habit of the constant *thought of God*. Our first Constitutions indicate them as an opportunity in the event that, for reasons of ministry, it is not possible to do *meditation* in common: "Each one" we read in no. 3 of the chapter on *Practices of piety* in the 1875 text, "as well as vocal prayer, will do at least half an hour of mental prayer each day, unless prevented by the sacred ministry. In this case he will make up for it with a greater frequency of short prayers, addressing to God with great fervour of affection those works that prevent him from the ordinary exercises of piety."

In practice, after the *introduction to meditation* one might choose one or more of the invocations found in the liturgy of the day (from the responsorial psalm or the readings) and repeat it or them silently with the mind and heart attentive to the Mystery... In other words not a purely mechanical repetition of a prayer but an *internalisation* that at the same time can recollect us and lead us to simple and profound *intimacy*.

We can conclude things in the usual way at the end of the half hour (*Prayer of entrustment to Mary Help of Christians*).

Many *spiritual masters* suggest tying this repetition to the rhythm of breathing. St Ignatius suggests in his *Spiritual Exercises*: "With each breath you pray mentally, saying a word from the Our Father or another prayer that you want to recite; thus, between one breath and another, you think mainly about the meaning of that word"; a teaching also picked up by Fr Barberis in his *Vade mecum*: "One can usefully take as a subject for meditation the formula of a prayer that one knows by heart, for example the *Pater*, the *Ave Maria*, the Acts of Faith. In this case you recite one of these prayers, pausing a few moments over each word to reflect,

³⁸ G. Bosco, *Il Cattolico Provveduto per le pratiche di piet *, Torino 1868, 2-3.

³⁹ This was Franciscan Francisco de Osuna's idea of meditation, opposite to that of Teresa of Avila. Christian meditation does not consist in *non pensare a nulla*, but in *thinking of God by loving him*.



to penetrate its meaning and nourish the soul. If you do this, you will spend half an hour in meditation, even if you only recite the *Our Father*.”⁴⁰

For potential, ordinary distractions, a general principle applies: it is sufficient to return *gently* to the chosen verse or invocation.

One of the particular applications of *simple repetition* could be the traditional prayer of the *Taizé community*. The chants that give rhythm to the three daily sessions are simple, made up of a single phrase repeated at length, often in different languages, taken from psalms or biblical passages, in a syllabic pattern (one syllable for each note). They are extremely catchy, always incisive, often harmonised in several voices, and therefore encourage internalisation and deep prayer.

The Jesus Prayer or prayer of the heart (Hesychasm)

Among the simple repetitions, certainly the most widespread of them has its origins in the Christian east and is known as the Jesus Prayer or Prayer of the heart. Spread by Evagrius Ponticus (4th c.) and other spiritual masters like John Climacus (6th sec.), the practice of the hesychasm (from the Greek *hesychia* meaning quiet, peace), is still alive in the Orthodox tradition, but also spread last century to many Catholic settings.

It consists of constantly repeating the formula *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*, and this is split into two according to the breathing rhythm (breathing in: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*; breathing out: *have mercy on me a sinner...*). The prayer is often given its rhythm with the help of a special rosary made of wool or rope, usually with a hundred knots, known as a *komboskini*. Legend says it was St Anthony Abbot, inspired by a vision of the Mother of God, who invented this way of making the knots for this Orthodox rosary.

The prayer became famous in Europe last century with the publication of *The Way of a Pilgrim* by an anonymous 19th century (Russian) writer. The beginning of these short stories is particularly evocative: “By the grace of God I am a Christian man, by my actions a great sinner, and by calling a homeless wanderer of the humblest birth who roams from place to place. My worldly goods are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on my back, and in my breast pocket a Bible. And that is all. On the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost I went to church to say my prayers there during the liturgy. The first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was being read, and among other words I heard these—“Pray without ceasing.” It was this text, more than any other, which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things also in order to make a living.”

One of the most detailed descriptions of the “prayer of the heart”⁴¹ is contained in an anonymous piece, probably the work of a monk from Mount Athos, Nicephorus the Solitary (14th c.). “Rest your chin on your chest” – Nicephorus writes in his *Method of prayer*, “pay attention to your self with your intelligence and your eyes. Hold your breath long enough

⁴⁰ G. BARBERIS, *Vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*, Torino 1931, 1176.

⁴¹ We note here that the expression “prayer of the heart” is used in other contexts and by other spiritual traditions with a different meaning, in many cases the more generic meaning of “affective prayer”.



for your intelligence to find the place of the heart and remain there in its entirety. At the beginning everything will seem dark and very hard, but with time and daily practice you will discover a continuous joy in yourself.”

Given these features and according to the terminology of *Some aspects of Christian meditation*, this can be described as a *psycho-physical* method; this latter, however, is not essential to the method and depends on each one’s own sensitivities.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* too makes reference to the Jesus Prayer. In no. 2667: “This simple invocation of faith developed in the tradition of prayer under many forms in East and West. the most usual formulation, transmitted by the spiritual writers of the Sinai, Syria, and Mt. Athos, is the invocation, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners.’ It combines the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 with the cry of the publican and the blind men begging for light[cf. Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:13]. By it the heart is opened to human wretchedness and the Savior’s mercy.”

In the Orthodox tradition the repetition of the *Jesus Prayer* is not only a *method* for daily meditation, but gradually opens the heart of the one praying to *continuous prayer*, following the indications of Paul to the Thessalonians: “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess 5:17-18). This is the grace of unity called on daily in our recent tradition in the *Prayer of entrustment to Mary Help of Christians*: “You were Don Bosco’s teacher. Show us how to imitate his virtues, especially his *union with God*...”

Composition of place (St Ignatius Loyola)

The *composition of place* is perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Ignatian pedagogy of prayer.

It consists in taking oneself, with the help of the *imagination* and through the *application of the spiritual senses*, inside the scene of the Gospel that we are *contemplating*. Let us leave it to the Basque saint to describe this interior journey to us: “*First point*. This consists in seeing in imagination the persons, and in contemplating and meditating in detail the circumstances in which they are, and then in drawing some fruit from what has been seen. *Second point*. This is to hear what they are saying, or what they might say, and then by reflecting on oneself to draw some profit from what has been heard. *Third point*. This is to smell the infinite fragrance, and taste the infinite sweetness of the divinity. Likewise to apply these senses to the soul and its virtues, and to all according to the person we are contemplating, and to draw fruit from this. *Fourth point*. This is to apply the sense of touch, for example, by embracing and kissing the place where the persons stand or are seated, always taking care to draw some fruit from this.”⁴²

The purpose of *composition of place* is to “collocate” the one praying at the heart of the Gospel episode, arousing *emotions* and *sentiments* that then allow the person to draw *spiritual fruit* from it. The role of the *imagination* goes further: the person praying is also invited to find his place, his role in the story he contemplates. For example, in relation to *contemplation of the nativity* in the *second week of the Exercises* Ignatius writes: “1. *The first point*. This will

⁴² IGNATIUS LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 122-125 (Tr. by Louis J Puhl sj).



consist in seeing the persons, namely, our Lady, St. Joseph, the maid, and the Child Jesus after His birth. I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave, and as though present, look upon them, contemplate them, and serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence. Then I will reflect on myself that I may reap some fruit.”

The faculty of the *imagination* thus becomes *creative fantasy*, always for the sole purpose of arousing in those who meditate the awareness of an event that is not distant in time, but that is happening *for me* and to generate feelings of love and gratitude, of genuine and profound *inward participation*. Ignatius wrote in his second annotation of the Exercises: “For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.”

A word on the role of the imagination in meditation

This method for *meditation* or *contemplation* of the *mysteries* of Jesus’ life is no novelty in the Church’s history, but it is part of a spiritual current that starts from the reflections of Bernard of Chiaravalle and St Bonaventure.⁴³

In a providential way Ignatius came into contact with this spiritual tradition through Ludolph of Saxony’s *Life of Christ*,⁴⁴ during his convalescence at Loyola. Luigi Tucillo, in an interesting article entitled *La scena della passione tra visio e actio nella letteratura meditativa e nell’arte tardomedievale* (The scene of the passion between visio and actio in meditative literature and late medieval art) wrote: “What distinguishes Ludolph’s work is the extraordinary physical involvement to which the reader is called within the episodes: he adopts an internal perspective to the scene, physically descends into space and acts in the first person. For example, when Jesus is surrounded by his enemies in Anna’s house, the devotee is invited to approach his Master and sit next to him. Similarly, during the scourging, when Christ is represented in a river of blood, the person meditating is compelled to throw himself on him: he touches him, embraces him and receives the scourges destined for the Condemned man on his own body. He makes his physical presence felt, he becomes an actor, co-protagonist of the events, companion of Jesus and almost his stunt double.”⁴⁵

John De Caulibus († 1376) in his *Meditationes vitae Christi* writes along the same lines: “If you want to profit from these meditations, make yourself present to the words and actions of the Lord Jesus, which are reported as if you heard him with your ears and saw him with your eyes, with all the fervour of your spirit, with diligence, joy, and at length.”⁴⁶

The method of *composition of place* lends itself to be used in meditation on the Gospel stories. Fr Giulio Barberis writes in his *Vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*: “St Ignatius also teaches us to apply our five senses in certain circumstances, helping the weakness of our spirit with our *imagination*. This is done by removing our senses from any earthly sensation,

⁴³ Cf. *ibidem*, nos. 179-188.

⁴⁴ Other famous names could be mentioned, other than Ludolph, such as Vincent Ferrer († 1419) or Thomas à Kempis († 1471)

⁴⁵ L. TUCILLO, *La scena della passione tra visio e actio nella letteratura meditativa e nell’arte tardomedievale*, in www.academia.edu/26145843/ (09/01/2020).

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.



and imagining ourselves *seeing* with our eyes the beauty of the celestial spouse and of what we are meditating; *savouring* with the palate the spiritual food of his words; *hearing* the sweetness of his voice with our ears; *experiencing* the sweetness of his perfumes with our sense of smell; and by *touch*, the happiness of his embraces. And so all our powers are caught up with the Lord or with the mysteries that we are meditating on.”⁴⁷

In many other cases our first novice master suggests that young Salesians have recourse to the *imagination* to *stir up the flames* of the spiritual life. “Look at the tabernacle” he writes as one example, “and *imagine* that Jesus is really looking at you from there. He is alive and real, his heart burning with love for us, and *imagine* that he is prepared to give you greater or lesser graces according to the greater or lesser commitment you place on doing meditation well. Oh! *imagine* that you really see Jesus with your own eyes: *imagine* that he keeps his eyes on you for the whole time of meditation: then meditation will certainly be good for you ... Look at the crucifix and focus on yourself, *imagine* that you really see Jesus on the cross, while in agony due to the immense spasms he suffers from and that he casts his gaze on you, and find some relief if you make your meditation with great devotion, while new pains would be added to the many he already suffers if he were to see you distracted and cold while meditating.”⁴⁸

A reason for study and research could be to study some *techniques* used in the psychological field which enhance the *therapeutic* role that can be attributed to the use of the so-called *creative imagination*.⁴⁹ Another psychological technique that can, in some respects, be combined with the reflections made is *psychodrama*.⁵⁰

In the Christian scene too, some authors⁵¹ affirm the great value of certain *biblical images* which can give our actions a new depth, open new perspectives, disclose the richness of our inner life. Eugene Kästner has written: “Truth wants to have a home. And it cannot live except in image, in word, in poetry. Only then is it connected with the earth, suffers, rejoices; only then can it grow and flourish. Images are windows ... In images there is the call from above for all things. In image, in parable everything is linked with shiny gold rings. Metaphor is the love between things; everything is held together through representation.”⁵²

If we let ourselves be involved in some of these *images of healing*, they will produce effects in us and modify our being and our behaviour, without even having to go through concrete

⁴⁷ G. BARBERIS, *Vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*, Torino 1965, 1195-1196.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 1194-1195. The word in the original is *figurati*; we have preferred to use the equivalent word *immaginati* or *imagine*.

⁴⁹ The bibliography on this subject is very extensive. Among other volumes, we would like to highlight: N. DEL LONGO, *La rêverie in psicoanalisi. Immaginazione e creatività in psicoterapia*, Milano 2018; F. PRESUTTI, *Educazione alla creatività e alla immaginazione*, Ispesf 2015; P. RICE, *L'immaginazione costruttiva*, Milano 2012.

⁵⁰ The inventor of psychodrama is Jacob Moreno, a psychiatrist, who developed this method in the early 1900s. (Cf. J. LEVI MORENO, *Principi di sociometria, psicoterapia di gruppo e sociodramma*, Milano 1980). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_L._Moreno for some works in English.

⁵¹ We mention, among others, the Benedictine Anselm Grün and his very rich literary production, and in particular: A. GRÜN, *La forza terapeutica delle immagini interiori. Attingere a sorgenti fresche*, Brescia 2012; Id., *Scoprire la ricchezza della vita. Immagini bibliche per una cura d'anime che guarisce*, Brescia.

⁵² E. KÄSTNER, *Die Stundertrommel vom Heiligen Berg Athos*, Wiesbaden 1956, 104-105.



intentions; acting on the unconscious, these representations can also change the conditions of our work.

Therefore, it is not a question of a *game* for its own sake, but of an emotional involvement *within* the pages of the Gospel, which can lead to conversion of the heart.

Mira que te mira (*St Teresa of Avila*)

This ancient method too has recourse to the *imagination* of the one praying.

Observe him while he is looking at you... The method consists in imagining the second person of the Holy Trinity in front of us, with the help of the *spiritual senses* and then stopping to analyse his gaze, to feel the beneficial influences on our life.

Thus does Teresa encourage her Sisters in *The Way of Perfection*: “I am not now asking you to meditate on him, nor to produce great thoughts nor to feel deep devotion. I only ask you to look at him. Who can prevent you from turning the eyes of your soul (but for an instant if you can do no more) on Our Lord?” (26,3). In her autobiography that Mary Mazzarello read and read again at Mornese to the girls in the workshop, she wrote: “Whoever has begun it [prayer] should not leave it aside; and whoever has not begun it, I beg him for the love of God not to deprive himself of so much good; if he perseveres, I hope in the mercy of that God whom no one has ever taken as a friend in vain; since mental prayer is nothing more – in my opinion – than dealing with friendship, spending much alone with the One we know loves us.” (Life 8,5).

Like the other *simple methods* this one too requires a childlike heart and involves the *affections*; but, far beyond an empty *sentimentality*, such an involvement requires, once again, to become active, to transform our life.

The *religious spirit* of our century risks overlooking this *affective* component, of being very *intellectual*; yet it is precisely the feelings that move the *will* and also the *intelligence*, and which keep alive the desire to know *The Beloved* deeply. Perhaps it is precisely this emotional involvement that has been lacking in the *spiritual experience* of many men and women religious in recent decades. Antonio Rosmini wrote in his *Of The Five Wounds of the Holy Church*: “Preaching and liturgy were the two great schools of the Christian people in the most beautiful times of the Church. The first taught the faithful with words, the second with words together with rites.”⁵³

These two foundations of Christian experience, Rosmini affirms, were “complete”: they were not addressed, in fact, only to the intelligence or to reasoning, but to the whole human being. “They were not voices”, he writes “which could be understood by the mind alone, or symbols which had no power other than that of the senses; but both by the way of the mind and by that of the senses, the one and the other anointed the heart and instilled in the Christian an elevated feeling about the whole of creation, mysterious and divine; which feeling was *operative*, all possible like the grace which constituted it...”⁵⁴

⁵³ A. ROSMINI, *Delle cinque piaghe della Santa Chiesa*, Rizzoli, Milano 1996, 33. In English: *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church*: Edited With an Introduction by H. P. Liddon [1883]

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.



An examen for the coming day

This is a kind of *preventive examen* (or 'examination') in the light of the word of God for the day, adapted to morning meditation.

After a community and personal *introduction* that is a true *entry* to prayer, the liturgy of the day is read attentively. Then, starting from the present moment, try to think about the day that has just begun, the commitments that await us, the people we will meet, the individual events that in all likelihood will take place, the Eucharistic celebration, travel, meals, the ordinary situations that await us.

It is a question, first of all, of observing each of these events in a prayerful atmosphere, considering them in their concreteness, also in the light of the experiences of the previous days or situations.

Then we will try to focus our attention, more specifically, on each of the people we meet, on those who are part of our daily history (confreres, young people, co-workers...), particularly on the most difficult or problematic relationships.

By renewing our awareness of the presence of the Spirit in the temple of every heart, let us try to illuminate each of these relationships, including in the light of the Word of the day, to foresee the difficulties we will encounter, ask the Spirit to suggest the words to say and gestures to perform right now, so that our relationships can be new and meaningful; let us learn to entrust our *companions on the journey* one by one to God from the morning onwards and let us allow the Spirit to suggest the best way to serve and love them, or, if necessary, to *put up with* them and not offend them.

We conclude with an invocation to the Holy Spirit to be with us *during the coming day* and to help us be a good gift, a *blessing* for those we will meet.

In Chapter X of the second part of his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, entitled *Morning Prayer*, Francis de Sales says: "Call to mind that the day now beginning is given you in order that you may work for Eternity, and make a steadfast resolution to use this day for that end. Consider beforehand what occupations, duties and occasions are likely this day to enable you to serve God; what temptations to offend Him, either by vanity, anger, etc., may arise; and make a fervent resolution to use all means of serving Him and confirming your own piety; as also to avoid and resist whatever might hinder your salvation and God's Glory.



Reading the past in order to write the future: From a circular by Fr Egidio Viganò

In a historical context in which many confreres felt a particular attraction towards some new ecclesial movements, in 1991 Fr Viganò wrote the long circular *Charism and Prayer* (AGC no. 338), where he reaffirms the richness of Don Bosco's spirituality and firmly states: "Now to reflect on prayer we must first move beyond charisms." "And so if we are to speak adequately of prayer we must go back first of all to the praying attitude of Christ." In the light of some reflections of St. Francis de Sales, Fr Viganò reaffirms the conviction that the charism of our founder and Salesian prayer constitute a vital unity, so that neither aspect makes sense without the other. The reference to *contemplation* is certainly in line with his predecessors' magisterium.

The authenticity of prayer, as the beginning of a first response, is rooted in a personal experience of Gad: think, for instance, of Moses before the burning bush. His attitude was one of discovery and almost of surprise. It is the Lord who says: "Look, I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share a meal at that person's side" (Rev 3:20).

This, attitude of attentive listening is found to be particularly fruitful in the form we know as "mental prayer", to which the great Spanish saints of the sixteenth century gave its most developed form. Mental prayer is not in fact a practice reserved to monks and hermits, but the very foundation of all prayer; in fact, faith is before all else an act of listening.

There is no prayer - just as there is no life of faith - without the intervention of the conscience and freedom of each individual. We know from experience that the most intense moments of prayer are often those involving our personal interior: moments of meditation more than of feelings; moments of silence rather than speaking; moments of contemplation rather than of reasoning; in fact: "the word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12).

"When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in the secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you". (Mt 6,6).

This in no way detracts from communal prayer, which is so important and has its most perfect ecclesial expression in the Eucharistic celebration, but emphasises the prior condition for an authentic participation in that too.

Mental prayer evolves gradually from meditation to contemplation; it is an interior attitude through which one enters into relationship with the love of God. St Teresa has described it as dealing with the Lord on friendly terms...

We must not think that "contemplation", to which meditation leads, is something granted only to a few privileged souls. It is not our purpose here to present it with difficult abstract definitions, nor to list its different kinds and degrees with their delicate problems, but to look at the example of those Saints who have lived our own spirituality...

Meditation becomes contemplation when the love, born of listening, gains the ascendancy and penetrates directly into the Father's heart. (cf. CC 12).



2. STRUCTURED METHODS

The first method to be presented in this session is, probably, the *major way* that the Church today indicates to laity and religious in order to learn to *pray the Word* and allow it to transform our lives as believers, day by day; we will offer three “variants” of it given the particular importance and relevance of the method. However, out of knowledge and fidelity to our tradition, we will also present some other structured methods which probably, due to their complexity, are less suitable for use in the half hour scheduled for daily meditation, but which can be used on other occasions (retreats, community meditations, spiritual exercises...).

Lectio Divina according to the method of Guigo (Guy) the Carthusian

Lectio divina is a very ancient expression, one often found in the teachings of the Fathers. In his *Letter to Gregory*, Origen recommends: “...and while you study these divine works [*lectio*] with a believing and God-pleasing intention, knock at that which is closed in them, and it shall be opened to you by the porter, of whom Jesus says, John 10:3 To him the porter opens. While you attend to this divine reading [*lectio divina*] seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages of the divine Scriptures. And do not be content with knocking and seeking, for what is most necessary for understanding divine things is *prayer*.”⁵⁵

In the teaching of the Fathers, the reading of the Scriptures, therefore, is not satisfied with an “intellectual understanding”, but must lead to prayer, to a personal relationship with God.

The arrangement of the *method of Lectio Divina*⁵⁶ as it is understood and widely used today, goes back to the Carthusian monk Guigo (also Guy in English) who in 1174, in the wake of the great monastic tradition originating from St Benedict, would be designed as a guide for the Great Carthusian.⁵⁷

In one of his letters to his *beloved brother Gervasius*, probably sent around 1150, Guigo sketches the outline of a method with extraordinary wisdom, one initially beloved only of the Carthusian tradition but which would be rediscovered and would spread in the second half of last century thanks to the new post-conciliar sensitivity and the contribution of certain writers and *masters of spirituality*.⁵⁸

Exhortations of Salesian magisterium regarding the use of this method are many. Already in 1986 *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, a guide to reading and understanding the Salesian Constitutions, when commenting on C. 93 says: “The Rule asks us for a daily form of mental prayer: what tradition calls meditation (as it is called in Article 71 of the

⁵⁵ *Sources Chrétiennes* 148, 192-193.

⁵⁶ When we refer to the method and not just regular reading of the Scriptures, we will make use of upper case (*Lectio Divina* instead of *lectio divina*).

⁵⁷ For the little information we have about his life, consult A. WILMART, *Auteurs spirituels et textes dévotes du moyen âge latin*, Paris 1991, 230-240.

⁵⁸ Among Italian writers we mention Carlo Maria Martini, Enzo Bianchi, Mariano Magrassi and Benedetto Calati.



General Regulations) and which corresponds to a form of *lectio divina*, according to the characteristic expression of monastic life.”

There are many recent publications that explain the *Lectio* method in some detail,⁵⁹ except that the fundamental point of reference continues to be Guigo’s letter, noted as *Scala claustralium* or *Letter on contemplative life*.

Here we will try to outline the essential steps in the method briefly, adapting them to our context:

1. INTRODUCTION

Usually in our communities this moment is accompanied by a prayer or invocation of the Holy Spirit. These formulas can be useful, but they must not replace a personal exercise of *awareness*, the willingness to be present to ourselves by gathering our inner energies, the choice of finding an adequate position of the body (*statio*); in essence it is a question of placing ourselves *personally in the presence of God*, and calling on him with confidence (*colloquio*).

2. THE CORE OF LECTIO

Following Guigo’s classic scheme, we need to imagine organising the time for our meditation by dividing it into four parts (*in advance*), which can also be of equal duration, or giving more time to one or the other according to our particular needs.

A. READING OF THE PASSAGE (*lectio*)

Usually the chosen passage will be the Gospel or one of the readings of the day; our meditation will certainly be more effective if this passage is read, even if for a few minutes, the previous evening (*remote preparation*). This habit already places us in a fruitful attitude of *listening*. We become aware of the fact that God takes the initiative and gives us the gift of his Word.

This first step has the understanding of what the passage *itself* says (*literal sense*) as its main objective; the passage must be read carefully, perhaps with a pencil in hand that allows us to underline the verbs (*actions*) or adjectives (*qualities*) that strike us most. To use a metaphor, we could say that it is about doing the work of the *ant* that patiently collects every little *fragment* that can be a nourishment for its life. The use of a commentary and biblical passages suggested alongside the text can be very useful in this step, as well as in the next.

It would be helpful to have the skills to be able to read the texts in their original language; but since this privilege is reserved to a few, we can resort to comparing two or three different translations available in our own language; this sometimes helps to grasp different nuances.

B. MEDITATION OR REFLECTION ON THE BIBLICAL TEXT (*meditatio*)

In this second moment the goal is to find out what the passage says *to me* (*spiritual sense*); more explicitly, it is a question of understanding what God wants to tell me, today and in the concrete situation in which I find myself, through this text.

⁵⁹ These should be distinguished from simple *commentaries* on a book of Scripture.



The metaphor we could possibly use is the *queen bee*, capable of reworking what the worker bees have patiently collected. Another image used by the Fathers is the slow chewing of previously ingested food (*ruminatio*).

In this second step too, the work is mainly entrusted to the *intellect*, but also to the *memory* that allows us to reconstruct some connections between our passage and other texts of Scripture or readings previously made, and to the *affections* that involve us in the understanding of what God wants to tell me, here and now, through his Word.

C. PRAYER (*oratio*)

This third step introduces us to the experience of *mental prayer* properly speaking. It is no longer a question of reading (*lectio*) and understanding (*meditatio*) the passage, but of transforming it into prayer (*oratio*), using in direct conversation (*colloquio*) the expressions contained in the biblical text, together with the movements of the heart, our feelings (*affections*). Our meditation becomes *personal dialogue* more explicitly; our attention is no longer directed to what the Word says in itself and not even to what it says to me, but this time it is I who put myself in dialogue with the Word, letting it *resonate* in me with the help of the Holy Spirit and trying to express my feelings to God.

D. CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE (*contemplatio*)

In this final step the sacred text is also set aside physically. Someone has said that the apex of communication is precisely the silence that is often created, without any embarrassment, among those who love each other. It is a time when the Word we have read (*lectio*), meditated on (*meditatio*) and prayed with (*oratio*) goes deeper (*contemplatio*) and confronts the *here and now* of our life to bring light and warmth. In this way our life opens silently and with emotion to the *gift* that God wants to make of himself.

We must not forget, in fact, that *contemplation*, like prayer in general, cannot be considered the fruit of our efforts; it is up to us only to create the conditions to be able to receive the gift (*active acceptance*) that God wants to give us. In this regard, Fr Pascual Chávez wrote: "The desire to do God's will leads gradually and unconsciously to adoration, silence, praise and to 'the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son.' (CCC 2712). From the contemplation of ourselves and our own world in the light of God we pass to the contemplation of ourselves as God sees us, to know that we are in the presence of him who is the object of our desire, the sole focus of our prayer. As distinct from the preceding stages, which are activities that require a force of will, 'contemplative prayer is a gift, a grace,' (CCC 2713), neither normal nor in any way our due; we can long for it, ask for it, and welcome it if it comes, but it is never automatic" (AGC no. 386).

Using one of the small, effective *summaries* of the letter from Guigo the Carthusian we can say that: "*Reading* is the assiduous study of the Scriptures, done with an attentive spirit. *Meditation* is a diligent activity of the mind which seeks the knowledge of hidden truths with the help of its own reason. *Prayer* is a fervent yearning of the heart for God to ward off evil and obtain good. *Contemplation* is a certain elevation of the mind above oneself towards God, enjoying the joys of eternal sweetness ... *Reading* is an exercise of the external senses, *meditation* is a work of the intellect, *prayer* is a desire, *contemplation* is an overcoming of every



sense. The first degree is for beginners, the second for the proficient, the third for devotees, the fourth for the blessed."⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

A. PERSONAL

This is the most important and irreplaceable moment, the one that allows us to reap the fruit of our meditation every day, identifying a particular corner of our life on which the Word seeks to shed light. In the context of the *Lectio* method, many indicate this with the term *Actio*.⁶¹ A text from Isaiah enlightens us on the dynamics that can accompany every daily *meditation*: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Is 55:10-11).

B. COMMUNITY

The conclusion of meditation in community in our recent tradition, is marked by the invitation *Blessed are those who listen to the word of God* and then by the prayer to Mary Help of Christians.

Lectio Divina according to Carlo Maria Martini

On 6 November 1980, more than two thousand young people gathered in the Milan Cathedral to listen to their Bishop who reached the hearts and minds of his young people by explaining the *Lectio Divina* method as a way of praying with the Bible. Thus began the *School of the Word*, which would continue until 2002, one of the most innovative and richest experiences in Cardinal Martini's ministry.

The method he gradually offered takes up Guigo's four steps, enriching them with the Ignatian tradition in relation especially to the experience of *spiritual discernment*. Ultimately, the scheme is enriched with other stages that we will try to clarify briefly, passing over the other *steps* we have already mentioned.

1. STATIO = INTRODUCTION
2. LECTIO = READING
3. MEDITATIO = MEDITATION
4. ORATIO = PRAYER
5. CONTEMPLATIO = CONTEMPLATION

⁶⁰ This little "masterpiece" of Christian spirituality can be read in its entirety in Italian on the Carthusian Italian website (https://www.certosini.info/guigo_ii.htm).

⁶¹ In this case then, there would be six stages: *Statio, Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, Contemplatio, Actio*.



6. CONSOLATIO = CONSOLATION

The first fruit of the encounter with God is that intimate joy and peace that man experiences in front of the mystery of God's love. This is the propitious moment to make the great decisions of life, decisions not to be changed in moments of discouragement or of desolation. The bad spirit tries to push us to total distrust and sadness; "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..." (Gal 5:22).

7. DISCRETIO = DISCERNMENT

With the gift of Counsel, the Spirit suggests to me how to interpret my personal, family, community situation as well as my social life. It is a question of attuning to God's thoughts, of reading the book of history that divine Providence composes with wise love and reading it with faith. It is the Spirit who teaches me to understand where and how I can act in the world to prepare the way for the Lord.

8. DELIBERATIO = DECISION

Prayer must not stop at inert contemplation, which gratifies my desire for religiosity without transforming my heart. I ask the Spirit for the gift of fortitude, so that I know how to decide to carry out the evangelical choices and the intentions resulting from discernment. Often it is a question of small decisions; but it is through fidelity in the small things of every day that one builds full fidelity to God's call to do his will.

9. COLLATIO = SHARING

Whenever possible, it is very useful to share the fruit of prayer with our brothers and sisters on the journey of faith. I am not alone in seeking the face of God, but we are the Church, a communion of people called to grow together in charity. The spiritual graces that the Lord grants to each person are not the private possession of individuals but gifts offered for the common good. In some of our communities, *collatio* is already included, with great benefit, in community day or in the monthly retreat.

10. ACTIO = RESOLUTION, ACTION

The greater complexity of this ten-step structure probably makes it unsuitable for a half-hour daily meditation. The presence of the *collatio* makes it more suitable, as we said, for a *monthly* or *quarterly* community retreat.

The fact remains that this scheme highlights the relationship between meditation on the Word and the concrete choices we are called to make in our lives. *Discernment* is, in fact, the *meeting point between prayer and action*. Every personal or community decision should be illuminated by the Word; the moral dimension of Christian life can be understood and placed in its proper light if it is thought of as life under the *guidance of the Spirit*; this perspective represents the real overcoming of all sterile *moralism*.



Lectio Divina. *Fr Pascual Chávez's summary*

The pages that follow are drawn from the circular "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:69). *The word of God and Salesian life today, summer 2004* (cf. AGC no. 386). They constitute an important document of the Salesian Magisterium which is the basis for the choice of this particular "method" for meditation by Salesians.

An exceptionally good instrument for growth in listening to the Word is *lectio divina*; this is a believer's method of reading Scripture, used from the beginning of religious life in which it is "held in the highest regard. By its means the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit."⁶² Rightly does the GC25, in its first practical guideline about evangelical witness, exhort the Salesian community "to place God as the unifying centre of its being and to develop the community dimension of the spiritual life by fostering the *centrality of the word of God in personal and community life through lectio divina*".⁶³

I hope that none of you will think that this guideline of the GC25 has introduced an element extraneous to our spirituality; "the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*"⁶⁴ has been at home in the religious life from its very beginnings, and at the present time is seen to be very necessary: "nowadays a Christian cannot be an adult in faith and able to respond to the needs of the contemporary world, if he has not learned the practice in some way of *lectio divina*".⁶⁵

For us to be at home with it, *lectio divina*, like any method of praying, needs practice, but it requires especially the will to listen and the willingness to obey. In its most traditional form it involves four stages or "spiritual degrees": reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*). In recent times, in an effort to up-date it, another stage has been added: action (*actio*). Often other elements are indicated as well (discretion, deliberation, collation, consolation, etc.), but in reality these seem to be nothing more than aspects of the fundamental stages.

- *Reading*. *Lectio divina* begins with an attentive reading, or better a re-reading several times, of the text in which we want to hear what God is saying. The chosen text may be easy to understand or well known – that does not matter; it needs to be read over until it becomes familiar, almost learned by heart, "emphasising the main elements".⁶⁶ One must not pass beyond this first stage without being able to reply to the question: *what is the real meaning of this passage I have read?*

- *Meditation*. Once he has discovered the meaning of the biblical text, the attentive reader tries to become involved personally, by applying the meaning to his own life: *what is this text saying to me?* "To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts

⁶² *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

⁶³ GC25, 31.

⁶⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 39.

⁶⁵ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Programmi pastorali diocesani 1980-1990*, Milano 1991, 440-441.

⁶⁶ CARLO M. MARTINI, *La gioia del vangelo. Meditazione per i giovani*, (The Joy of the Gospel. Meditation for the young) Casale Monferrato 1988, 12.



to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them."⁶⁷ The Word has been heard and calls for consent; it has not been accepted unless it reaches the heart and brings about conversion. Understanding the text leads to understanding oneself in its light; in this way the text that has been read and understood becomes a norm of life: *what must I do to put it into practice, what must I do to give its meaning to my own life?*

- *Prayer*. To know, guess at, or even merely imagine what God wants leads naturally to prayer; in this way a burning desire arises for what daily life should become. The one who prays does not ask so much for what he lacks but rather for what God has enabled him to see and understand. He begins to yearn for what God is asking of him; and in this way makes God's will for him the object of his prayer.

- *Contemplation*. The desire to do God's will leads gradually and unconsciously to adoration, silence, praise and to "the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son."⁶⁸ From the contemplation of ourselves and our own world in the light of God we pass to the contemplation of ourselves as God sees us, to know that we are in the presence of him who is the object of our desire, the sole focus of our prayer. As distinct from the preceding stages, which are activities that require a force of will, "contemplative prayer is a gift, a grace,"⁶⁹ neither normal nor in any way our due; we can long for it, ask for it, and welcome it if it comes, but it is never automatic.

I can reveal to you that following the decision of the GC25, I feel personally obliged to "keep on reviving and expressing the primacy of God in the communities", by fostering the centrality of God's Word in personal and community life, first of all "through *lectio divina*".⁷⁰ This is a matter of great importance to me – I will tell you why in the words of Cardinal Martini – "because I shall never tire of repeating that *lectio* is one of the main means by which God wishes to save our western world from the moral ruin that threatens it because of its indifference and fear of believing. *Lectio divina* is the antidote offered by God in these recent times to foster the growth of that interior consciousness, without which Christianity risks losing out to the challenge of the third millennium".⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2706.

⁶⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2712.

⁶⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2713.

⁷⁰ GC25, 30.31.

⁷¹ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Programmi pastorali diocesani 1980-1990*, 521.



Ignatian meditation

The term *meditation* is reserved by Ignatius for the spiritual exercises proposed during the *first week* (meditation on *sin*, meditation on *hell*...). For Ignatius, meditation is a *method of prayer* by which the three powers or faculties of the soul are applied to a *truth of faith: memory, intelligence and will*. In the second, third and fourth week of the exercises Ignatius prefers the term *contemplation*.

The method is apparently a very complex one; only practice can make it familiar to one who wishes to use it in personal meditation. The three basic steps are always the same: *preparation*, the *body of the meditation* made up of the so-called *three points*, and the *conclusion*.

Making reference to the text of Cardinal Lercaro we can sum up the scheme of the Ignatian method as follows:⁷²

A. PREPARATION:

1. PROXIMATE

1.1 Prepare the "points" the evening before and establish the grace to ask for in the *Preludio*.

1.2 Think about it briefly before falling asleep and set your alarm time.

1.3 Think about it once more as soon as you awake.

2. IMMEDIATE:

2.1 Next is the place where one must meditate, pause for a moment and place oneself in the presence of God; make an act of Adoration, outwardly if possible.

2.2 Preparatory prayer.

2.3 Preludes.

2.3.1 *Historical* prelude: briefly recall the fact you will be meditating on.

2.3.2 *Imaginative* prelude or composition of place: imagine the place where the fact takes place; this is replaced, if possible, with another imagination, when Meditation is not about a fact.

2.3.3 Prelude of *petition*: ask for the grace in which the fruit of Meditation consists.

B. BODY OF THE MEDITATION

For each of the three points:

1. An exercise of *Memory*

Recall the parts of the matter to be meditated on and pretty much "scroll through" them with the mind's eye.

2. An exercise of the *Intellect*

Reflections: Make the subject of Meditation your own, exploring it further it. Applications: Practical conclusions are drawn for one's conduct and the means to be used are foreseen.

3. An exercise of the *Will*

Affections: They are devout sentiments (of adoration, praise, love, repentance, aroused in us by reflections. - Resolutions: Practical, particular, relative to the present, humble, they are made throughout the Meditation, more especially at the end.

⁷² Cf. G. LERCARO, *Metodi di orazione mentale*, cit., 353-354.



C. CONCLUSION

- COLLOQUIO: conversation with God (or Our Lord or the Virgin Mary), in which graces are asked for and our own matters are discussed; can be interspersed throughout the Meditation; must not be lacking at the end.

- VOCAL PRAYER: Brief (*Pater, Ave, Anima Christi...*).

- AFTER THE MEDITATION:

Examen on how the Meditation went.

Take note of illustrations, movements.

It is worth noting that this apparently rigid *structure* contains within it certain anthropological attentions, all oriented towards the *efficacy* of the prayer experience; we can say that Ignatian meditation presupposes a strongly *unified* anthropology, involving the body as well as the *powers of the soul*. The *remote preparation*, the *choice of the place*, the brief pause to gather oneself and make an *outward act of adoration*, the request contained in the *preparatory prayer*, the preludes, the final examination, the advice to make a *written record* of the experience, are all elements ordered to the “success” of a dialogue capable of producing an effective growth in the Christian life.

Simplified Ignatian method

Here we limit ourselves to reporting the content of the Ignatian method as it is currently presented on the official website of the Society of Jesus. It contains, in a brief way, all the “ingredients” of the previous method.

“Prayer is a personal encounter with the Lord. Choose a time and place that will help this encounter. Then observe the following steps:

1. PRESENCE. I place myself in the presence of the Lord begging for the gift of prayer and concentration. I ask the Lord that all my energies may converge on this encounter. I think of how much love he has in getting to know me and looking at me right now. Then:

– *Composition of place*: I use my imagination to make an ‘inner icon’ of the scene I am about to meditate on.

– *I ask for what I want and desire*: I enter into a direct relationship with the Lord by asking for a very specific gift, in words that I can often repeat.

2. MEDITATION. I read and re-read the passage. I stop where a word strikes me, where I “find pleasure”, am in no hurry to go on. “It is not so much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but feeling and enjoying things inwardly.” Regarding the word that strikes me, I set my memory in motion (what does it remind me of?), my intelligence (what does it make me understand?), my will (what desires does it give rise to in me?).

3. COLLOQUIO. I speak with the Lord “as a friend speaks to a friend”. And I am not afraid to “pour” all the “death” in my heart into Him so that He can pour His life into me. This is “conversation”.



4. REVISION. After the prayer, in another place, I retrace my steps for a few minutes. I ask myself how the method went, which word struck me most, and try to name the feelings that went through me."⁷³

The method taught by the Vade mecum (Fr Giulio Barberis)

The method taught by Fr Barberis from the time of the first novitiate is substantially the Ignatian one, as can be easily demonstrated by comparing Barberis' first manuscript⁷⁴ of his *Vade mecum* with the general scheme of Ignatian meditation.

The *Vade mecum*, in particular, devotes two entire chapters to this topic; the first, titled *Meditation*, is a small treatise on mental prayer, its effectiveness and importance, on the need for it and its fruits in religious life. It is full of quotes from Scripture and the history of spirituality; the second, titled *On the practical way of making meditation*, explains in detail the method proposed for making it, after a preface filled with pedagogical wisdom, titled *Doing what is possible*. "When you have good will" says Fr Barberis "you always succeed in meditation, because it depends more on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit than on our efforts, and the Holy Spirit is always with those who do what they can."

The subject matter that follows is very complex and does not fit into the half-hour of mental prayer provided for in our Constitutions. In the Salesian tradition of the first half of the last century, the three points of the meditation were often read by a guide, partly because of the difficulty of having a copy of the text available to everyone. Silence and personal prayer were reduced to a few minutes and, in some cases, fidelity to form became predominant rather than attention to intimate and personal dialogue. Our hypothesis is that in many cases excessive fidelity to the model and a certain lack of elasticity may have harmed the quality of meditation and reduced to a minimum, subjectively, the motivations that justify its importance and practice.

In summary, the scheme presented by Fr Barberis was as follows:⁷⁵

1) PREPARATION

REMOTE PREPARATION

PROXIMATE PREPARATION

- a) Placing ourselves in the presence of God
- b) Asking forgiveness for our sins
- c) Asking for the grace to be able to meditate well
- d) Depicting the subject

2) MEDITATION POINTS (*three*)

- a) Exercise of the intellect
- b) Depicting the place
- c) Application of the senses

⁷³ <https://gesuiti.it/metodo-di-preghiera-ignaziano/> [06/06/2020].

⁷⁴ The original is found in in ASC A 000.02.05.

⁷⁵ Cf. G. BARBERIS, *Vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*, cit., 1180-1206. The subsequent editions are substantially unchanged. The last edition of this precious treatise on Don Bosco's spirituality was published in 1965.



- d) Exercise of the will
 - e) Resolutions
 - f) Affections and colloquies
 - 3) Conclusion
 - a) Resolution
- Must be practical
- b) Thanking the Lord
 - c) Examination and repentance

“If you do it this way,” concluded Fr Barberis, “I hope that you too will be able to draw from meditation those fruits that St Bernard, St Ignatius, St Louis and Fr Beltrami used to obtain. After meditation they all felt inflamed with love for the Lord, they no longer felt a taste for anything earthly, they felt ready to do anything, even the most difficult, even to suffer martyrdom for the Lord’s sake.”⁷⁶

The “seven steps” method (Lumko – Africa)

The last three methods we present are of more recent origin.

The *Seven Steps* method it is more suitable for community meditation, but can also be enhanced in personal meditation, with some modifications. It has its origin in South Africa, precisely in Lumko, a Catholic institute in Del Menville, but it has also spread to Europe, especially in Germany. In this method too, as in Guigo’s, prolonged and personal contact with the text, silence, prayer are strongly desired and promoted.⁷⁷

We read in the *Instrumentum laboris* (Working Document) of the 2008 Synod on *The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*: “The newness of *Lectio Divina* among the People of God requires an appropriate pedagogy of initiation which leads to a good understanding of what is treated and provides clear teaching on the meaning of each of its steps and their application to life in both faithful and creatively wise manner. Various programmes, such as the Seven Steps, are already being practised by many particular Churches on the African continent. This form of *Lectio Divina* receives its name from the seven moments of encounter with the Bible (acknowledging the presence of God, reading the text, dwelling on the text, being still, sharing insights, searching together and praying together) in which meditation, prayer and sharing the Word of God are central.”

We briefly present the content of the individual steps, adapting them to the context of a religious community.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 1205.

⁷⁷ For a deeper understanding of the method see A. HECHT, *Passi verso la Bibbia*, Leumann 1995. English readers might go to <https://madure.net/2008/03/16/the-seven-steps-of-bible-study-lumko-method-2/>



Suggested methods for meditation

1. INVITATION (WE INVITE THE LORD) AND INTRODUCTORY PRAYER

Invitation and prayer are the first step. Each one should have the Bible in hand and be aware of the journey ahead.

2. READING THE SACRED TEXT

A confrere reads the Gospel aloud or a passage from the liturgy of the day. The text can also be read a second time in another translation.

3. ECHOES OF THE TEXT (DWELL ON THE TEXT)

Each one chooses a word or some short sentences that has struck them and says it aloud, prayerfully, letting it “penetrate”. After each of these there is a moment of silence. At the end the biblical text can be read again calmly.

4. SILENT MEDITATION

A pause of silence follows (at least ten minutes); this is the very heart of the meditation. Each one can also silently *repeat* in his heart what touched him most, transforming the Word into prayer.

5. SHARING WHAT HAS STRUCK US

Once the fourth step is completed, each one, if he wishes, can communicate to others what he has grasped as a warning or a hope, a commitment or a comfort. It is not just about communicating an intellectual reflection, but about sharing emotions, feelings and the attitude that meditation on the passage aroused in us.

6. EXCHANGE ABOUT DAILY LIFE

How is the life of the community challenged by the Word? It is possible to decide on a specific common action, but above all it is a question of sharing the current situations and problems of the community, interpreted in the light of the Word.

7. CONCLUDING PRAYER

The meeting ends with a prayer or a song of thanksgiving, in analogy with the seventh day of creation, a time of prayerful contemplation. Bishop Hirmer of Umtata wrote: “The seven steps are intended to educate to inner tranquillity and to open the heart to listening to the Word of God.”



The ruminatio method (according to Clodovis M. Boff)

This is the method presented by Brazilian theologian, a religious of the *Servants of Mary*, in his *Meditação. Como Fazer?* Published for the first time in Portuguese in 2006. We reproduce it here because its characteristics of *synthesis* between some methods and *techniques* of ancient and recent tradition.

Let's examine it in detail.

1. INTRODUCTION

a. *Placing ourselves in the presence of God.* For this introduction the author suggests having recourse to the *imagination*. "We can imagine ourselves", he says, "seated at the feet of the Master, like Mary in Bethany, listening to his word, or as a dinner guest of the Holy Trinity, Rublev's icon suggests."⁷⁸ this first step can be linked to a *relaxation technique*, to foster inner silence.

b. *Ask for the light of the Holy Spirit.* He is the true *Inner Teacher*. Only the Spirit can open us up to the treasures hidden in the word.

2. THE CENTRAL BODY OF THE MEDITATION

a. *Slow and attentive reading of the passage.*

b. *Ruminatio.* It is a matter of slowly repeating, over and over again, the word or short phrase that in the immediately preceding phase struck our mind or heart, to *digest* the Word. This metaphor, often used by the Fathers, is borrowed from the animal world. Just as ruminant animals eat food and then chew it for a long time so that it is assimilated by the body, so the person of prayer feeds on the Word of God, savouring it slowly. In his commentary on Psalm 37 St Augustine says: "Whoever swallows, making what he eats disappear forgets what he has heard. Instead, the one who does not forget thinks, and thinking he *rumina* (ruminates) and *ruminando* (ruminating) he savours it."⁷⁹

Clodovis Boff writes: "The interesting thing about this recovery of the *ruminatio* method is its similarity with different methods of oriental origin based on the repetition of a mantra and which today acquire ever greater prestige in a West increasingly prey to rationalism and activism."⁸⁰ And further on: "Spiritual progress passes through the *diminution of thoughts* and the *increase of feelings*, understood in the deepest sense of 'affections of the soul' ... One passes from simple meditation to contemplation in the true sense of the word."⁸¹

3. CONCLUSION

a) *Write a word or phrase on a piece of paper to remember during the day.* Our prayer, to be authentic, must always confront itself with real life in order to transform it.

b) *Thanksgiving.*

⁷⁸ C.M. BOFF, *Come fare meditazione. Il metodo della "ruminazione"*, Milano 2010, 76.

⁷⁹ ST AUGUSTINE, Exposition on Ps 37. (see New Advent website).

⁸⁰ C.M. BOFF, *Come fare meditazione*, cit., 6.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 78.



In this method once more we find a tripartite scheme, the centrality of the Word, fidelity to the Fathers and to the tradition of the Church, the repetition (*ruminatio*) of a verse or a formula which brings us back to the hesychastic tradition, the concreteness of a conclusion that makes the practice of meditation alive and effective.

Fr Thomas Keating's Centering Prayer method

Thomas Keating (1923-2018), a Cistercian monk, was the Abbot of St Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, in Massachusetts, and is the founder of the *Centering Prayer* movement.⁸²

As in all methods ordered to contemplative prayer, the theological basis of this method lies in the awareness of the indwelling of the Trinity in us. It is inspired in particular by the writings of those who have made a decisive contribution to the Christian contemplative tradition, in particular: John Cassiano; the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*; Frances de Sales, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux and Thomas Merton.

There are four guidelines or stages suggested by the method:⁸³ We describe them here briefly:

1. Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your *intention to consent to God's presence and action in you*.

This *sacred word* is chosen at the beginning, in a brief moment of prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us on the one that is most suitable for us. Examples of *sacred words* are: God, Lord, Jesus, Father, Mother, Mary; or also, in other languages: Abbà, Kyrie, Jesu, Mater. Other possibilities are: Love, Peace, Mercy, Silence, Calm, Faith, Shalom, Amen...

2. *Sitting comfortably, with your eyes closed, take a brief moment to quiet down, then silently introduce the sacred word as a symbol of your consenting to God's presence and his action in you.*

Comfortably means relatively comfortable, but not enough to encourage sleep during prayer. Whatever position we adopt, the back must be vertical. We close our eyes as a sign of detachment from what is around us and within us. We introduce the sacred word softly, as if we were placing a feather on a layer of cotton wool. If we do fall asleep, as soon as we wake up, we quietly resume our prayer.

3. *When you realise that you are overwhelmed with thoughts, return very gently to the sacred word.*

Thought is a generic term for all perception: sensory perceptions, emotions, images, memories, projects, reflections, concepts, comments, spiritual experiences, etc... It is normal and inevitable to have thoughts and they are an integral part of Centering Prayer. By saying, "return very gently to the sacred word" it indicates that this action

⁸² There are many books published by Keating and translated into a variety of languages. In Italian see: T. KEATING, *La preghiera del Silenzio*, Assisi 1995; Id., *Risvegli. La pratica della lectio divina*, Roma 2003. In English: *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, Thomas Keating Jan 1997 Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

⁸³ Cf. www.antidemalta.org/uploads/5/7/2/6/57264959/centerprayer-italian.pdf



must be done gently, without effort. This is the only voluntary activity during the time of Centering Prayer.

4. *At the end of the prayer period, remain silent with your eyes closed for a couple of minutes.*

These extra minutes allow us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life. For some, a simple look at God, or attention to one's own breath, may prove more suitable than the sacred word. After choosing a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period: this would be starting to think again.

Fr Keating suggests, for this method, a minimum duration of twenty minutes, and two repetitions per day. Centering Prayer thus familiarises us with the language of God, which is silence.

The peculiar feature of this method is that it is not a *discursive meditation* but a simple *resting* in God.

Reading the past in order to write the future: From a circular by Fr Juan Vecchi

In the circular *"When you pray say: Our Father..."* (Mt 6:9). *The Salesian, a man and teacher of prayer for the young*, 2001 (AGC no. 374), Fr Vecchi devotes vibrant pages to the importance of prayer in the life of the Salesian. At the beginning of the letter he points out some common places among them "one that wants to see action at the centre of Salesian life." «Sometimes when we speak of God, with reference to ourselves and still more in religious discussions with others, we put on a mask, we adopt a terminology suited to the occasion, and we use words that are exact and well stated. These masks do not correspond to what we really are." Only a deeper and more authentic life of prayer can enable us to "heal" the motivations for our actions. It may be interesting to note that in this letter Fr Vecchi repeatedly mentions some of the contemporary masters of prayer (Carlo Carretto, Enzo Bianchi, Carlo Maria Martini, José Maria Castillo, Manuel Ruiz Jurado, Maurizio Costa, Romano Guardini...).

On the part of man, this readiness to obey and listen to the Word constitutes the indispensable condition for discovering the plan which God entrusts to every individual, in the time and place where he has been called to live, and will also be the fundamental condition for the continual renewal of his commitment to conversion to God: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Is 55:10-11).

The best place for listening to and hence meditating on the Word, is that of Mary at Bethany, "who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (Lk 10:39). Everything begins therefore with attention directed to the Word, which is then developed in meditation, prayer and contemplation.

Listening to God, with its aspects of silence, centering on Him and not on ourselves, becomes an act of welcome or, rather, of the revelation in us of a presence more intimately present to us than we are to ourselves. Silence is the special characteristic of the Word. Silence and the Word are complementary and mutually strengthen each other. Without silence it is difficult to attain self-knowledge or to discern God's plan for our own life. Silence gives depth and is a unifying element.



Salesian moderation in speech implies neither distance nor artificial self-control; it means that our attention is always given to the other person, with understanding and the desire to give and receive. In this way we pass to an internal aspect, to being at peace with ourselves, to taking a calm view of persons and situations, to an internal peace and tranquillity which enjoys the other's presence. This leads also to an attitude of self-control and resistance which silences disordered sentiments towards others, arbitrary ideas about oneself, rebellions, rash judgements, grumbling and gossiping which spring up from the heart. A controlled silence is the guardian of the internal self and makes it possible to listen willingly to the one who is speaking. The God we are trying to find is within us, not outside.

The internal self needs time and space to examine and judge. As regards the first we should not be afraid to reserve in our daily timetable some periods for personal meditation, study and prayer and – why not? – contemplation: that total attitude as though mesmerised by truth or beauty.

The Gospel advises us to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Mt 6:6). It is a matter of choosing a place where attention and spirit find fewer obstacles in reaching God ... Anyone with a little experience in the spiritual life knows that this process demands patience and perseverance, that it is not a path he travels alone for the Spirit both precedes and accompanies him. As he goes on his way he will gradually come to know also the fruits of a growing interior peace and degree of freedom, of meekness and charity, which are also the consequences of a process of prayer.



Conclusions

“So Jesus, hidden in the tabernacle, is called by Isaiah a fountain of living water; a fountain is always flowing out, always gushing forth, and one never sees the container from which it gushes forth, and the more water one draws from it, the more abundantly it gushes forth clear and clean... What can one say to him by visiting him often? To speak in this way is to do Jesus a grave insult, as if he were not rich enough to satisfy our every request. A zealous servant of God ... who was called the spouse of the Sacrament because of her love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, when asked what she did during the many hours she stayed before the Venerable, replied: I would stay hours and I would stay for an entire eternity and isn't the essence of God there, which is the delight of the blessed in Heaven? Good God, what do we do before Him, and what do we not do? One loves, one praises, one thanks, one asks. And what does a sick man do before the Physician? What does a thirsty man do before a clear fountain? What does a hungry man do before a Holy Table?” (*Don Bosco*).⁸⁴

AT THE END OF OUR JOURNEY, we have the feeling that there is so much more that could be said on such a vitally important subject, but one of the objectives we set ourselves was to prepare a *booklet* that would be as easy to read as possible. It is not difficult to find more extensive information on each of the proposed methods in order to make further personal enquiries.

It would have been interesting, for example, to visit the spiritual experience of the first young Salesians through some of their writings preserved in the archives, or through the letters that recount their sometimes brief life in the Congregation. “He was caught in his adolescence” states the manuscript which is the obituary of cleric Giacomo Vigliocco, certainly revised by Don Bosco “several times praying at night and at great length at that.”⁸⁵ “As soon as he knew the importance of meditation for the progress of the spiritual life,” says the biographer further on, “he embraced it with such love that he never stopped doing it... It was beautiful to see him at the beginning of each meditation, concentrating so much on himself that he no longer heard or saw anything else.”⁸⁶ Another important field of study could be to revisit the founder's writings, in search of his concept of prayer, as well as his *spiritual experience* and *charismatic legacy*.⁸⁷

However, we would like to conclude our journey in the hope that we have offered, in particular to novices and young confreres, some stimuli and reflections that will enable each to find his *own* method to make the *meditation* that our rules prescribe for us more forceful, joyful and vital. This objective, as we mentioned in the *Introduction*, can only be achieved if the pages of this booklet and the various methods proposed are gradually tested in *practice*:

⁸⁴ This quote is taken from a *Discorso per le Quarantore* (A Forty Hours devotion sermon) by Don Bosco, according to the title page of the unpublished manuscript, in 1859 in the church of Santa Croce in Cavallermaggiore and in 1861 in Provonda, a hamlet of Giaveno, also in the province of Turin. It is preserved in ACS A 225.02.08.

⁸⁵ *Società di S. Francesco di Sales. Anno 1877*, Torino 1877, 36. The manuscript has corrections by Don Bosco.

⁸⁶ *Società di S. Francesco di Sales. Anno 1877*, cit., 42-43

⁸⁷ In view of this see especially, G. BUCCELLATO, *Alla presenza di Dio. Ruolo dell'orazione mentale nel carisma di fondazione di San Giovanni Bosco*, Roma 2004 and studies found on www.ritornoadonbosco.it.



this is the characteristic of every effective pedagogy on prayer. In the patient and constant practice of *meditation* one gradually and naturally acquires the *rules of the game* that make the experience of prayer less and less formal and tiring.

We leave you, at the end of the journey, with two testimonials.

– The first, the better known, is taken from Fr Rinaldi's letter to novice masters and already mentioned in the *Introduction*. "I went to visit my dear Father in his final year", this authoritative interpreter of the founder's charism wrote, "or rather, in the final months of his life, and wishing to make my confession to him once again, I asked him to listen to me. I knew very well that everyone was forbidden to go to Don Bosco for confession; but I thought that I would not transgress the order if I did things as I will now tell you. 'You mustn't tire yourself' I said to Don Bosco, 'You mustn't speak: I will speak; then you will tell me just one word.' Notice my plea, just one word. The good Father, after he had listened to me, spoke just one word to me, just one word: and do you know what it was? *Meditation!* He added nothing, no explanation or comment. Just one word: *Meditation!* But that word was worth more to me than a long speech. And after so many years I still seem to see our Father in that attitude of holy and tranquil abandonment and to hear him repeat: *Meditation!*"⁸⁸

– The second is taken from Carlo Carretto, a contemplative religious with the *Little Brothers of Charles De Foucauld*, who died in 1988; he was the brother of a Salesian who was Bishop in Thailand and of two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

To one of the sisters, Sister Dolcidea, Brother Charles at the age of forty, a few months after the beginning of his novitiate in the desert, wrote: "I will give you a physical example that I have here before me in the desert. There is a piece of desert, all sand and death, at most a few thorns. Men want to turn the desert into a green oasis. They start work. They build roads, lanes, canals, bridges, houses, etc, etc... Nothing changes: everything remains desert. The basic element is missing: water. However, those who have understood begin to work, but not on the surface: they start to dig deep! They look for water, dig a well. The fertility of the oasis will not depend on the canals that have been built, on the roads, the houses, but on that well. This is what I saw in Europe. An army of crazy Catholics builds things, they build houses, colleges, associations, parties, but hardly anyone bothers to dig wells. Conclusion: sadness, discouragement, inner emptiness and sometimes despair. We pretend to build for God without God. And don't tell me, sister, that we pray. No, we do not pray, even if we say a hundred rosaries a day, even if we go to Mass regularly. Prayer is something else entirely! Prayer is breathing, it is freedom, it is love, it is unceasing conversation, it is above all thinking about God. This is what is lacking in our old Christianity which, when it wants to pray, begins to insert formulas,"⁸⁹

This is the only concrete strategy for making the desert bloom again: to go back to digging wells in order to draw water with joy from the sources of salvation. (cf. Is 12:3).

⁸⁸ F. RINALDI, *Cari Maestri degli ascritti*, in ASC A 384.01.15

⁸⁹ C. CARRETTO, *Lettere a Dolcidea*, Assisi 1989, 46-7.

