

A Method for Reading the Spiritual Classics

Spirituality is life; it is experience; it is the living relationship in one's deepest self to God, to one's fellows, and one's whole being. Where does reading fit into the pattern of spiritual growth? What contribution do spiritual classics like the works of St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross make toward spiritual progress? It is not enough just to say that, like Scripture, spiritual reading "is useful for teaching—for reproof, correction, and training in holiness, so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16-17). The question is *how*. What is a sound methodology for using a spiritual classic most efficaciously in raising the quality of one's love, in "putting off the old man and putting on the new"?

Sacred writing, whether the Scriptures themselves or the writings of saints and theologians, is the product of experience and reflection. The gospels, for example, are faith documents. They are the reflection of the Christian community on its own experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and the memories of his life on this earth. Three stages occurred in the formation of the gospels: there were the historical experiences of Jesus and his disciples, reflection on these events in the light of subsequent happenings, especially the Resurrection, and eventually the setting down in writing of this story.

Teresa of Avila refers to her own writings as the product of a similar process: "It is one grace to receive the Lord's favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is; and a third, to know how to describe and explain it" (*Life* 17:5). Notice Teresa considers each element of this process a charism or grace. The question is, how can we best employ the final product for our own sanctification?

Lectio Divina

The traditional and still typical response is to reverse the process of a book's formation. It is Augustine's "take and read." So we take the texts of the gospels, reflect in faith on their significance for us, and in this way allow ourselves to be led into the faith experience described. The gospels are not primarily doctrinal statements or theological propositions. They are the symbolic expression of the experience of the living Lord Jesus as he was then and as he is now. The symbols—language, imagery, concepts—are intended to evoke in us the very experiences they contain. This is the genius of the Scriptures both Old Testament and New; they present the living God, the living Christ, and the community living in the Spirit. Through their prayerful use we recover the original experience of ancient Israel or the primitive Church. By inserting ourselves into the story, we allow ourselves to be touched by the Lord and to let our own experience resonate with what we read.

The Bible is our story as much as it is the history of Israel or the life of Christ, because it is the Church's story. It is the story of our life set down in normative patterns which represent the reliving of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Peter, in the woman at the well, in the mysteries of Jesus' earthly life we locate ourselves, for we, too, are called to this same death to self and life in God as disciples of Jesus. Reading and reflection initiate the process but the goal is to open ourselves to what we see and to experience it ourselves. By a dialectic movement back and forth between our own as yet unobjectified experience and the objectified experience in the text, we find

correlations and antinomies, and thereby come to identify the Paschal Mystery in our own lives and to welcome the experience of Christ in the prayer. These are the steps of the *lectio divina* catalogued by Guigo II, a medieval Carthusian, as reading, reflection, prayer, and contemplation. A contemporary translation of these overlapping and interlocking components of prayer is listening, waiting, experiencing.

This is the obvious order to follow in spiritual reading. You pick up the book and read it reflectively. This stirs up holy thoughts and desires under the impulse of God's grace, which hopefully lead to a deeper experience of the presence of God. It is very clear and simple.

New Method

I propose, however, to change this order. I suggest that we begin with our own "unilluminated," largely unobjectified experience, line this up with the Scriptures, and only then go to the classical expressions of our tradition which are the great spiritual books. Instead of simply reading, reflecting and experiencing, the order would be: our own life first, the Scripture second, and the other writings third. In popular jargon today this means to tell our own story first, and then listen to *the* story which is that of the community exemplified in Jesus and his followers. We seek to image our own story first, before relating our experience to the great symbols of the faith. Our own uniqueness and existential reality take precedence in this sense over the models we are to emulate.

The reasons for this suggestion are manifold. We begin with experience, i.e., our real condition and attitudinal state inside and outside the present prayerful exercise, because otherwise there is a danger of headiness, of intellectualizing, of trading thinking or fantasizing for living. Teresa saw this difference clearly, whereas people who are not

in touch with themselves easily mistake pious reflection for authentic prayer. Reflection does not remove bad habits, she says, whereas real prayer does (*Way of Perfection* 12:5). The dichotomy which many have lamented between theology and piety, i.e., spirituality, can only be healed by rooting our thought in life-realities. The Gospel is not academic theory; it is Jesus Christ who is alive, and who touches us in human experiences. Our concern is, not where Jesus has been, but where he is at this moment in our own history. To approach him by abstract theory is hazardous, because it may lead to a make-believe spiritual life in a fantasy world or else cause one to assume a controlling, do-it-yourself stance, when our task is always to respond to the divine initiative,

We give priority to the Scriptures because renewal is a return to sources, *resourcement*, as the French say. The Christian fact has passed through many cultures and taken on the hues and shadows of many different philosophies. It is only in its primitive and purest expression, the divinely inspired and safeguarded Scriptures, that we drink of the clear water of Christian revelation in its simplest terms (though Scripture itself needs to be studied in the context of its own world-view and culture). So we propose to root our search for God, not in a Teresa or John of the Cross as such, but in the sacred Word of God. Only when we have held up our experience to this divine mirror of God's Word, and allowed the penetrating light of the Holy Spirit to reflect off that mirror into the caverns of our own consciousness are we able to submit to a further enlightening from the giants of our tradition.

This is not to lessen the importance of the spiritual classics. It is to put them in focus. St. John of the Cross proceeded no differently. The primary source of his doctrine is Scripture, not his experience or theology. "In discussing this dark night," he writes, "I shall not rely on experience or

knowledge, for these can fail and deceive us. Although I shall not neglect whatever possible use I can make of them, my help ... will be Sacred Scripture, at least in the most important matters... “ (*Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Prologue, 2). Teresa speaks no differently. She writes that “if a locution should deviate from Scripture just a little, I would have incomparably great assurance that it comes from the devil than I now have that it comes from God, however greater the latter assurance may be” (*Life* 25:13).

In other words the heart of Teresa’s and John’s message is Scripture, and their writings are commentaries on the text, homilies over the proclamation. Spiritual writing thus clarifies, spells out, concretizes, and especially gives personal witness to the Gospel experience. It is one way of helping us be wise scribes who draw from the treasury new things and old (Mt 13:32).

In order to elucidate this methodology, I should like to address each element in the process. This method will apply to any spiritual reading, but I shall treat the topic in terms of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

1. Experience

The spiritual life is the Gospel—reality lived, and the Gospel is Jesus Christ. He is the Word spoken by the Father in human flesh who expresses human reality perfectly. One symbol that seizes and sums up that life is the Paschal Mystery of death-resurrection. We live that mystery in proportion as we are dead to sin and alive to God. It is the Christ-life within us, both in privileged moments when we encounter the Lord in Word and Sacrament and in the ordinary interactions of daily life in which he touches us in events and people. It is the life of the Spirit within us, whereby we are children of God and heirs with Christ, “if only we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him” (Rm 8:16).

This life is manifested by the fruits of the Spirit (Ga 5:16-25). It is a delicate task, however, to identify this life in every situation. The discernment presupposes self-knowledge, being in touch with one’s feelings, which are the best index of one’s heart or spirit and reveal one’s real motivation over against fantasy and wishful thinking. A knowledge of the ways of God is necessary for advancing Christians if they are to achieve a sense of the presence of God and the right understanding of his absence. Thus, for example, the experience of the dark night of John of the Cross could easily be missed as a “spiritual experience, “ because it looks like depression or burnout, or at least the loss of a loving relationship with God. Similarly, contemplation in its incipient stages may seem to be little more than sitting there or doing nothing, which, of course, are adequate descriptions of that prayer. Discernment is essential to identify where God is acting or where he is truly absent.

The task of discernment is not one of theological analysis but prudential judgment and a judgment by way of connaturality or “feel. “The famous line of *The Imitation of Christ*, that it is better to feel compunction than to know how to describe it, may be anti-intellectual, but it does have the right priorities.

Teresa of Avila had no doubt about the usefulness of theological knowledge. In fact she is frequently cited as preferring a learned director of souls over a holy one. This is not quite true. She is solidly in line with tradition in putting experience and prudence as more important qualities for the spiritual director than learning. But she stood firmly and with increasing conviction against the current of her mystical times, so like our own, even confronting her friend, the great Franciscan reformer St. Peter of Alcantara, in affirming the real value of scriptural expertise and theological knowledge in questions of holiness.

The spiritual or faith understanding of one's experience, therefore, is less a matter of technical psychology or theology than seeing it as revealing the presence or absence of God. The most important point is that it be real and not merely imagined. This may seem like a silly remark, but it is possible to fabricate a "spiritual life" like a suit of clothes with virtues and prayer-forms and even faults made out of "whole cloth," out of touch with the deeper, inner self. There is no growth without the involvement of one's deep self, which the Scriptures call the heart, and tradition names spirit as opposed to soul (1 Th 5:23). The heart engages one's vital energies and directs the pursuit of holiness, calling upon all the factors of one's life. This makes for a growing wholeness, which is the goal and the measure of spirituality.

Wholeness is forged in struggle, in transformation, in dying and rising. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The absolute necessity of being really real, of being in touch with one's true self and with the living God, and not living unawares by defenses such as denial or projection, is evident. This elementary principle demands that all spiritual endeavors begin and end with the really real in one's life.

And yet it helps to objectify and look at this experience, to surface it in reflection and thus to evaluate it. How is this done? How get a handle on the basic patterns of our experience? Ultimately the answer is the art of discernment, which grows apace with advancement in holiness. The holy man of experience is one who can see through delusions and blind spots and discover God in the most unlikely places. A deeply spiritual person discerns the movements of God's Spirit in his life by second nature. He raises the right questions and he identifies intuitively with true values in the practical order.

But no man is an island and we live the Paschal Mystery as members of the Body of Christ, a people with a tradition that confronts, challenges and measures us. Herein lies the necessity of a spiritual tradition: we build on the past. The models of the past must not tyrannize us. They are historically conditioned, but their spiritual reality is identical with our own. So the records of the past can help, not by providing stock answers, but by raising the real questions. The past is best addressed according to the educational theory of androgogy or adult education which works out of experience more than theory. The balance must be maintained between the uniqueness and freshness of each one's experience and the established traditions of the Christian community. The history of the community acts as a balance, almost a gyroscope, in identifying the way the Lord is leading us and challenging us to greater growth.

II. Scripture

Such questions best come out of the Scriptures, the second step in the process. The reason is obvious: the Scriptures are the normative expression of that experience of God in Christ which is our spiritual life. Our own experience takes on intelligibility and meaning against the backdrop of the heroes of the Old and New Testaments. The biblical accounts zero in on this common experience. They are faith reflections on that experience and come to us as rich symbols evoking the same experience in the reader.

Evoke is the important word. As exegetes are pointing out today, the Scriptures will not yield their full message to purely historical or literary analysis. Modern biblical criticism has rendered an immense service to the Church and the Church has warmly embraced and canonized this scientific approach to the Scriptures. But the Church has never said that scientific exegesis is the last word in biblical interpretation. Not only

the Holy Spirit, but one's personal faith experience must enter the arena to unlock the treasures of God's Word.

Sacred Scripture is a locked treasure house with the key inside. The key is our own faith experience. If we approach the Scripture with pure intellect, we may amass the data for a beautiful theological synthesis. We will find ideas to conceptualize the saving plan of God. But we will not meet the Lord. Signs are not symbols. Signs have mere intellectual appeal; they point to a given reality, whereas symbols contain the reality. Symbols speak to our whole being, to our imagination and affectivity as well as our reason. The symbols of Scripture present the Lord to us if they speak to our hearts, if our faith experience meshes and interacts and resonates with the symbol, if we stand under the Scriptures to be enlightened, judged and evaluated by them.

Jesus Christ, as the famous N. 7 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* points out, is really present in the Scripture. He is present to the spiritually mature. Years ago the great spiritual writer, Father Garrigou-Lagrange, wrote that a taste for the Scriptures was a mark of spiritual maturity. Saints like Thérèse of Lisieux have testified that at a certain point in their lives they were attracted by no other writing than the Bible, except Thérèse added, the works of John of the Cross, recalling Pope Pius XI's later assertion that the works of St. John of the Cross were "pure Gospel."

The Scriptures tell the story we are living in proportion as the reality of Jesus Christ has taken hold of us. Like Paul we are in process, not having reached the goal yet or finished the course, but racing to grasp the prize because we have been grasped by Christ (Ph 3:12). The Gospel is Jesus' story as the absolutely perfect model; he is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:5). It is Paul's story, too, and John's, and Mark's and all the New Testament figures, insofar as they participate in the life of Christ. The mysteries of Jesus' earthly life are the elements of that story;

these earthly mysteries live on in the glorified Christ and in all who live in him and through him. The Gospels recount these mysteries and reveal both Christ and ourselves.

Our story corresponds to his story, not materially, in historical detail, but mystically, in the hidden sense of "Spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). We read the Sacred Scriptures, not as a recipe book or directory with ready-made solutions, but on the level of spirit, where deep speaks to deep. We read the Bible with our whole being, and not just with our heads. The essential condition for correlating our lives with the Scriptures is faith, i.e., having listening (*audire*) and obeying (*obaudire*) hearts. We do not approach the Scriptures with a *tabula rasa*, an empty blackboard, but like sponges with our own form and configuration, and we ask that our lives be further formed and figured after the pattern of the Son. This is the way to see our experience in relationship with the normative experience of the Scriptures.

III. Spiritual Masters

Good spiritual reading, and especially the spiritual classics participate in the Word of God. They are derivatives of the Scriptures, reflections of that same light refracted through the prism of particular times and persons and places. They do not occupy the same hallowed standing as the sacred books themselves, which are divinely inspired and canonically recognized as God's Word. But they perform a similar function. They are not the primary symbols of God's revelation, but they explain and comment on that original data. Sometimes the writings are themselves alternate symbols, as in the case of the poetry of St. John of the Cross or the "Exclamations of Love" of St. Teresa of Avila. But more often they are commentaries on the symbols. They attempt to translate into didactic language the original experience contained in the symbol.

The spiritual classics are like friends of the Bridegroom. The Bridegroom himself comes to us in fullness in the Scriptures. The friends of the Bridegroom prepare the way, spell out the implications, and elucidate what is the gift of God, the living water, the bread from heaven. The rich body of spiritual literature of our tradition is commentary on the Christian reality. More specifically, these books are witnesses to the ever-recurring mystery of Christ present. They testify to the dynamic of dying and rising which took place in Jesus, the first-born from the dead, and which continues to take place in his members in every age and milieu.

The Bible is the Church's book, and it is given and interpreted by the living teacher, the magisterium of the Church. Bible and magisterium are linked together. When Teresa and John address the issues of the spiritual life, they are acutely aware of the subordination of their personal opinions to both Scripture and the teaching Church. St. John of the Cross writes:

If I should misunderstand or be mistaken on some point, whether I deduce it from Scripture or not, my intention will not be to deviate from the true meaning of Sacred Scripture or from the doctrine of our Holy Mother the Catholic Church. If this should happen I submit entirely to the Church, or even to anyone who judges more competently about the matter than I (*Ascent*, Prologue 2).

If the spiritual classics participate in the Word of God, they are even more clearly the instrument of the teaching Church. They are the exposition of the Church's traditions (with a small "t"), which in turn are concretizations of the Church's Tradition (with a capital "T"). The spiritual classics record what it means "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering" (Ph 3:10) in particular circumstances.

The spiritual classics are gifts to the Church. Both Teresa and John testify to the gift quality of their writings. Teresa wrote in her *Life*, put to paper originally at the

inauguration of the reform in 1562, that until recently she had no understanding of what was happening in the depths of her soul. She knew that an inexpressible mystery was occurring, but she was unable to objectify and describe the experience. Insight came, and eventually she found the images and comparisons to explain her state, such as the extended allegory of the four waters. John of the Cross spoke no differently. His poetry attempted to capture in an art form ineffable mystical experience, and was thus the product of mystical and poetic inspiration. The prose came with more difficulty. It attempted to unpack some of the meaning intuitively grasped in image, and often left St. John frustrated by the enormity of the task. Even when the prose commentary was itself a mystical and often poetic expression, as in the case of *The Living Flame of Love*, he hesitated to explain the poetry:

Since [the four stanzas] deal with matters so interior and spiritual, for which words are usually lacking—in that the spiritual surpasses sense—I find it difficult to say something of their content; also, one speaks badly of the interior depths of the spirit if one does not do so with a deeply recollected soul. Because of my want of such recollection, I have deferred this commentary until now, a period in which the Lord seems to have uncovered some knowledge and bestowed some fervor... perhaps His Majesty wants me to explain them for you (*The Living Flame of Love*, Prologue 1).

The writings of the saints, therefore, are God's gift to his pilgrim people. They are a special hermeneutic, i.e., an interpretation of God's Word, offering enlightenment on the original revelation for different persons and circumstances. Classical spiritual authors have different devotees as do biblical authors. Similarity in human experiences, in personality and temperament, in life vocations, or the opposites in these factors serve to make Augustine popular with one reader and Origen with another. Dominicans will tend to gravitate toward Catherine of Siena, Franciscans to the *Fioretti* of St.

Francis or the mystical works of St. Bonaventura. Carmelites, of course, will veer toward Teresa, John of the Cross or the Little Flower.

But whatever the particular appeal, all these writers are presenting the Gospel to the whole Church. If the reader can transcend the cultural and historical conditionings, any spiritual writer, particularly writers of long-standing and authority in our tradition, will have a great deal to say. Each author from the past will need some historical positioning and perhaps interpretation to insure a correct understanding of his message. This is why a guide is necessary to introduce writings from the past. In fact, a book as such is not enough without a living teacher to initiate the disciple into new spiritual ways. Once again the experiential and interactional character of spirituality stands out. It is a life and it is learned by living. Holy books, scriptural or otherwise, are only instruments to facilitate the work of the Lord in our midst.

Conclusion

The method, then, for reading the spiritual classics, specifically Teresa and John, takes its origin in the Christian life of the individual. This life is primarily validated, not by pop psychology or even sophisticated humanistic studies, not even by contemporary

spiritual writing, but by the Word of God given to us in the Bible. The terms of this life, which are death and resurrection, are further illuminated by the classics and all solid spiritual reading. The process of using sacred literature for personal growth is never pursued apart from life, but as the check and guide in the endless assimilation of the person into the Mystery of Christ.

I have attempted to apply this method in some workshops and retreats, one of which was taped and published by the *National Catholic Reporter* under the title, "Spiritual Awakening: the Mystical Prayer of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross," in eight cassettes and a study booklet. The booklet contains lead questions to help one get in touch with his or her experience and lists a few appropriate scriptural references and readings in the two saints. It is equally or perhaps more desirable that the reflection or the imaging of one's own experience be spontaneous and the scriptural and other references be selected by oneself. The latter tasks particularly presuppose some familiarity with the sources. An instructor's guidance helps to teach the process, and to point the inquirer in the right direction for pursuing his or her personalized spiritual journey.