DEVINE READING (LECTIO DIVINA) AS LOGOS' CONTEMPLATION ACCORDING TO SAINT GREGORY THE DIALOGUE

1. From studing holy words to the knowledge of Divine Word

According to Saint Gregory the Dialogue\(^1\), Scripture is a light, enlightening the dark of the current life\(^2\), a forest refreshing with its own shade the fever of this world\(^3\) and a shepherd’s guide securing the church unity and flock’s direction\(^4\).

According to this aspect, Saint Gregory formulates a very significant principle: "Holy Scriptures are simultaneously developing with their readers"\(^5\). This principle is based on the

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fact of Holy Spirit’s presence in Scripture and it’s reader’s life. Through Scriptures, a reader develops a spiritual relationship with Divine Logos and attending his life to be changed. He attends his life to be developing spiritually and be introduced to a new state which determines his relationship with God and His approach. Beyond this specific spiritual aspect of this principle, Saint Gregory’s thought also indicates a christological and ecclesiastical dimension by pointing out that Savior and Logos himself is growing daily through his own Body, meaning the Church. Each part contributes on that. Of course, it is not a measurable increasement but a spiritual one; Via afflictions of these body’s members, it finally brings a coronal of glory⁶.

Gregory’s whole approach bases on the interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision, described on the first chapter of homonym book, and on the twenty fifth chapter of Exodus where God ordered to Israel, through Moses, to construct a gold light. Gregory associates these facts in his hermeneutic Speeches on Ezekiel; In the first occasion, he sees the wheels and their movement as a prediction of Holy Scriptures and their development⁷; In the second case of the gold light, he sees the incarnation of Divine Logos and his granting of salvation⁸.

modo cum legentibus crescit”, IDEM, Moralia in Iob XX, I, 1, CCL 143A, 1003.

⁶ GREGORY THE GREAT, Homiliae in Hiezechielem I, VI, 8, op. cit., 188-191; GREGORY THE GREAT, Homiliae in Hiezechielem I, VI, 17, op. cit., 198: “Rotas quippe signare Testamenta diximus”.


⁸ “Quis in candelabro nisi Redemptor humani generis designatur? Qui in natura humanitatis infuslit lumine diuinitatis, ut mundi candelabrum fieret, quatenus in eius lumine omnis peccator in quibus iaceret tenebris uideret. ΣΥΝΘΕΣΙΣ τχ. 1 (2012)
As a result of the fundamental principle above, Gregory demonstrates an other one, equally important: "vivid reading is the life of goods". This principle explains how someone can observe an experience of the holy words from a holy person which constitutes the real revelation of Divine Word on a man and how He grants the rich gifts of the Holy Spirit. Researching and listening to holy words and its interpretation, through the Holy Spirit, is depicted in history through the Saints’ lives, of who embrace the heaven gifts; They love to speak about them and they are filled by love.

Considering both fundamental principles, Gregory called his doctor and beloved friend Theodorus because Theodorus could not find more time to spend on daily reading of Scriptures due to his occupations. Gregory mentions in his Epistle to him: "what really is Holy Scripture, unless a kind of letter from omnipotent God unto his own creature?... Please, be positively disposed on them and study the Creators words every day. Learn to understand God’s heart through His words, to flamely desire eternal goods... God enforces you regarding this work by sending His Spirit. Entering in your heart, the Holy Spirit covers it with Its own presence and renews it". From these views, someone can recognize

Qui pro eo quod naturam nostram sine culpa suscepit, candelabrum tabernaculi ex auro purissimo fieri iubetur. Ductile autem feriendo producitur, quia et Redemptor noster qui ex conceptione et natuitate perfectus Deus et homo exstitit, passionum dolores pertulit, et sic ad resurrectionis gloriam peruenit. Ex auro ergo mundissimo ductile candelabrum fuit, quia et peccatum non habuit, et tamen eius corpus per passionis contumelias ad immortalitatem profecit", GREGORY THE GREAT, Homiliae in Hiezechielem I, VI, 8, op. cit., 188-191.

9 “Viva lectio est vita bonorum”, GREGORY THE GREAT, Moralia in Job XXIV, VIII, 16, PL 76, 295.


God's initiative in order for Him to cultivate an unbroken relationship of friendship with man; A relationship which ends on man's adoption from God. This relationship has been built on the firm ground of trust between the Creator and His creature by distributing His Law, by fulfilling it with the Logos' incarnation and by granting Holy Spirit in order to guide the Church members.

In his hermeneutic *Speeches on Ezekiel*, Gregory ecclesiastically defines this encouragement above unto Theodorus asserting that "many details of Holy Scripture, which I could not understand on my own, I comprehended in a assembly with my brothers"\(^{12}\). This passage is refered either to a brotherhood's assembly concerning spiritual lectures – where they usually explain the Scripture- or to a worship assembly for a sermon; In both cases, this passage does not stop to remark the gravity of liturgical life, constituting a criterion for a safe holy-spiritually interpretation of the Bible. The connection between studing and interpreting the holy Speech and the mystery of Eucharist in the Church prevents the danger of a rational relationship with Christ; It transforms this relationship to ontology. The Eucharist places the Lord of Glory in the center. The Church feels Him, comprehends and tastes Him. Every faithful receives Him within, conforms his life with His life and apprehends His message in the Holy Spirit.

Refering to his writings, I should point out that Saint Gregory does not want to present a novelty; He repeats the traditional teaching of the Church in a creative way. He wants Christ's mouth to be the interpreter in order for His people to be lead to salvation. Actually, Gregory was a maniac reader of Bible in the same way that every Spirit bearing shepherd does. Although Gregory was a real researcher of Bible, he did not only desired Bible's theoretical approach due to his belief that a Christian should feed his soul and his earthly life by studing the Bible. Moreover, the relationship between a shepherd and Holy Scripture is love\(^{13}\) because Bible's directly binds one with the beloved Word and reveals Him


to the reader.

On his writings, Saint Gregory demonstrates the experiential and eschatological contemplation of Holy Scripture. His biblical commentaries disclose his belief that Holy History is fulfilled in each faithful’s life and that it has an absolute eschatological perspective. “We believe”, he said, “those things took place in history and hope they will secretly be performed”. Scripture is a secure way for God’s knowledge, and biblical figures constitute pedagogic models which contribute on virtues’ development; This truth defines Saint Gregory’s thought.

Sharing a same patristic biblical approach and Bible’s literal and allegorical interpretation, Saint Gregory demonstrates his particular preference on the Bible’s ethical approach where a daily human act should be harmonized with scriptural words. Harmonic combination of speech, action and prayer, is the only way which leads to the successful achievement of the salvific scope of God’s descendence on a man and man’s elevation until he will be joined with Him.

Someone can meet a representative expression of this spiritual view of lectio divina in his second book of Dialogues, in which Gregory presents the life of Saint Benedict. Gregory particularly respected Benedict and emerges him as an ascetical model; He represents Benedict as a typical sample that reveals the spiritual experience of “the unity of the two Testaments”. According to Gregory, Benedict is a new Moses, a new Elissaios, a new Helias and David, a new Peter. “This man”, Gregory says, “was really full with the spirit of all righteous”; Basically, he was full of Christ’s Spirit in which the two Testaments are combined. “Benedict, a man of God, had one Spirit, granted with the gift of salvation; The Spirit fulfilled chosen hearts (...), as it is written: from His fulfill-

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ment we received [John 1:16]"^{16}.

2. The Scripture’s mystical approach and the meeting with God

Ascetic Fathers of the first millenium practised on studying, meaning their exercise in a repeatable readiness. Thus, a monk was becoming familiar with the holy passage and was learning it. It was implanted in his memory and the whole words of God penetrated his entire existence. The meaning of Scripture was driving through him and became practised in practical life. In Saint Benedict’s Rule, someone can not find a systematical doctrine about lectio divina,^{18} except for the repeatable exhortation for audition^{19} and studding Holy Scripture^{20}. Namely, it’s about an extensive and careful reading which had a praying character and was combined with constant and mental pray; The conclusion above comes from a work of John Cassian Conferences^{21} and the

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^{17} See RUFINUS, Historia Monachorum II, PL 21, 406B; PALLADIUS, Λαυρεία Ἑγορία I; IZ, PG 34, 1033; 1041; ATHANASIUS THE GREAT, Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ Ὀσίου Πατρός ἰμῶν Ἀντωνίου 3, PG 26, 845A.

Rule of Saint Benedict.22

The biblical writing and Father’s teaching were flourishing inside the faithfuls’ hearts by their frequent studying, causing an award of the rich gifts from the Holy Spirit. It was exciting their desire to meet God Logos who was familiar after His revelation through Holy Scripture. By reading the Bible, the Fathers were reading Christ Himself and were discussing with him. They were “eating” and simultaneously approaching the holy words with equal clearness as the bread and wine in the Eucharist.

Despite his numerous pastoral and administrative responsibilities, Saint Gregory did not stop to be a typical representer of an hesychastic-speculative tradition. He has heritaged from both previous eastern and western Fathers and from contemporary sinaitic ascetical environment.23

Spiritual experiences exist in all his writings and especially in his Dialogues. In his Dialogues he narrates about a paralyzed man, Serbulus; Even Serbulus was unlettered, he acquired codecs of Holy Scripture after many sacrifices and would have his guests read them for him. Thus, he managed to learn Scripture in his own particular way.24 Moreover, he suggests to John, abbot of Saint Lucas’ monastery in Syracuse, to pore over with “studying and praying” and urge his monks to the same spiritual exercise.25 Yet, he talks about Saint Hecytius, abbot in the area of Valery, men-

tioning his habit to journey and always hold Holy Scriptures; John did that in order to study them all the time and transfer their truth watering fields of mind in that way. Moreover, he narrates that monk Antony, his co-monk in Saint Andrew’s monastery, was studying holy words with a flameful desire without searching for a fruit of knowledge; But he was searching for tears of joyful-ness in order for his mind to be raised and flamed; In that way, his mind abandoned everything earthly and sored through contemplation to a heaven homeland.

Following the patristic tradition, Saint Gregory the Dialogue imparts to holy readings new spiritual horizons because he considers them as a preparation for the Logos’ vision and eternal life’s embracement. He had a certainty about the method of approaching Holy Scriptures; Someone should start their reading feeling that he lives with Christ and He is their Savior. Under such circumstances, the unknown and inapproachable God becomes known and visible. It is not a simple reading of holy words but an essential and truthful meeting with Him. This meeting takes place in three different levels. In the first one, a man defines his relationship and stance to God. In the second one, he disdains temporary and earth things; In the third one he regards heavens with clear heart. Thus, a faithful totally identifies his life with God who signifies and fulfils his existence and grants him salvation.

Gregory admits that God talks both through his revealed speech and through personal inspiration; But he points out such a inspiration comes to someone only after his deep penetration on Scripture. Repentance and intensive desire of heavenly gifts are

26 GREGORY THE GREAT, Dialoghi, I, IV, 10, op. cit., 92-93.
27 GREGORY THE GREAT, Dialoghi, IV, XLIX, 2, op. cit., 428-429.
28 “Prius quippe est mores conponere; postmodum omnia, quae adsunt, tamquam non adsint considerare; tertio vero loco munda cordis acie superna et interna conspicere. His itaque librorum gradibus quasi quandam ad contemplationem Dei scalam fecit: ut, dum primum in saeculo bene geruntur honesta, postmodum etiam honesta saeculi despicientur, ad extremum etiam Dei intima conspicientur”, GREGORY THE GREAT, Expositio in Canticum Canticorum 9, R. BELONGER, SC 314, Paris 1984, 84.

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presuppositions for such inspiration. He says, “when God’s Testaments start to sound in the ear of the heart, the spirit of a listener goes on until tears, repented and full of love. Consequently, the words of Holy Scriptures become tasteful for the reader’s heart. Everyone, who loves more, read them secretly, almost hiddenly and silently.”

Gregory frequently refers to the mind’s clearness “katharsis” and heart’s purity in order for a man to penetrate the inside truth and depth of Scripture. His doctrine is not only a mystical approach. It aims to the spiritual capability of the faithful, not only for them to experience it, but also to teach them. A faithful and pure mind is enlightened by Scripture’s words; This mind can comprehend the Scripture and pronounce Scripture’s meaning. His heart is bright and therefore helps his brothers through his sermon to turn on the light in their hearts. This teaching states every believer’s obligation, especially every shepherd’s one, to strive for virtues in order to become capable of receiving divine grace and to experience God and view Him. Namely, it is a pass from action “praxis” to theory, from contemplation of the soul and silence to the creator’s vision.

Scripture is like a mirror of the soul, in which someone can see his internal face. By looking at this face, a shepherd is self-examined and conceives his duty to always be a sower of holy words. His teachings should build on his flock to the truth and

30 GREGORY THE GREAT, Dialoghi, II, XVI, 7, op. cit., 174-175.
32 “Primus ergo gradus est ut se ad se colligat, secundus ut uideat qualis est collecta, tertius ut super semetipsam surgat ac se contemplationi auctoris inuisibilis intendo subiciat”, GREGORY THE GREAT, Homiliae in Hiezechielem II, V, 9, op. cit., 130-131.
33 GREGORY THE GREAT, Moralia in Job II, I, 1, Gregorii Magni Opera I/1, Città Nuova Editrice 1992, 161.
34 GREGORY THE GREAT, La Regola Pastorale II, 4, op. cit., 75.
testify the glories of the heavenly homeland\textsuperscript{35}. The shepherd’s truthful and flameful prayer to God impowers him for his difficult task to guide believers. Regarding the safe guide of his logic flock to the way of the Lord and heaven glory, the agonistic conviction, his deep faith, insistence and patience should constitute his model\textsuperscript{36}.

Being devoted to holy studying and preaching, Saint Gregory presents an excellent example for self-examination of conciousness and its transformation in Christ. “\textit{I can not be silent\textquotedblright}, he says commenting Ezekiel, “\textit{I will speak because the sword of God’s speech (...) penetrates me (...); I will talk because words of God sound inside me despite my will\textsuperscript{37}. In this spiritual condition, the flesh’s conviction is broken because it is penetrated by the holy sword of divine words. A proud human hypostasis is changed into a vessel of humility and his mind is fulfilled by Divine Spirit. After their meeting with hypersensial ones, celestial things are transformed and God Logos releases them; Moreover, He waters every creature through His words, becoming familiar to Him.

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\textsuperscript{35} GREGORY THE GREAT, \textit{La Regola Pastorale} II, 10, op. cit., 103.
\textsuperscript{36} GREGORY THE GREAT, \textit{La Regola Pastorale} II, 5, op. cit., 78-79.
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