

## Reading as Formation

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Ivo Coelho, SDB

We are becoming more and more aware that the intellectual dimension is not the whole of formation, and that we have to learn to give proper attention to the other dimensions, most especially the human and the spiritual. Still, I want to speak here of one element in our intellectual formation, and that is *lectio* or reading, which, I am realizing more and more, is a wonderful means of formation.

Obviously, the reading that truly forms us is not merely reading for information, though of course we need to read the newspapers and the magazines, or scroll through the news pages on the internet. In this kind of reading for information, we are not really expected – and it would be absurd, in fact – to study deeply the headlines or an article in a magazine. Skimming through is quite enough. Then there is also reading for entertainment, and those of us who love novels would know precisely what I mean. But there is another kind of reading, which we could call reading for formation, that is different and really makes a difference. In this kind of reading, skimming through the headlines and turning the pages of a book are not enough. Here we need to read slowly, deliberately, meditatively, trying to understand, searching for the true meaning of what we read, and allowing it to sink into ourselves. When I read in this manner, the text comes alive to me, and some part of myself also becomes alive. “The lighting up of the text is at once the lighting up of the self,” as Fred Lawrence says. Or, as Tony De Mello would say, I begin to hear the thousand bells. When this happens, I grow, I am changed significantly, I am no longer the same. I am challenged in some basic conviction, I am called to examine it or re-examine it, to decide whether to stay with it, deepen it, modify it, or even abandon it. Or else, as happens when I read good poetry and great literature, I find some part of my being lighting up, vibrating, as happens to me when I read *The Wild Braid*, a wonderful book by Stanley Kunitz and Genine Lentine, or the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I come away somehow richer, more serene, more grateful, more enlivened.

This is how, in fact, we are called to read our basic texts, the texts on which we base our lives, those that provide light for the way and daily nourishment: the Constitutions, but above all Sacred Scripture. “Your word is a lamp for my steps, a light for my path.” (Ps 119:105) I find it wonderful that General Chapter 27 chose to highlight these basic texts, even enthroning them in the Aula Magna. When we read the Scriptures and our Constitutions as they are meant to be read – with faith, hope and love, as Augustine would say – we find our hearts burning within us. *Lectio divina* is precisely such reading: a reading that dwells on an inspired text (*lectio*), that listens to what it is saying to us (*meditatio*), that turns to God for help to do what he is asking us to do (*oratio*), and that, finally, dwells like a child in peace in its mother’s arms (*contemplatio*). I am convinced that much reading, and even all reading, can become divine reading, if only we know how to dwell, meditate, pray, and rest in it. God waits for us in the most unexpected places. We need the eyes to see him, and the patience too.

So we might ask ourselves: How often do I truly read the Word? Where is the book of the Constitutions, and how often do I access it? And what happens to me when days, weeks, months, years pass without truly reading the Word, and without accessing the Constitutions? Ongoing formation is made up of little things like these.

So reading – a powerful means of formation. Let's not neglect it. Let's rediscover the art of reading, the treasure that is reading.