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Selected Aspects of the Biblical Spirituality according to Writings of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

Saints, founders of religious orders, congregations or associations of apostolic life were animated above all by striving for the fulfilment of the Gospel, usually some specific aspect of it. The Word of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have caused and continue to cause new charisms in the Catholic Church. John Paul II notes that ‘one cannot think about the work of the founders without seeing in them the incarnation of the Gospel, embracing the geography and history of the Church’.² The vitality of the charism is based on fidelity to the Gospel and the guidelines of its founders inspired by the Word of God. Starting from the unambiguous perspective of the Word of God, the founders set an example of shaping life according to the spirit of the Gospel. It was thanks to the power of the Word of God that they were able to embody, effectively and sacrificially Christ’s love not only in speech, but also in deeds, through their commitment. The religious families that they left behind continue the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, provided that the Gospel remains at the basis of the thoughts, words and actions of the friars and nuns.³

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska (1865–1939), founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, was guided in her life by the desire to fulfil the words of Christ contained in the Gospel. The scripture was her

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² Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie do zakonników w sanktuarium Serca Jezusowego w mieście Guatemala: Żywy depozyt charyzmatu założycieli* [in:] idem, *O życiu zakonnym. Przemówienia — Listy Apostolskie — Instrukcje*, red. E. Weron, A. Jaroch, Poznań–Warszawa 1984, p. 245.

³ See *ibidem*.

basic reference. This article is intended to present selected aspects of the biblical spirituality in the writings of Mother Ledóchowska. It shows the value and meaning of the Bible based on the reflections of St. Ursula, analyses biblical references in her *Testament*. It also justifies the validity of Mother Ledóchowska's indications on the Scripture.

1. The value of the Scripture according to St. Ursula based on *Meditations*

The most significant source, testifying the value of the Holy Scripture for the founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus is the book of *Meditations*. The reflections contained in it are based on the given fragments of the Gospel. 'The Gospel is an inexhaustible source for souls of good will'⁴ — states Mother Ledóchowska, who considers meditation the most important basis and foundation of the life of the soul.⁵

1.1. About *Meditations*

Meditations are a collection of reflections relating to individual periscopes of the Gospel. They are largely based on the Gospel, but also contain references to other Scripture texts, including the Old Testament. They are above all the fruit of St. Ursula's personal meditations on the Gospel. They include not only reflections on a given passage, but also prayerful phrases addressed to God, to Christ, Mother of God and saints. According to the idea of St. Ursula, *Meditations* are a thoroughly practical book, intended for systematic, everyday use; they are addressed to the Ursuline Sisters.

In the *Foreword*, Mother Ledóchowska explains what *Meditations* are and how they were born. St. Ursula is aware of the mission given to her by God — she confesses that God, in spite of her will, entrusted her with the task of giving the spirit of the young Ursuline branch, so she treats it as her duty to do everything in her power to 'perpetuate what has begun [...] according to God's will and for God's glory'.⁶ Saint Ursula points out that the spirit of the Congregation is in the *Constitutions* approved by the Holy Church, in the *Directory*, in the *Practices*. She considers these documents and writings crucial. Simultaneously, however, as a true spiritual mother, she carries the desire to leave something else, something more, to her daughters. It is in this way that *Meditations* were written to serve

⁴ U. Ledóchowska, *Rozmyślenia dla Sióstr Urszulanek Serca Jezusa Konającego*, t. 1, Pniewy 2000, p. 9.

⁵ See eadem, *Pisma zakonne*, Pniewy 2000, p. 83.

⁶ Eadem, *Rozmyślenia...*, t. 1, p. 5.

the unification of hearts and the ‘unification of spirit’⁷ of the sisters scattered throughout the various communities and houses of the Congregation.

Saint Ursula encourages us to make *Meditations* a permanent point of reference and gives us a reason to do so. She writes, addressing her sister: ‘Hold on to those meditations that will lead you into the spirit of our Congregation’.⁸ The fundamental value of *Meditations* is that they show the spiritual traits of the Congregation, mark the inner path of pilgrimage that each sister should follow, identifying herself with the spiritual aspirations and message of St. Ursula. According to the Founder, *Meditations* are also a sign of the unity of the Congregation and an element connecting the sisters on their way to holiness. ‘These reflections of ours — what kind of a link between sisterly love in God’⁹, notes the Saint. She sees a definite direction contained in the reflections, which they set for the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, so she writes: ‘Do not look for new, separate ways — one way for all is at the same time a guarantee of the proper development of the Congregation’.¹⁰ *Meditations* are also a kind of objectification brought about by pondering the Word of God, which is alive, effective, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating to the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, capable of judging the desires and thoughts of the heart (see Heb 4:12).

Mother Ursula turns to her spiritual daughters:

I beseech you, my children, to accept the thoughts on which your Mother has worked with all her heart, with the same heart that she gives you. Hold on to them faithfully. So that they not to clog you, I have based almost all of them on the Gospel, which can never clog. [...] Don’t say that it’s boring to go back to the same meditation every year — after all, the Church goes back to the same Sunday Gospels every year, to the same prayers at Mass, to the same psalms in the breviary. It is precisely the fact that every year you will go back to the same meditation that will keep you in our spirit. From year to year you will be able to follow if you are moving forward on the path that has been marked out for you from the very beginning of your religious life.¹¹

Thus, from the beginning, Mother Ledóchowska gives words of encouragement and explanation, especially for those who would be distrustful or sceptical about *Meditations*.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

Saint Ursula defines only the auxiliary role of *Meditations* in relation to the Gospel, to the Scripture. The Word of God is the supreme word, and *Meditations* are only meant to help in prayer, in meditating on passages of the Gospel. Mother Ledóchowska in no way absolutizes the texts of *Meditations*, on the contrary, she foresees situations when these reflections will not be helpful to someone. She recommends: ‘Read, soul, the content of the reflections, and if it does not suit you, look for food for yourself in the given paragraph of the Gospel’.¹² The text of the Holy Scripture is always in the first place for St. Ursula, and all other human words are only secondary and commentary to the inspired text. Mother Ledóchowska is aware that God leads people in different ways and it would be naive to want to push everyone into one scheme — this would not give primacy to the Holy Spirit, who is the first to lead the believer on the path of the spiritual growth. The author of *Meditations*, being a person with broad horizons, free of tightness and scheming, points out, addressing her sister: ‘Maybe God will lead your soul on a higher path — contemplation, then give in to God’s guidance, but if He leaves you on the ordinary path of often laborious meditation based on the work of the three authorities of the soul: reason, heart and will — stick to these meditations’¹³. According to Mother Ledóchowska, meditations are prepared in such a way that they can be used by any sister, regardless of age, education, origin or duties.

Therefore, Mother Ledóchowska leaves her spiritual daughters support to meditate in the morning on all days of the year. Thus, she sets out a program of systematic and orderly spiritual work. According to her intention, *Meditations* are to serve as an aid in meditating on the Gospel, which is the place of meeting Christ. *Meditations* are not, however, a study of biblical exegesis. The Founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus was not a researcher of the Holy Scripture, she did not reach for the methods of Bible analysis developed at that time, but represented a practical approach. Wojciech Misztal notes that it was precisely such a practical approach that gave rise to the Holy Scripture, which was created to feed, nurture and develop spirituality¹⁴ — for this purpose the Bible should be read, considered and explained, using the achievements of exegesis.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ See W. Misztal, *Ewangelia w duchowości św. Urszuli [in:] „Otrzymała od Ducha Świętego wielki charyzmat”*. Św. Urszula Ledóchowska i Urszulanki Serca Jezusa Konającego, red. M. Krupecka, W. Misztal, Kraków 2012, p. 128.

1.2. Saint Ursula about the Gospel

The records of St. Ursula's reflections based on the Gospel are a testimony of love for the Word of God. Mother Ledóchowska draws attention to the great respect that the Jews had for the Scripture and in this context she notes that Christians have not only the words of the prophets, but the word of the Son of God himself.¹⁵ For the author of *Meditations*, the Gospel is a place of encounter with the living Word of God, with the Incarnate Word, with Christ — it allows to meet the true Jesus, to get to know him, to be filled with the Spirit of God. Reading it and reflecting on it should lead, according to St. Ursula, to a deeper love and intimacy with Jesus. The Mother writes, calling and encouraging sisters to love the Gospel: 'Oh, if only by reading it frequently we were able to form such a clear picture of Christ that His divine figure will always accompany us; if only in every uncertainty we were able to raise our eyes to our Leader and seek guidance in His example of life!'.¹⁶ The close relationship with Christ, built on consideration of the events of His life, is to be reflected in the daily existence of the believer.

Therefore, the Gospel gives, above all, the knowledge of the Person of Jesus Christ. Saint Ursula recommends the sisters to ask themselves: 'Have I known Him and do I do everything in my power to know Him and to make others know Him? I can get to know Jesus by the serious reading of the Gospel, by meditating, by reflecting on His teachings, His principles, by approaching Him lovingly'.¹⁷ Getting to know the Saviour more deeply and establishing a relationship with Him cannot be done without the Gospel. Moreover, it is necessary not only to read the Word of God, but also to meditate, to pray with this word, combined with a desire to know the Lord more deeply, flowing from love for Him. Mother Ledóchowska assures: 'After all, He is my best friend, full of sweetness, graciousness for me'.¹⁸ And she adds: 'If I stay away from Him, it is because I do not know Him, because I do not realize enough His infinite love for me'.¹⁹ He recommends asking Christ for the grace of knowing Him and His love.

According to the author of *Meditations*, every Christian should make an effort of will and mind to gradually and systematically get to know the Lord Jesus and to conform himself to Him: 'Wonderful figure of Christ, I must work hard to recreate Your image for myself'.²⁰ A religious person is called to follow Christ in a special way by the practice of the evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience. Pondering the Gospel is essential for an authentic life of religious

¹⁵ See U. Ledóchowska, *Rozmyślania...*, t. 1, I. 12.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, XII. 3.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem, I. 12.

vows. Hence, St. Ursula addresses these words to every sister: ‘I must look more and more attentively at the virtues of Jesus, to live more and more with Him, to live His life, to cling to Him, to be with Him, to follow Him, to think, speak, act, pray and suffer with Him’.²¹ She ensures that life in the Lord’s company is sweet.

The meditation and contemplation of the Person of the Saviour leads to know how to direct one’s heart and gaze at Christ, who suffers from poverty in the stable of Bethlehem, who is worn out and tired when He undertakes physical work in Nazareth. Moments of joy, on the other hand, must not mean forgetting about the Saviour; on the contrary, they should be an opportunity to enter into similar evangelical scenes, for example, to look at Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and share His joy with Him. Similarly, St. Ursula addresses the Lord, asking Him:

May the fields covered with grain remind me of your compassion for the people left behind like sheep without a shepherd and of your encouragement to pray for workers at the harvest of God. The waters of the lake — Thee teaching from the boat the crowds standing on the shore. Storms and winds — Your divine power that silenced the stormy elements. When crosses and sufferings fall on me, let me see You sad until death, sweating blood in the Garden, You crowned with thorns, covered with blood by the column of scourging. In humiliation — Thee, Lord, to the mockery — named king, ridiculed and slapped by Herod. In anxiety and persecution — Thee carrying the cross, dying on the cross.²²

This prayer shows how crucial is the Gospel for St. Ursula, shows the ability to reflect on it and to relate it to one’s own life. For Mother Ledóchowska, bending over to the Word of God is not one of the many practices to which she is committed on the path of religious life. The ability to persevere and systematically stop and read the Gospel is the desire of the heart, longing to cling more and more to the Saviour. ‘How we should value, love the Gospel!’²³ — marks St. Ursula.

The author of *Meditations* encourages us to accept the words of Christ with faith and the greatest love, and to preserve them as a treasure. ‘Don’t I have the Gospel that repeats His words to me and puts His deeds before my eyes?’²⁴ — St. Ursula asks rhetorically and adds that Jesus does not speak now as He did during His earthly life in Palestine, but this does not prevent her — reading His teachings in the Scripture — from joining in spirit with those who hear Christ. Mother Ledóchowska commands the sisters to ask themselves: ‘Do I value the Gospel?’

²¹ Ibidem, II. 17.

²² Ibidem, I. 12.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, II. 17.

Do I read it willingly and lovingly? And by reading it carefully, do I come closer and closer to Jesus and love Him more and more?’²⁵ Simultaneously, these questions relate to what is fundamental in religious life, which is the way of following Christ more closely. St. Ursula therefore convinces us of the irreplaceable role that the Gospel should play: ‘Oh, if only I could understand what the Gospel is to me and what it could be if I wanted to study it, read it, think about it!’²⁶ Hence, it is so necessary to overcome and remove all obstacles, especially weariness, boredom, discouragement — faced by a man who seems to already know the content of the Gospel — and to keep coming back to the Word of God. In order to show the value of the Holy Scripture, Mother Ursula uses the metaphor of a treasure, which sometimes has to be dug with effort, sometimes one has to search long for it and in the midst of adversity, but finding it brings great happiness.²⁷

Mother Ledóchowska points out that by constantly reading the Gospel, it is possible to lead a life that has been shared by the apostles, and it is realized when the believer’s mind, heart and soul abide in the company and presence of the Lord.

My life would then be transformed into an unearthly life — on earth, but not from this earth; into God’s life, because it is lived as Jesus lived, animated not by the spirit of the world, but completely imbued with the spirit of Jesus. Jesus would become my companion, my friend, who I would constantly look at, with whom I would constantly talk, who I would consult, with whom I would always find comfort, tranquillity and a ray of hope in difficult, black moments, that do not lack in life!²⁸

writes St. Ursula. Simultaneously, conscious of the temptations that believers may encounter, she instructs the sisters to pray with the following words: ‘O Jesus, You alone help me to stand always by You, faithfully seeking You in reading the Gospel. Let me not be distracted by my innate laziness, and my innate curiosity does not lead me to read many other books with neglect of the Gospel’.²⁹

According to St. Ursula, the Gospel is a signpost of life, which does not allow to get lost in the struggle. ‘There we have guidelines on how to act in every circumstance of life’³⁰, assures the Mother. The Word of God does not so much give ready-made solutions to problems as it allows us to shape properly our reason, will and feelings. The author of *Meditations* writes about the Gospel: ‘It is

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ See ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem, I. 12.

a bright ray for me, a light beam that breaks through from heaven to my soul, it disperses the darkness of my mind, it shows me which way to go. It is the holy spark that ignites in my heart the fire of the holy love'.³¹ Hence, she asks the Lord: 'O Jesus, may my heart be drawn to Your holy teaching, may I constantly seek light in the Gospel, may I submit with a flexible mind to all the laws of God, even though I cannot understand them'.³² Pondering the Word of God allows us to look properly at the world with the eyes of faith and to strengthen love. 'O Jesus, may Thy Gospel become for me a signpost, a faithful friend every day, a light dispersing the shadows of doubt, sorrow, temptation and death. Lord, I often, very often, read at least a page from the Gospel. May it be no book that is for me more beautiful than you, my Gospel!'³³ — writes the author of *Meditations*. She is convinced of the importance and irreplaceable role of the constant contact with the Word of God. The one who accepts the words of the Gospel with faith, lives them and is permeated by the spirit of the Gospel, can experience its power in the everyday life.

The author of *Meditations* presents Jesus Christ as the Teacher and Master, who during His earthly life teaches, heals and proclaims the Kingdom of God. Saint Ursula notes that even today He directs His teaching and reveals His will in various ways. One of them is the Gospel. Therefore, she makes the sisters ask themselves, when addressing the Saviour: 'Do I accept Your teaching, Your guidance, Your exhortations, which You give me, either by Your inner inspirations or by the words of the Gospel?'.³⁴ She repeatedly instructs her spiritual daughters to make the love of the Gospel an object of examination of conscience. She assures: 'You can never read enough of it — the more we study this holy book, the more words gain strength and the bigger the light they bring to our soul. The Gospel must be loved, it must be constantly read, to bring the spirit of the Gospel, and thus of Jesus, into our lives, and then it will become clear and holy'.³⁵ She invites us to ask the Lord to love and listen to His words, to ask for the grace of reading the Gospel with an ardent desire to faithfully follow its advices and commandments. 'I cannot give You in my present life more proof of love than by loving every word that comes out of Your mouth'³⁶ — St. Ursula turns to the Lord in prayer.

The Gospel provides an opportunity to discover and do God's will. 'Jesus, I know Your will, it is for me contained in Your evangelical teachings, in my *Constitutions*, it is in the will of my superiors, in my duties. There is only one thing

³¹ Ibidem, XII. 5.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem, I. 12.

³⁴ Eadem, *Rozmyślenia dla Sióstr Urszulanek Serca Jezusa Konającego*, t. 2, Pniewy 2000, IX. 11.

³⁵ Eadem, *Rozmyślenia...*, t. 1, XII. 20.

³⁶ Ibidem.

I need — that I constantly strive to do Your will faithfully, so clearly revealed. It is not in prayers alone, extraordinary penances and virtues that my holiness is contained, but above all in the strictest adherence to God's will'³⁷ — writes Saint Ursula. She sees the fulfilment of God's will as her priority, which comes from the love of God.

The love of the Gospel and love for Christ in the Blessed Sacrament are in direct relationship. The knowledge of the Person of Jesus of Nazareth comes through reading and pondering the Gospel and should lead to the adoration of Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament. 'I want to seek You, my Jesus, in this holy Book, and then in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar I will understand You more easily and find You as You were in the land of Palestine. I need the Gospel in order to learn to cling to Jesus in the Tabernacle with all my heart'³⁸ — St. Ursula turns to the Saviour, thus giving the reader of *Meditations* the opportunity to reflect on the words of personal prayer. She shows that the one who prays to the Lord present in the Eucharist in the form of bread and wine, meets the One that he has come to know through the Word of God. 'The faithful soul sees Jesus everywhere, and this is its strength, its happiness. It sees Him in the Tabernacle, and that is why it is its happiness to kneel at the foot of the altar and look with the eyes of its soul at this miraculous figure of Jesus, whom it knows so well by reading the Gospel'³⁹ — she says.

2. Biblical references in St. Ursula's *Testament*

Among the writings of Mother Ursula Ledóchowska, her *Testament*, which is a spiritual message, has a significant place. The *Testament* contains requests to spiritual daughters — St. Ursula makes here a choice of what is most important; she underlines what she wants sisters to pay attention to. In a dozen or so requests, she asks her spiritual daughters to love the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Crucified Jesus, the Blessed Sacrament; she recalls the importance of humility, sisterly love, poverty, obedience, prayer, devotion to the Blessed Mother, mortification, serenity, silence, concentration; she asks for faithful fulfilment of the rule, sincerity towards superiors and respect for all religious congregations. She instructs the sisters to be completely united with God's will, to be permeated by the zeal for the salvation of the souls, and to be faithful and persevering to the end. In this spiritual message of St. Ursula, there is no separate request to love the Scriptures or the Gospel. However, one cannot deduce from this fact that

³⁷ Eadem, *Rozmyślenia...*, t. 2, IX 20.

³⁸ Eadem, *Rozmyślenia...*, t. 1, II. 17.

³⁹ Ibidem, I. 3.

Mother Ledóchowska does not care about this matter. According to her, love for the Word of God must characterize every Ursuline Sister, which she often points out, especially in her *Meditations*. Moreover, it is worth noting that although the Mother does not explicitly devote a separate request to the theme of the Gospel, the whole *Testament* calls implicitly to listen to and fulfil the Word of God, as it is permeated with this Word. In her *Testament*, Saint Ursula repeatedly quotes and recalls the words of the Scriptures, especially the Gospel. These quotations from the Bible, chosen by Mother Ledóchowska, illustrate well the essential elements of her spirituality.

The first and last of the several biblical passages quoted by St. Ursula in her *Testament* has a common denominator: it speaks of the Kingdom of God. The string of quotations begins with words of reinforcement, which are an encouragement to trust in God: ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom’ (Lk 12:32)⁴⁰, and the *Testament’s* conclusion, entitled *The Last of My Words to My Dear Children*, contains the call: ‘Be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what He requires of you’ (Mt 6:33). Saint Ursula indicates to the sisters that the kingdom of the Divine Heart is theirs, and that extending the Saviour’s reign in human souls should be their concern and task.⁴¹

The only biblical sentence that is quoted twice in the *Testament* is the Master of Nazareth’s evangelical assurance of unity between the love of Christ and love of the neighbour: ‘All that you have done to one of these least of my brothers, you have done to me’ (Mt 25:40), contained in *Requests III* and *IV*. Saint Ursula makes it clear that love for God must be reflected in acts of love towards brothers and sisters. The call of Ursuline sister is to be a consolation for Christ, for His Agonizing Heart. This task is fulfilled when one lives for the happiness of the others, in love for one’s neighbour, in sacrifice for another, forgetting oneself. Mother Ledóchowska encourages us to be ready for even the smallest act of love, which is the fruit of the daily determination given in prayer to Christ at the foot of the cross: ‘The Agonizing Heart of Jesus, I want to comfort You by giving happiness to my sisters!’⁴² A sentence from the Gospel accented by St. Ursula in her *Testament*: ‘All that you have done to one of these least of my brothers, you have done to me’ (Mt 25:40) should also be a call for an ardent service to others and sacrificial work. Acts of kindness and mercy performed for others are an expression of love for Christ. The author of the *Testament* asks the sisters a rhetorical question: ‘Wouldn’t this thought that we are working for the upkeep of our orphans, working for Jesus himself, be an incentive for you to work more and more

⁴⁰ See *New Testament: Good News Bible*, The Bible Societies/Collins, St Ives 2005.

⁴¹ See U. Ledóchowska, *Pisma...*, p. 13.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

zealously, to sacrifice without limits in your work?'.⁴³ This makes it clear how St. Ursula draws attention to the deepest motivation for her actions.

The above sentence from the Gospel (Mt 25:40) is not the only passage in the Scripture that speaks of love quoted by Mother Ursula in her *Testament*. She also quotes (in *Request III*) the new commandment of love written in the Gospel according to Saint John: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you; that you also love one another as I have loved you. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples' (Jn 13:34–35). This fact shows unequivocally how deeply the Saint recognizes and understands the essence of Christian love. Furthermore, she instructs the sisters to reflect on these words frequently, to follow them and to look at the Saviour's sacrificial and full consecration of love.⁴⁴

Another evangelical sentence quoted by St. Ursula in her spiritual message is the motto of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus: 'I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me as you have said' (Lk 1:38). These words express the Mary's feature of spirituality left by Mother Ledóchowska. She indicates the irreplaceable value of the attitude of readiness to do God's will, following the example of the Blessed Mother. The author of the *Testament* also convinces: 'Be sure that Mary will rather miraculously come to your aid than leave you'⁴⁵; she encourages us to resort with a childlike confidence to the Mother of the Saviour and to follow Her in discerning and accepting God's intentions.

The importance of the faithful doing of God's will in the religious life is repeatedly underlined by St. Ursula in this text. She emphasizes the happiness that comes from such an attitude; then a man can say in the peace of heart: 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'⁴⁶ — points out the author of the *Testament*, paraphrasing the words from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians (see Gal 2:20). Another sentence of St. Paul, quoted by St. Ursula in *Request XII*, also speaks about doing God's will: 'God wants you to be holy' (1 Thes 4:3). The issue of reading and realizing God's intentions has a fundamental importance for Mother Ledóchowska.

The next three quotations (one from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament) touch upon the mystery of Christ sacrificing His life on the Cross. *Request VII* to love Jesus Crucified, Mother Ursula begins with the words of St. Paul from the Letter to the Galatians: 'As for me, however, I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for by means of his cross the world is crucified for me, and I for the world' (Gal 6:14). According to the Founder's

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 25.

⁴⁴ See ibidem, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 53.

idea, devotion to Christ Crucified has a central place in the spirituality of the Ursuline Sisters. In this context, St. Ursula quotes and emphasizes the word ‘I desire’ (Jn 19:28) uttered by the Saviour from the height of the Cross. She shows that it does not merely express physical desire, but is a cry for love. Therefore, Mother Ledóchowska recommends listening to the painful complaint of the dying Lord — to this aim she quotes a sentence from the Book of Psalms, which she interprets as the words of Christ: ‘I waited for the compassionate, but there was no compassionate, and for the comforting, but I did not find him’ (Ps 69:21).

The other two Gospel’s quotations placed by St. Ursula in her *Testament* are a reminder of the encouragement to address requests to God, with faith and trust: ‘Ask and it will be given to you’ (Mt 7:7) and speak of the need for perseverance: ‘Whoever holds out to the end will be saved’ (Mt 10:22). All the biblical passages selected and quoted by Mother Ledóchowska show how accents in her spirituality are distributed.

3. The topicality of St. Ursula’s indications concerning the Holy Scripture

According to the teaching of Vaticanum II, the Scripture should be a real source of Christian spirituality.⁴⁷ This truth is underlined by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*. The Gospel must find its realization in the life of every Christian. The Word of God should be an important space for the believer to learn a close relationship with God. Pondering the Scripture creates and strengthens a personal relationship with the living God and makes it possible to discern and fulfil His saving will. The post-conciliar teaching of the Church confirms and develops the contents of the constitution *Dei Verbum*. Saint John Paul II in his exhortation *Vita consecrata* states unambiguously: ‘The Word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality’.⁴⁸ Similarly Pope Benedict XVI in his exhortation *Verbum Domini* states: ‘The Word of God is the first source of all authentic Christian spirituality’.⁴⁹

The Word of God has an irreplaceable value for man’s spiritual life since it contains at the same time: an objective showing of God’s saving plan, a description of the believer’s life — the believer’s response to Revelation and the experiences in which the Christian can participate through faith and through the Holy Spirit operating in the Church. The Second Vatican Council, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, states that ‘so great is the power and

⁴⁷ See The Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation “Dei Verbum”*, London 2014, no. 21.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Exhortation “Vita Consecrata”*, Vatican 1996, no. 94

⁴⁹ Benedict XVI, *Exhortation “Verbum Domini”*, Vatican 2010, no. 86.

strength of the Word of God that it is for the Church a support and vital force, and for the sons of the Church a confirmation of faith, a nourishment of the soul and a source of pure and constant spiritual life⁵⁰, while the study of the Scripture is considered the soul of theology.⁵¹ The Scripture contains the Word of God, its Author is the Holy Spirit, who acted through human authors.⁵² The Bible describes the experience of faith. Through the Holy Spirit and through faith, the man can participate in the experiences described in the Scripture. Faith is born from listening to the Word of God.

But Christianity is not the religion of the Book — it is the religion of the Person, the Incarnate and living Word, the religion of the Word of God, not the written and silent word.⁵³ The Bible is not at the beginning of Christianity, but is secondary to the experience of faith. The scripture is God's speech, recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in writing.⁵⁴ It is also a 'story' of what God has done for people, showing the realization of the salvific plan of God's Love — He is known through His actions. God, descending in His goodness to reveal himself to man, speaks human words. 'Through all the words of the Scripture, God speaks only one Word, His only Word, in which He speaks the whole'.⁵⁵ The whole Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.⁵⁶ He is the only Word of the Scripture. The Church encourages the faithful to get to know Jesus Christ through frequent reading of God's words.⁵⁷ Knowing Jesus, however, does not only mean knowing intellectually, but must be a personal human response to Christ's invitation. There is food and power in the Scriptures.⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that Scripture and the Body of the Lord feed and guide the Christian life.⁵⁹

This approach to the Scripture was close to Mother Ursula, who always leaned over the Word of God in faith. She particularly encouraged to the reflection and contemplation of the Gospel, because it allows us to know better the Person of Jesus Christ and to deepen our relationship with Him. Reading and meditating on the Bible in the spirit of faith was the essential part of spiritual life for Saint Ursula. Mother Ledóchowska also emphasized the clear link between the Word of God and the Eucharist, mentioned also by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

⁵⁰ The Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution...*, no. 21; see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London 2016 [CCC], no. 131.

⁵¹ See The Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution...*, no. 24.

⁵² See CCC 136.

⁵³ See Benedict XVI, *Exhortation...*, no. 7; CCC 108.

⁵⁴ See CCC 81.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem* 102.

⁵⁶ See *ibidem* 134.

⁵⁷ See The Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution...*, no. 25.

⁵⁸ See *ibidem*, no. 24.

⁵⁹ See CCC 141.

‘The biblical text can only be properly understood by those who have lived through what the text says’⁶⁰ — states the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. You cannot understand the Scripture if you do not have an inner experience of how God acts in your own life. Spiritual life and the hermeneutics of the Scripture are closely connected.⁶¹ ‘As the life of the reader of inspired texts is strengthened by the Holy Spirit, the understanding of the reality of the texts is deepened’.⁶² The life of Saint Ursula is an excellent example of a gradual penetration into the depths of the Word of God, coming from the experience of faith and from the readiness to accept God’s guidance on the roads of everyday life.

The Word of God contained in the Scripture is a direct invitation to dialogue with God; it stimulates a response to God, particularly significant for the spiritual life.⁶³ Richard Rohr notes that ‘the genius of biblical revelation lies in the fact that it does not offer us solutions, but (1) it opens up to us the path where we can reach them, and (2) it offers an internal and external authority that allows us to trust this path’.⁶⁴ The biblical message contains the essence of the mystery of faith, which the believer must accept in a personal way. The Holy Scripture has the key to reading the events of the relationship between God, Lord of the world, and people of all times — the history of creation and redemption from sin. It invites us to reflect on the relationship of faith with other aspects of life.⁶⁵ Saint Ursula Ledóchowska is the one who allowed the Word of God to be formed. Her writings show how she understood the Bible and what it meant to her; and her life not only bears witness to her love of the Gospel, but is a living exegesis of the words of Christ.

‘The deepest interpretation of the Scripture comes from those who have allowed themselves to be shaped by listening to, reading and pondering the Word of God’⁶⁶, says Benedict XVI in his exhortation *Verbum Domini*. The saints of the Catholic Church — and among them St. Ursula Ledóchowska — are those who have lived the Word of God; the Scripture was a fundamental reference for them. Moreover, without them the interpretation of the Bible would not be complete.⁶⁷ ‘Every saint is like a ray of light coming out of the Word of God’.⁶⁸ The saints

⁶⁰ See The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II, A, 2.

⁶¹ See Benedict XVI, *Exhortation...*, no. 30.

⁶² The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, II, A, 2.

⁶³ See Ch.A. Bernard, *Introduzione alla teologia spirituale*, Casale Monferrato 1996, p. 50.

⁶⁴ R. Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, Cincinnati 2008, p. 23.

⁶⁵ See. F.R. de Gasperis, *La corsa che ci è proposta*, Bologna 2003, pp. 8–10.

⁶⁶ Benedict XVI, *Exhortation...*, no. 48.

⁶⁷ See *ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

show the true face of God and man.⁶⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar believes that the life of saints is an experimental dogma.⁷⁰

The scripture is a source of Christian spirituality, although not the only one.⁷¹ Christian spirituality concerns the Christian life as long as it is a personal project, relating to the conscious involvement of man.⁷² In today's world man is under the strong influence of factors that push him from the path leading inwards, from the path of listening and deeper reflection, and lead him to live outside, to feed on the superficial. People who allow themselves to be drawn in by the vortex of life lose themselves.⁷³ However, there is no shortage of those who want to make an effort to seek the depth of their relationship with God, and one of the manifestations of this desire is the ability to bend over to the Word of God. This ability is essential for the modern Christian — the shape of his humanity and Christian life depends on it. The person of St. Ursula Ledóchowska and her texts can be an important help in reading the Word of God and putting it into practice.

One of ancient stories says that one day some brothers visited Father Anthony and asked him: 'Say the word: how can we be saved?'. The old man answered: 'Did you listen to the Scriptures? It is the right thing for you'. The disciples answered: 'We also want to hear something from you, Father'.⁷⁴ The disciples come to Father Anthony as they want to hear a word from him. They consider him to be a man of God who has put his word into practice, so they want to draw on his holiness and wisdom. They do not turn for help because they underestimate or lack the Word of God; on the contrary, they look for someone who will help them to better live the Word of God, who will teach them a spiritual struggle. They see that it is worth praying and learning about the Scriptures not only by themselves, but benefiting from the experience of others in the community of the Church who

⁶⁹ See Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, Castel Gandolfo, 9 August 2009, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20090809.html [accessed 30 September 2020].

⁷⁰ See R. Skrzypczak, *Wstęp* [in:] J. Bątkiewicz-Brożek, *Jezu, Ty się tym zajmij!*, Kraków 2017, p. 21.

⁷¹ The sources of the theology of spirituality are: Scripture, history of spirituality, personal experience, doctrinal texts directly related to the theology of spirituality, knowledge of man, see Ch.A. Bernard, *Introduzione...*, pp. 49–52.

⁷² More precisely: "the concept of Christian spirituality is understood both as the practice of the spiritual life and a structured reflection on that spiritual life" (*Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, red. M. Chmielewski, Lublin–Kraków 2002, p. 228).

⁷³ J.B. Lotz, *Einübung ins meditieren am Neuen Testament*, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 9.

⁷⁴ See *Nuove letture dei Giorni*, Editione Quiqajon Monastero di Bose 2010, p. 9.

have already gone through a certain stage in listening, reflecting and living the Word of God.⁷⁵

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska is a person from whom you can learn how to live the Word of God, how to consider and implement it. The scripture plays a fundamental role in the thought and life of the Founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus. Her spirituality is biblical. In addition, Mother Ledóchowska, with her approach to the Bible, overtook the Second Vatican Council. The way of perceiving and reading the Gospel, which she represented, is still valid today.

Due to the limited volume of this article, it shows selected aspects of biblical spirituality, based only on *Meditations* and *Testament* of St. Ursula Ledóchowska. Simultaneously, these writings are crucial for getting to know the biblical spirituality of the Founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus. It should be noted that other works of Mother Ursula also contain numerous biblical references, whose analysis of which could one day give a more complete picture of her spirituality based on the Scripture.

Summary

The aim of this article is to present selected aspects of the biblical spirituality according to writings of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska. The Word of God has the central position in the spirituality of the Founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus. Mother Ledóchowska is the author of *Meditations*, that contain considerations based on specific fragments of the Gospel, intended for each day of the year. Her *Testament* is also full of biblical references and permeated with the evangelical logic. According to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska the meditation of the Word of God in the spirit of faith enables us to learn more and get to know better the person of Jesus Christ and to deepen the relationship with Him. Mother Ledóchowska, by her attitude to the Holy Bible, was ahead of the Second Vatican Council's time. All her life was an active exegesis of the words of Christ.

Keywords

Christian spirituality, Ursula Ledóchowska, Bible, Gospel, meditation

⁷⁵ See *ibidem*.

Wybrane aspekty duchowości biblijnej w pismach św. Urszuli Ledóchowskiej

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu ukazanie wybranych aspektów duchowości biblijnej w pismach św. Urszuli Ledóchowskiej. Słowo Boże zajmuje centralne miejsce w duchowości Założycielki Zgromadzenia Sióstr Urszulanek Serca Jezusa Konającego. Matka Ledóchowska jest autorką dzieła *Rozmyślenia*, które zawiera rozważania oparte na poszczególnych fragmentach Ewangelii, przeznaczone na każdy dzień roku. Jej *Testament* jest również pełny odniesień biblijnych i przeniknięty logiką ewangeliczną. Według świętej Urszuli medytacja Słowa Bożego w duchu wiary pozwala lepiej poznać osobę Jezusa Chrystusa i pogłębiać z Nim więź. Matka Ledóchowska swoim podejściem do Pisma Świętego wyprzedziła II Sobór Watykański. Całe jej życie stanowiło żywą egzegezę słów Chrystusa.

Słowa kluczowe

duchowość chrześcijańska, Urszula Ledóchowska, Biblia, Ewangelia, rozmyślanie

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