



**AN INTRODUCTION TO *LECTIO DIVINA*
FOR NON-MONASTICS**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lectio Divina is the ancient monastic practice of the prayerful reading of the Bible. This prayer is a way of getting in touch daily—in a personal and intimate way—with the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit; it is a way of learning to know Jesus Christ, our Lord and brother. The women and men monastics of the early Church developed and expanded on the earlier Jewish practices of prayer. What developed and was practice by women and men monastics for centuries was later codified in a more accessible form by a 12th century Carthusian monk by the name of Guigo II. His famous work of prayer was known as the *Scala Claustralium (The Ladder of Monks)* where he developed his own four-fold division of Lectio Divina that has become a type of structural foundation. Unfortunately, this division has often been wrongly interpreted as a formalized prayer method that has been used, expanded upon, and even abused by some in their desire to make Lectio Divina accessible to others. What we will learn is that this four-fold division has become far too systematized in modern times. In fact, the monks regularly moved between those divisions even in a single prayer session. Nonetheless, Guigo’s division is a helpful *starting point* for those beginning to pray Lectio Divina.

As the monks deeply understood from their practice, Jesus has the same power to speak with you *today* in Lectio Divina to give you counsel, insights, and directions in your everyday life. Your encounter is with the true Word, who loves you unconditionally and is ever-present and real in your life. If you do not allow Him to reveal Himself to you daily through His Word, then you can easily stray from the right path and become alienated from your true self. It is in the Bible that the story to which your life belongs is written. Understand that as a Child of God, no word comes from the mouth of the Lord without achieving in you the work He intended. Just as one might receive the Eucharist and consume the Living Word found truly and substantially present, so too did the monks understand that the written or spoken words found in the Scriptures were also meant to be “chewed upon” in order to consume the Lord as He gives us our daily bread.

Lectio Divina is a way of reading the Sacred Scriptures that is centered on God. If you do it with faith you will be able to hear what He has to say to you here at this moment. It is a way of reading that is slow, so that the words are savored in meditation. It moves from the literal meaning to what only the Holy Spirit can make clear to you. It calls both for action by your involvement and for passive surrender as it draws you into the heart of God. The text must be read for its own sake and not for the achievement of having read it. At its core, Lectio Divina is a way of experiencing Jesus Christ. You will encounter Him personally in the Sacred Scriptures because He is hidden in the pages of your Bible and you ought to believe in His presence with greater assurance than if you could see Him with your eyes. If you do not at once understand what you read in the scripture passage, then have confidence that the Lord will reveal it to you in His own time. When you read the Word of God, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God, and so reading about God is raised by grace to the new level of conversation with God. Traditionally, Lectio Divina moves from lectio to meditatio, from meditatio to oratio, and concludes with contemplatio. Lectio Divina can be practiced on your own or in a group, but the fundamental pattern remains similar.

You ought to do Lectio Divina every day, even if it is only one single verse of the Bible, because “Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4). Your reading of the Word of God should be deliberate, moving slowly from verse to verse, from word to word, watching for the context, paying close attention to each passage, looking out for the

answers that are there in sacred scripture itself and the “echoes” they evoke in your mind and heart, watching the notes and marginal references and always treasuring silence so as to make space to listen. You should know the word you hear is directed to you personally and individually. Your prayer may be simply staying with the Word in silence, or it may be thanksgiving, or a petition or praise, or a blessing, or a prayer of contrition, or an intercession, or one single word, on which you pause and repeat at will, or it may be a prayer of inspiration.

Here are some thoughts by the Church on why Lectio Divina is so important in this day and age even as people continually speak of being distant from God:

“And so let us at long last arise, because Scripture is waking us and calls out, ‘Now is the moment for us to rise from sleep.’ With our eyes open to God’s own light and our ears ringing, let us hear what his voice is teaching us as, each day, he calls out and says, ‘Today, if you wish to hear his voice, do not make your hearts hard.’ And, once more, ‘Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.’ And what does the Spirit say? ‘Come, children, listen to me. I shall teach you to fear the Lord. Run while you have your life’s light, before the night of death overtake you.’”

Exurgamus ergo tandem aliquando, excitante nos Scriptura ac dicente; Hora est iam nos de somno surgere. Et apertis oculis nostris ad deificum lumen, adtonitis auribus audiamus divina cotidie clamans quid nos admonet vox dicens: Hodie si vocem eius audieritis, nolite obdurare corda vestra. Et iterum: Qui habet aures audiendi, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. Et quid dicit? Venite filii, audite me; timorem Domini docebo vos. Currite dum lumen vitae habetis, ne tenebrae mortis vos comprehendant. (*Rule of St Benedict, Prologue, vv 8-13*)

Since one who loves more risks more, I must reprimand my most illustrious son Theodore. He has received from the most holy Trinity the gifts of intelligence, well-being, mercy and charity. But they are forever being stifled by profane questions, by constant comings and goings. Thus he neglects to read the words of his Redeemer each day. What is Scripture if not a letter from almighty God to his creature? If Your Excellency lived somewhere else and received a letter from an earthly monarch, he would have no peace, he would not rest, he would not shut his eyes until he had learned the contents of that letter. The King of Heaven, the Lord of Men and Angels, has written you a letter that you might live, and yet, illustrious son, you neglect to read it with ardent love. Strive therefore, I beg you, to meditate each day on the words of your Creator. Learn to know the heart of God in the words of God. Thus you will long for the things of heaven with greater desire, and your soul will be more eager for the joys that are celestial. Then will your rest be so much the greater as now you have been restless for love of your Creator. May the Spirit fill your soul with his presence, and, in filling it, make it more free.

Sed quia ille plus diligit, qui plus praesumit, erga dulcissimam mentem gloriosissimi filii mei domni Theodori habeo aliquam querelam, quia donum ingenii, donum rerum, donum misericordiae atque charitatis a sancta Trinitate percepit; sed tamen saecularibus indesinenter causis astringitur, assiduis processionibus occupatur, et quotidie legere negligit verba Redemptoris sui. Quid est autem Scriptura sacra nisi quaedam epistola omnipotentis Dei ad creaturam suam? Et certe sicubi esset Gloria vestra alibi constituta, et scripta terreni imperatoris acciperet, non cessaret, non quiesceret, somnum oculis non

daret, nisi prius quid sibi imperator terrenis scripsisset agnovisset. Imperator coeli, Dominus hominum et angelorum, pro vita tua tibi suas epistolas transmisit, et tamen, gloriose fili, easdem epistolas ardentem legere negligis. Stude ergo, quaeso, et quotidie Creatoris tui verba meditare. Disce cor Dei in verbis Dei, ut ardentius ad aeterna suspires, ut mens vestra ad coelestia gaudia maioribus desideriis accendatur. Tanto enim tunc maior ei erit requies, quanto modo amore Conditoris sui requies nulla fuerit. Sed ad haec agenda infundat vobis omnipotens Deus consolatorem Spiritum. Ipse mentem vestram sua praesentia impleat, et implendo levet. (*Gregory, Epist. IV, 31 [PL 77, 706ab]*)

“It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.” (*John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 39*)

“*Lectio divina* consists of meditating fully on the biblical text, reading and re-reading it, ‘ruminating’ it in a certain sense, and squeezing all of its ‘juice’ so that it nourishes meditation and contemplation like sap, and is able to irrigate concrete life. As a condition, *lectio divina* requires that the mind and heart be illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that is, by the inspirer Himself of the Scriptures, and place oneself, therefore, in an attitude of ‘religious listening’.” (*Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus at St. Peter’s Square, November 6, 2005*)

“If this practice is promoted with efficacy, I am convinced that it will produce a new spiritual springtime in the Church.” (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Participants in the International Congress Organized to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation ‘Dei Verbum’, September 16, 2005*)

THE BASIC PRACTICE

PREPARATION:

The place for undertaking Lectio can vary with each person. For those initially undertaking Lectio, it is often helpful to sit in Church or before the Blessed Sacrament so as to learn to keep external distractions to a minimum. Others often choose a room, a prayer corner, or special place in their homes that is set aside just for prayer. In order to keep those external distractions to a minimum, it might also be helpful to have a lit candle, a crucifix, or a bible located where you can fix your eyes upon it when distracted. None of these are required, but each can serve as helpful tools during this time. We traditionally prepare ourselves for Lectio with silence, with an exodus from ourselves, and with prayer. Some have taken up the practice of beginning that time for silence by also playing a song or singing a simple hymn to prayerful segue into a time of slowing down and entering into silence. When you are then ready, we call upon the Holy Spirit with an *epiclesis* or invocation, asking the Spirit to open the ears of our heart and give us an insight into the Word. The monks traditionally began with a section of Psalm 69 (O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me), but others have also prayed the invocation “Veni Sancte Spiritus” (Come, Holy Spirit). You can choose these, or even write one yourself to invoke the Holy Spirit. Just begin with the sign of the cross and pray your invocation when you are ready.

GROUP NOTE: When you are leading a group in Lectio Divina, it is helpful to explain a bit about the context and history of passage that has been chosen. You can find excellent resources in commentaries online and in print to provide this. It is important to not allow the Lectio to become a study session, but rather simply setting the context for the prayer time. As you then move to a period of silence, it is also often helpful to have the invocation already written out for people to participate after making the sign of the cross.

LECTIO:

Read the passage that has been chosen. It might be one of the readings appointed for the day’s Mass, or some choose a passage that has been particularly on their mind for some time. One of the many advantages for using the daily mass lectionary is that it usually follows a continuous reading cycle, or else generally places the respective readings together to form a unit that speaks to a certain theme. Later on, the more experienced reader can approach books like Daniel, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews as they gain a good relationship with reading and understanding the varying genres that are present. If it is your first time for a passage, you might consider having read the passage in a commentary to gather the broader context before you read it the first time here in Lectio. The key is to not allow the reading time to become a study mode; do the study beforehand if needed.

The first step is to understand what the reading is about by taking somewhat of a broad or macro overview of the passage. If it is a Gospel passage, you may need to come to understand the characters in the situation. Where is the action taking place, in what context and when? When is the passage occurring, which places are named, which people interact, what is each one doing? What is the dialogue about?

Then, begin by reading through the passage slowly, as many as four or five times if needed. Even more helpful is to read out loud as the monks traditionally did so you can “chew upon” the words and listen for the resonances and intonations of God speaking to us. For the monks, it was essential to hear the *voces paginarum* (voice of the pages) by proclaiming the text as you take in the Word and the speaker’s presence becomes evident. As a word or phrase begins to surface and speak to you, begin to slowly repeat it quietly as you “chew upon” the words.

GROUP NOTE: It is often helpful to pass out a sheet with the chosen reading already printed on it with space for making notes. One person can be chosen to slowly read the passage out loud to the group while others follow along. Invite the group to individually underline or make note of specific words or phrases that speak back (echo) in their heart. Take a short pause, and then have another person slowly read the passage again. This becomes important since each person will emphasize different aspects of the very same passage when reading out loud. The Spirit is working through the proclamation of those lectors just as the recipient takes and reads along with the word being proclaimed. Pause again and ask each person to take a moment to capture or become more aware of the Word from the passage that is being spoken to them.

MEDITATIO:

Three points that are helpful in understanding this next phase:

1-This step involves understanding what God is saying to *me* through the passage, here and now. This is because He has a word for *me* today. As you have come to understand what Jesus is saying to the people involved in the passage, so you will also hear what He is saying to you here and now in your own life. Meditation in Lectio is NOT Ignatian-style introspection or psychological self-analysis. It is how we get to a text’s deeper meaning for me. We balance our knowledge about the text, with how the Spirit is speaking to me today. By taking the text’s otherness seriously, we will not be tempted to read so subjectively that we end up making the text say things it does not say at all.

2-The ideal conditions for doing Lectio Divina do not exist. The perfect conditions are, in fact, the ones you have now, your mood, your problems with your family, your work or studies, as well as your joys, tiredness or the boredom you are experiencing. Your awareness of the presence of God may be strong, or fragile and evanescent. Do not allow any of these concerns to dampen your attentiveness or awareness that God is really and truly going to speak to you today.

3-Do not make the mistake of saying that you already know the passage, because in that way you stop listening to God. If, after reading the passage, you immediately think of someone *else*, go back to the passage and read it again, this time applying it to *yourself*. Try to have the attitude of the boy Samuel who, when God called to him, answered, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3, 10). “What does this reading say to me today?”

So, try to discover what is in these words for *you*. Is it because of the person described, a word, a situation, a gesture? Write down or speak out loud the reasons you can discern. If you keep a notebook, you can begin to see how God is working in your heart over time, the underlying things that matter. What is God saying to me? How does this reading relate to my life, my work, my problems, my studies, my prayer life, my search for God, the way I relate to others, the judgements I make, or any other aspects of my life?

Finding the wavelength and resonance is the most important thing. This process takes time, but the Word of God cries out to us every day; we are likely to hear what is needed but we must learn to tune into the spoken word of God. When other stray thoughts come to mind, assess whether this is God speaking to you. If not, try to shift your focus back on the word or phrase God has spoken to you. With time people learn the wavelengths and get better attuned to the resonances.

GROUP NOTE: Imagine a monk sitting on a mountain top and shouting. What he would hear back would be an echo that would return to him. Not surprisingly, the monks would often recount how repeating the word or phrase given to them in scripture would echo back to them with some insight, thought, affirmation, concern, etc. While two people may read or hear the same scriptural passage, the echo that returns to them has a different resonance in each person, because each one's heart and life are different. This echo can be shared briefly with other members in the group. It is not an explanation, a speech or a homily based on the reading. It is not about applying the reading to somebody else. Because we believe that the echoes are inspired by the Holy Spirit, then the echoes to others are also a way we may grow spiritually. Invite those who want to briefly share the echo that has come to them, BUT in a very specific format for a group setting. Do it in the first person singular: "This word says to me ... This word strikes me because ... It makes me think ... I believe ... I should ... I must ... For me, this reading, verse ..." It is not compulsory to share the echo, but in the sharing you are bearing witness to how God is speaking to you in your life today.

ORATIO:

What am I to say to God? God is speaking to you personally. He is waiting for your answer. He wants to have a personal relationship with you, a dialogue with you as you are and as you can be. You do not need to put up any barriers of pretense. Answer Him faithfully. God is now speaking to me with these shared words and echoes to affirm/examine/challenge me in areas of my life where He wants me to grow. Reflect upon what intonations were being conveyed to you. Is God asking me to do anything? Is there some word I can share to help others? Enter into a dialogue with God about the Word He has spoken to you and the deep thoughts or insights that surfaced as a result. As you engage in this dialogue speak out loud if possible, remember that God is present with you in this moment. You might conclude your time by offering specific prayer intentions for yourself or others that have needs.

GROUP NOTE: You can transition to oratio by calling people to now spend some time speaking directly to God about what He has shared to them individually or through the echoes of the group. Spend some time in silence to allow for this dialogue. When you are ready, there are two options for the group movement to the next phase. First, you can end this time by allowing people to offer their short intentions out loud or privately to God. You then invite people to move to a time of contemplatio. A second possibility would be to invite people to move from oratio to contemplatio by sitting quietly in the stillness of praise as they rest with God. You can then end contemplatio with the prayer intentions (as opposed to them being at the end of oratio) concluding with the normal ending of contemplatio.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Sit quietly now and try to be still in your heart...this is not prayer or meditation in a formal sense. Be aware of the Holy Spirit present with you. When your mind starts to wander, bring it back to the silence possibly even using the focal ideas mentioned earlier. In Lectio Divina, the reader sometimes moves beyond words to a quiet and attentive resting in the presence of God. This can happen at any point in the process and should be welcomed. Don't confine it just to the last phase of this time, but at least end the time in contemplatio. Here we sit in silence and just become aware of God's presence within us and rejoice in His presence. It is not an ecstatic state or moment of visions. Instead, it is the time where we undertake a gradual transformation of our gaze so that it becomes like God's way of seeing. In essence, our time in silence helps us move to praising God that He is in our midst and guiding us at all time. When you are ready, you can end the time by praying an "Our Father" and making the sign of the cross.